

Barack Obama Is Fourth President to Put Americans At Risk In Iraq: Let Those Threatened by the Islamic State Fight It

By Doug Bandow

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President Barack Obama has become the fourth straight president to order military action in Iraq. His airstrikes have destroyed American military equipment captured from the U.S.-supplied Iraqi army, which a decade ago American forces defeated and disarmed.

The last president who didn't bomb Iraq, Ronald Reagan, acted as a de facto ally of Baghdad in the latter's aggressive war against Iran, which ultimately encouraged Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait. That in turn led to the first Gulf War, years of sanctions and periodic bombing, the 2003 invasion, and now the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Unless President Obama pulls back quickly, his administration risks becoming absorbed in another interminable, unnecessary war in Mesopotamia with unpredictable but almost certainly negative consequences.

ISIL's rise is both a geopolitical failure and humanitarian disaster. However, so far the organization threatens the security of other nations, not America. Nor does the president have legal authority, necessary from Congress under the Constitution, to go to war again in Iraq.

Yet President Obama plans to unveil a detailed new war plan on Wednesday. The temptation to act is strong. After all, the Islamic State exists because of prior misbegotten U.S. actions. And the usual Greek Chorus is singing ever more loudly one of its many paeans to war. Just give war another chance.

Originally President Obama defended limited airstrikes "to protect American personnel" involved in "a humanitarian effort" to help Yazidis trapped by ISIL forces. Even then the initial strikes were suspiciously broad -- not on forces attacking U.S. personnel, but on artillery firing on Kurdish forces defending the Kurdish city where U.S. personnel were located. Then the president gave another address promising more attacks if ISIL "attempted to advance further."

Since then airstrikes have been used to support more general Iraqi and Kurdish military operations.

The president did insist that he would "not allow the United States to be dragged in fighting another war in Iraq." He later reiterated that commitment, stating that "there's no American military solution to the larger crisis."

However, Pentagon officials referred to ISIL as "the enemy" and in a New York Times interview last month President Obama indicated his willingness to consider joining a refashioned Iraqi government in "pushing back" the group. Now the administration is vowing to "crush" the organization.

In fact, it is not easy to be just a little bit pregnant in combat. Unfortunately, even a lot of bombs might have limited effectiveness, as was evident even during the desert conflict in Libya. The president insisted that "combat troops will not be returning to fight in Iraq," but airpower is unlikely to suppress a religiously motivated insurgency against the corrupt, incompetent Iraqi authorities. Moreover, any military involvement puts U.S. credibility at stake, encouraging the administration to ever escalate to rescue a failing policy.

Any involvement threatens blowback -- more than the murder of errant journalists to fall into ISIL's hands. For years U.S. bombing appears to have created more enemies of America than it has killed. The 13-year-long Global War on Terrorism destroyed the international al-Qaeda organization but spawned a multitude of al-Qaeda-like national splinter groups. Until now ISIL has sought to become a de facto government and state, not a terrorist organization. That establishes an "address" for retaliation, giving ISIL an important incentive not to follow al-Qaeda's anti-American *raison d'etre*. If Washington becomes a belligerent, ISIL's international aspirations are likely to change.

An even greater danger is turning Washington into a participant in Iraq's complicated sectarian struggle. Today former Baathists and Sunni tribes, some of which worked with U.S. forces against Al-Qaeda in Iraq during the "Sunni Awakening," are loosely allied with ISIL against the Shia-dominated national government. Washington should not turn millions of Sunni Iraqis into enemies.

Nor is it easy to resolve a regional conflict by intervening in one small place in Iraq. ISIL established its fighting prowess and gained much of its materiel from the ongoing Syrian civil war. If the administration is going to risk U.S. involvement in the fighting, it will be hard to confine military action to one small part of the multi-national battlefield. Which is why the administration is considering bombing Islamic State forces in Syria. But that would greatly complicate its efforts to oust the Assad government.

Creeping escalation would risk a repeat of the president's predecessors' mistakes in Iraq. Absent a quick exit, the president may face an expanding conflict which comes to divert his personal attention, absorb his political capital, and taint his legacy, just as Iraq did to George W. Bush. The administration hopes to avoid repeating history by relying on other nations to do most of the

dirty work. But Washington still would be deeply involved and viewed as the principal enemy by ISIL.

President Obama still has time to step back before the U.S. becomes a formal belligerent. Washington should emphasize that the Islamist Sunni insurgency is a problem made in Baghdad. The U.S. invested heavily in a military which became a sectarian tool of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. His misrule encouraged Sunni tribes and former Baathists to journey back into the 7th Century with ISIL in order to oust their Shia oppressors. A political modus vivendi, whether a more inclusive national government, radical federalism, formal partition, or something else is necessary to split the coalition between Islamic extremism and everyday sectarianism.

The administration also should revisit policy in Syria. The Obama administration believed President Bashar al-Assad to be a "reformer" before declaring him to be international enemy number one. It turns out that he's somewhere in between. His regime is vile, but ISIL is worse. Equally important, the Assad government poses no active threat to important U.S. interests. Far more dangerous would be a regional ISIL "caliphate." Washington should stop trying to overthrow the Damascus regime.

The U.S. also should drop the ISIL problem into the laps of neighboring countries. For instance, members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, led by Saudi Arabia, have funded extremist factions fighting Assad and Turkey has allowed movement of ISIL fighters into Syria. These nations must recognize the danger of blowback if ISIL succeeds in destabilizing much of the Middle East.

The Sunni Arab regimes need to help delegitimize ISIL. The pleas of Christians, Yazidis, Kurds, and Shiites are not likely to shake the movement's followers. Other Sunnis may be more effective in reducing the Islamic State's appeal, especially to those who today have allied with extremists for purely tactical reasons. These governments already have begun to act against ISIL supporters within their borders. The Gulf States also could provide aid to those displaced. Military support for Iraq and the Kurds would be helpful as well.

More directly, nations on the group's target list should take the lead in offering military assistance to the Kurds and Iraqi central government, and intervening directly. Israel could act unofficially, disguising its efforts where possible. Iranian involvement is hardly problem-free, but Tehran has an interest in preventing an ISIL conquest of Iraq. Amman has a professional air force and an incentive to stop the Islamist group before the latter reaches Jordan.

Turkey has an even larger military. Ankara so far has focused on ousting the Syrian government, but a collapse of Iran's Kurdistan could trigger large refugee flows into Turkey's Kurdish areas. Nor is ISIL likely to stop its subversion at Turkey's border. Ankara needs to change its priorities. Given the Erdogan government's improved relationship with Kurds in both Turkey and Iraq, Ankara could offer military assistance to Kurdistan. And Turkey, not America, should be launching air strikes against Islamic State forces.

While ISIL is a critical problem in the short-term, it may be self-correcting in the long-term. It is one thing to overrun a wide expanse of territory poorly defended by ill-coordinated and ill-

prepared forces. It is quite another to consolidate control and actually rule. Clashes already have been reported between ISIL fighters and Sunnis who want to live in the 21st Century. Enhanced political cooperation in Baghdad, more responsible behavior by ISIL-enablers like Saudi Arabia, military involvement by such threatened nations as Jordan and Turkey, and an allied shift away from the anti-Assad campaign could generate an overwhelming coalition against ISIL. Without requiring the direct U.S. military involvement envisioned by the administration.

Washington has spent decades attempting to micro-manage the Middle East. Virtually every U.S. plan has misfired, collapsed, or exploded. Perhaps nowhere have American officials done worse than in Iraq. ISIL would not exist but for George W. Bush's misguided invasion of Iraq. Heck'uva job, George & Neocon Co.!

Still, perhaps most striking is how little the consequences usually affect the U.S., except when Washington chooses to make the problems America's own. The impact looks especially modest compared to the negative results of constantly intervening. It turns out that being a superpower has at least one big advantage: other nations' misfortunes usually don't have a significant impact.

There still are well-founded humanitarian desires to help in Iraq and elsewhere. Unfortunately, however, options today are limited. Instead of jumping into another unnecessary and counterproductive war, Washington should step back, temper its ambitions, and place responsibility on regional players with more at stake in the conflicts and greater ability to solve the problems. The third time definitely isn't the charm for war in Iraq.

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