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U.S. back to war in Iraq again?

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More American military personnel are heading to Iraq and Syria. The administration continues its slow progression to renewed ground combat.

U.S. Defense Secretary Ashton Carter informed Congress that a “specialized expeditionary targeting force” would be sent to Iraq on top of the 3,500 personnel already there, with the authority to operate in Syria too. This mix of Special Forces “will over time be able to conduct raids, free hostages, gather intelligence, and capture ISIL [Islamic State] leaders,” explained Carter. Where greater opportunities appear to work with local forces, he added, “We are prepared to expand it.”

Unfortunately, no matter how effective these forces, they won’t turn around a 16-month deadlock. The more men and materiel the president commits to “win,” whatever that means, the more he will have to introduce after the failure of every successive escalation. The president’s promise not to commit “boots on the ground” already was trampled underfoot in October, when a Delta Force soldier was killed while accompanying Kurdish forces on a raid in Iraq.

In fact, congressional hawks long have been pressing for a genuine expeditionary army. Presidential wannabe Sen. Lindsey Graham has been pushing to increase U.S. forces in Iraq to 10,000.

He and Sen. John McCain also proposed a 100,000 man “regional army to go into Syria.” Of this force the U.S. would provide perhaps 10,000. Alas, waiting for Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt and other Sunni states to contribute the rest would be akin to waiting for the Easter Bunny or Great Pumpkin to appear.

The lessons of the Iraq War have been forgotten, or never learned. Yet retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, U.S. Special Forces Commander in both Afghanistan and Iraq and director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, recently observed that after 9/11 “we strategically marched in the wrong direction” as a result of “all the emotions” taking over. The invasion and overthrow of Saddam Hussein unleashed the Islamic State and was “a huge error.”

The Obama administration is attempting to do everything, which means it likely will achieve nothing. Washington hopes to simultaneously defeat Islamic State and defenestrate Syrian President Bashar Assad, the single strongest force opposing the Islamist radicals. The administration wants to reestablish Baghdad's authority nationwide while convincing Iraqi leaders to grant more authority to the Sunnis, with whom they have effectively been at war since the U.S. invasion.

American officials are trying to persuade Sunni allies such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey to focus their efforts on Islamic State, a Sunni group that is the strongest force deployed against Assad, their priority. Washington is working closely with Kurdish forces, which Ankara views as an existential threat dedicated to breaking up Turkey.

The U.S. has devoted much money and effort to bolstering the weak and decreasingly effective "moderate" insurgents in the hopes that they can defeat both Assad and the Islamic State. Now Washington is caught in between Turkey and Russia as they confront each other over Assad's survival.

Nor is Islamic State easy to defeat. How long is America prepared to occupy yet another Arab country or two in order to establish order, remake the state, impose liberal institutions, and ensure preservation of the foregoing?

A better policy would be for the U.S. to back away. In fact, Islamic State never threatened the U.S., other than executing a couple of hapless Americans who fell into its hands, because it was focused on creating a caliphate, or quasi-nation state.

Having a return address made the group susceptible to retaliation. Only recently has it begun to employ terrorist attacks—against Russia, Lebanon's Hezbollah, France, and probably Turkey's Kurds—as retaliation for their active operations against the Islamic State. Islamic State would be unlikely to focus its resources on an absent America given the abundance of its local enemies.

Indeed, the Islamic State prospers only because of the weakness of its adversaries. Without America's presence they would have to confront a much more serious Islamic State threat.

Powers that Washington cannot force into a coherent coalition might more informally reach a complicated, regionalized *modus vivendi*. At the same time, the U.S. could concentrate its resources on incapacitating or killing those dedicated to striking America even after Washington's disengagement.

There is still time for U.S. President Barack Obama to return luster to his Nobel Prize by reversing course, pulling the U.S. out of yet another extended ground war in the Middle East. For more than a decade Washington has been engaged in what historian Barbara Tuchman referred to in another time and circumstance as "the march of folly." It is time to call a halt.

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