



Obama Administration Loses Collective Mind: Sending Troops To Iraq, Targeting Assad In Syria?

By Doug Bandow
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In 2009 President Barack Obama received the Nobel Peace Prize before doing much of anything. Since then he has initiated two wars, first in Libya and now in Iraq and Syria, and escalated another, in Afghanistan. Alas, he has demonstrated that it is bad to start wars unnecessarily, but even worse to wage wars foolishly.

The administration appears to have lost its collective mind. The president has added ground forces to the battle in Iraq and the military has suggested introducing thousands more. His officials reportedly have decided to focus on overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the name of fighting the Islamic State.

It is hard to know which of these ideas is worse.

The U.S. has been back at war in the Middle East for more than two months. The results have not been pretty.

The administration claims to have created a vast coalition of 60 nations, roughly 30 percent of the world's countries. Alas, as in the past the celebrated gaggle assembled by Washington turned out to be mostly a PR stunt. The U.S. accounts for about 770 of the roughly 900 strikes on Iraq and Syria. The Arab states have done little in the air and nothing afoot. Only Iran, which Washington fears almost as much as ISIL, has put boots on the ground.

Most flagrantly AWOL is Turkey, which has tolerated radical fighters transiting through and even operating on its territory. Many of the Islamic State's combatants came from Turkey and ISIL has targeted Turkish territory for its caliphate. Yet Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan only cares about the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, once a close friend. And Erdogan expects the U.S. do the job for him.

Nor has the administration's scattershot bombing campaign had much effect. Iraq's Baghdad has not fallen. That was never likely, however. Kurdistan's Irbil remains in danger. Syria's Kobani is unconquered but in ruins, and thousands of its residents have fled.

The Islamic State quickly adjusted its tactics to minimize the vulnerability of its forces. By one count U.S. strikes have killed 464 Islamic State personnel and 57 fighters for Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate. However, the estimated number of ISIL fighters trebled to as many as 30,000 just a couple weeks into Obama's war.

Moderate Syrian rebels, most notably the Harakat al-Hazm and Syrian Revolutionary Front, favored by the administration have been routed in that country's north. Many fighters defected or fled while abandoning their heavy weapons, including TOW anti-tank missiles and BM-21 Grad rockets, provided by Washington. Deputy National Security Adviser Tony Blinken essentially admitted failure: "Unfortunately, every day there is going to be in some part of Iraq or some part of Syria, a community that is under siege, under attack, and is looking for help. We can't be every place, every time."

The Free Syrian Army, the biggest Western-oriented insurgent group, also is losing fighters, perhaps 3000 in the last few months, largely to al-Nusra. This raises questions about how "moderate" the group actually is. Some of Assad's opponents now are criticizing the U.S. Former U.S. ambassador Robert Ford explained: "they are burning American flags because they think we are helping the regime instead of helping them." Residents of Raqqa, the ISIL stronghold bombed by American forces, blame Washington for higher food and fuel prices, as well as electricity outages.

Iraq's Shiite majority has formed a new government—handing the Interior Ministry to a hardline Shia faction responsible for past atrocities against Sunni civilians. President Obama hasn't even sold his policy to his own aides. One unnamed administration official told CNN: "It has been pretty clear for some time that supporting the moderate opposition in the hopes of toppling Assad, isn't going to work." Four months ago the administration announced that it planned to vet and train "moderate" insurgents; as yet not a single Syrian has been approved. Once begun, that process will take three to five months, followed by eight to nine months of training. Thus, it will be at least another year before the first U.S.-backed fighter is ready to do battle.

Moreover, last week reports emerged that the Islamic State and al-Nusra Front, long at odds, agreed to stop battling each other. The pact appears to have grown out of a series of informal local ceasefires begun last month and envisions the two radical groups fighting together. The administration's plan for the "moderates" to defeat this strengthened radical axis and the Syrian government looks ever more fantastic.

Through everything the Islamic State is unbowed, accepting recruits, raising funds, slaughtering opponents, and launching attacks. The administration appears to have created its own variant of the infamous quagmire: continuing, desultory warfare with little effect other than to suck America deeper into sectarian strife. At the same time Washington is relieving Middle Eastern nations of the need to act in their own defense and making ever more enemies by intervening yet again in someone else's quarrel. The Islamic State's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi responded to the U.S. campaign with a call to "erupt volcanoes of jihad everywhere."

So the administration apparently is rethinking its policy. And preparing to make everything worse.

The president already has doubled U.S. boots on the ground, sending in another 1500 advisers to Iraq. Gen. Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated in September that as many as 15,000 U.S. troops might be needed for “a ground component to the campaign” to retake Iraqi and Syrian territory seized by ISIL. Last week he said that the administration was considering sending American personnel to cooperate with Iraqi troops in the battle for Mosul and to guard Iraq’s border.

As yet he didn’t “foresee a circumstance when it would be in our interest to take this fight on ourselves with a large military contingent.” However, if, as is likely, the administration’s latest escalation has little effect, the administration will be under greater pressure with fewer options. Already this is as much America’s as Iraq’s war, even though the Islamic State did not attack the U.S.

However, Baghdad holds the key to defeating ISIL: either reconcile with or free Iraq’s Sunnis. The majority Shia must give the Sunni tribes and former Baathists who don’t want to live in the 7th century—the great majority of the population of Mosul, Anbar Province, and elsewhere—an incentive to confront the Islamic State. (Either federalism or independence would work.) But Baghdad has little incentive to do so if it believes the U.S. will do the fighting instead.

Equally foolish, administration officials reportedly want to shift their focus to wrecking the most competent military force opposing ISIL: the Syrian army. While escalating the conflict Obama officials have declared the Iraq-first approach to be “untenable.”

True, but not because America is not doing more. Baghdad holds the key in Iraq, while U.S. policy in Syria is internally inconsistent. Alistair Baskey, spokesman for the National Security Council, explained: “Alongside our efforts to isolate and sanction the Assad regime, we are working with our allies to strengthen the moderate opposition.” The first is the strongest opponent of the Islamic State, while the latter spends most of its time attacking the first. The president should not expect his policy to defeat anyone.

Yet the administration apparently is moving toward a Syria first strategy, based on the ouster of President Assad. Proposed steps include accelerating aid to the “moderates” and establishing a no-fly zone along the Turkey-Syria border. Rep. Ed Royce (R-Ca.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said he understood the proposal to be at least in part a response to pressure from Turkey and the Gulf States, which have funded radical forces in Syria against Assad and expect Washington to protect them from their folly. On the record administration officials speak of a reappraisal as part of a constant review process.

Focusing on Damascus would be twice stupid. First, it would mean essentially doubling down on the policy of supporting the weakest faction in Syria, whose members have been defecting to the radicals. Second, it would entail targeting what today is the strongest force resisting the Islamic State. A “moderate” victory against both jihadist and government forces is the least likely outcome. Far more likely, U.S.-supplied insurgents would weaken the Assad regime, perhaps enough to contribute to an ISIL/al-Nusra victory. Then the fun would really start, perhaps with mass beheadings in Damascus.

One reason Americans elected President Obama was their belief that he had learned from the Bush administration's foolish misadventure in Iraq. That hope faded when the president launched his own war against Libya's Moammar Qaddafi, which also had disastrous consequences. Now it appears that Sen. Obama's famous 2002 speech denouncing the Iraq invasion reflected partisanship rather than prescience. Barack Obama no less than George W. Bush believes in trying to bring peace to the Mideast through war.

The Islamic State is evil, but until now it was not interested in terrorizing Americans. Rather, ISIL's raison d'être was establishing a Middle Eastern caliphate, or quasi-state, from the territory of several Middle Eastern countries which have large armies and para-militaries, and competent air forces. The administration used the tragic but limited plight of the Yazidi people as an excuse to micro-manage an entire conflict-filled region. As a result, the Obama policy could end up sacrificing the lives, wealth, and security of Americans for years to come.

Like a second marriage, Washington's latest Middle Eastern excursion represents the triumph of hope over experience. It is hard to point to a military intervention in the broader region which has worked well: Lebanon in 1983, Iraq almost continuously since 1990, Somalia in 1992, Afghanistan for more than 13 years starting in 2001, Libya in 2011. Other forms of meddling have been scarcely more successful: drone warfare in Pakistan and Yemen, decades of financial, military, and diplomatic backing for Egypt, destruction of Iranian democracy in 1953, dismissal of Saudi-backed suppression of Bahrain's Shia majority by its Sunni monarchy, and tepid support for Syria's insurgents. Virtually every U.S. action has resulted in a worse reaction, including by al-Qaeda and now the Islamic State—the latter but one of many ill consequences of the Iraq invasion.

Despite this extraordinary record, the administration would have us believe that it can simultaneously destroy ISIL, rid Iraq of sectarianism, replace Bashar al-Assad with a Syrian Thomas Jefferson, contain Iranian influence, and convince a gaggle of hostile Middle Eastern states to work together to further America's ends. The administration admits that it's been tough going so far, but all we need to do now apparently is put more ground forces into Iraq and better target Assad.

President Obama told Americans in explaining his policy toward the Islamic State: "Keep in mind that this is something that we know how to do." Very badly. It's time he and others in Washington learned from past mistakes, which are almost too many to be numbered. The first may be the most serious: the belief that the U.S. can transcend religion, history, ethnicity, tradition, politics, and geography and "fix" the Middle East. America can't. It's time to give up trying to do so.

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