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Let the neighbors take care of Islamic State's ambitions

By [Doug Bandow](#)

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President Barack Obama is channeling George W. Bush in launching a new war in the Middle East. Why is Washington involved? Islamic State is evil, but the organization's raison d'être is establishing a Mideastern caliphate or quasi-state — not terrorizing Americans.

In fact, Islamic State's grabbing territory provided the United States with a target for retaliation, something lacking with al-Qaida. The murders of Americans and Britons captured in the region were horrid but opportunistic. Morally abominable? Yes. Cause for war? No.

Washington has never had much success in fixing the Middle East. The U.S. has been bombing Iraq since 1991. Islamic State would not exist if not for the 2003 U.S. invasion. Saddam Hussein is dead, as are over 200,000 Iraqi civilians.

Washington has been battling al-Qaida since 2001. While the national organization is largely kaput, the group has spawned multiple national offshoots.

The Bush administration justifiably overthrew the Afghan Taliban as punishment for hosting al-Qaida. But 13 years of nation-building has been far less successful.

Three years ago the Obama administration declared that Syria's Bashar Assad had to go, discouraging rebel forces from negotiating with him. Since then "moderates" have lost ground. The Islamic State's capture of the city of Raqqa created a base for attacking Iraq.

Washington joined European states in ousting Libya's Moammar Gadhafi in the name of the Arab Spring. Today the country is in collapse. Yemen, the subject of a lengthy drone campaign, appears headed in a similar direction.

Now Washington plans to rid the world of Islamic State.

Alas, targeting the "Caliphate" removes the most important deterrent to Islamic State's attempting to stage terrorist attacks in the U.S. If Islamic State finds its conventional ambitions frustrated by Washington, the group might switch direction and cooperate with groups such as al-Qaida. In fact, the al-Qaida-linked al-Nusra Front called on jihadists worldwide to strike at Washington and its allies in retaliation for their "war against Islam."

The Obama administration almost certainly will be drawn ever deeper into the conflict. Pinprick aerial bombing won't wipe out Islamic State adherents.

U.S. policy in Syria, the scene of Islamic State's initial success, is bound to fail. Washington had no reason to join the tragic imbroglio. Assad is a thug but poses no threat to America, in contrast to Islamic State.

The administration intends to step up efforts to train and arm "moderates," some of whom cooperate with Islamic State. The likelihood of these groups defeating both Assad and Islamic State is small. While U.S. bombing will hamper the latter's efforts, the group has been adapting and advancing. The administration could end up helping Islamic State plant its flag in Damascus. The administration's campaign is particularly misguided because so many other candidates could take on Islamic State. The organization is essentially at war with every major country in the Middle East.

Islamic State's territorial claims directly threaten Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon as well as autonomous Kurdistan. The group's stance as self-proclaimed Sunni guardian challenges Iran and Israel. Its Sunni radicalism targets Saudi Arabia and the smaller Persian Gulf kingdoms plus assorted Islamist and secular insurgents in Syria. European nations created many of the region's artificial borders that have generated much strife and birthed many of the radical outsiders who have flocked to Islamic State to do violent "jihad."

No doubt, Washington's allies prefer that the world's superpower take care of the problem, but they are capable of acting. Indeed, since its spectacular summer successes, Islamic State has lost momentum and the element of surprise.

The anti-Islamic State coalition is divided and fractious, and necessity tends to force official compromise and unofficial cooperation. But the U.S. is determined again to "lead." Other countries will help out a little, but most coalition members are likely to do only as much as they believe necessary to limit Washington's kvetching.

America should leave Islamic State to its neighbors. Only local governments can create stability. They must adopt economic and political reforms to satisfy discontented publics, nurture popular loyalties to thwart triumphal ideological and theological movements, and employ competent militaries to suppress security threats.

Obviously such a regional effort will take time. But Obama administration officials are saying the same for the U.S.-led campaign. Plan on years more of war to defeat an enemy that has not seriously threatened America. Never mind the costs or consequences.

Washington has made a hash of the Mideast, yet Obama is continuing Washington's policy of endless war in the Middle East.

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