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A perplexing foreign policy

By Doug Badow
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The Obama 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 of Iraq and Syria.

The U.S. has been back at war in the Middle East for more than two months. The results?

The administration's coalition of 60 nations is mostly a PR stunt. The U.S. accounts for about 770 of the roughly 900 strikes on Iraq and Syria. Arab states have done little in the air and nothing afoot. Most flagrantly AWOL is Turkey.

Nor has the administration's scattershot bombing campaign had much effect. By one count, U.S. strikes have killed 464 ISIS personnel. However, the estimated number of ISIS fighters trebled to as many as 30,000 just a couple weeks into Obama's war.

Moderate Syrian rebels favored by the administration have been routed in that country's north. Many fighters defected or fled while abandoning their heavy weapons provided by Washington.

The Free Syrian Army, the biggest Western-oriented insurgent group, also is losing fighters, largely to al-Nusra. Yet, explained former U.S. ambassador Robert Ford: some Syrians "are burning American flags because they think we are helping the regime instead of helping them." Residents of Raqaa, the ISIS stronghold bombed by American forces, blame Washington for higher food and fuel prices.

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. Four months after announcing that it planned to vet and train "moderate" insurgents the administration has yet to approve a single Syrian.

Moreover, reports emerged that the ISIS and al-Nusra Front agreed to stop battling each other and even to fight together. The administration's plan for the "moderates" to defeat this strengthened radical axis and the Syrian government looks ever more fantastic.

Through everything ISIS is unbowed, as Washington makes ever more enemies by intervening yet again in someone else's quarrel.

The president already has doubled U.S. boots on the ground, sending in another 1,500 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 ISIS. 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 that nation's border.

Equally foolish, officials reportedly want to shift their focus to wrecking the most competent military force opposing ISIS: the Syrian army. Proposed steps include accelerating aid to the "moderates" and establishing a no-fly zone along the Turkey-Syria border.

Focusing on Damascus would be twice stupid. First, it would mean 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 ISIS.

A "moderate" victory against both jihadist and government forces still would be the least likely outcome. Far more likely, U.S.-supplied insurgents would weaken the Assad regime, making an ISIS/al-Nusra victory more likely.

The administration would have us believe that it can simultaneously destroy ISIS, 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.

President Barack Obama and others in Washington should learn from past mistakes, which are almost too many to be numbered. The most serious may be the belief that the U.S. can "fix" the Middle East. America can't. It's time to give up trying to do so.

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