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Obama's New War

By Doug Bandow
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President Barack Obama is channeling George W. Bush. The former has assembled a grand coalition to fight a new Middle Eastern war. Only President Obama acted without legal authority and stuck the U.S. with most of the work. Why is Washington involved at all?

The Islamic State is evil, but the organization's *raison d'être* is establishing a Middle Eastern caliphate, or quasi-state, not terrorizing Americans. In fact, grabbing territory provided the U.S. with a target for retaliation in response to any attack, something lacking with al-Qaeda and its many off-shoots.

In calling the new campaign “counterterrorism” and ISIL fighters “terrorists” the administration engaged in egregious deception. Daniel Benjamin, who earlier handled counterterrorism in the Obama administration, observed that Washington officials were “all over the place describing the threat in lurid terms that are not justified.”

In fact, intelligence officials admitted they had seen neither ability nor desire to attack America, at least before Washington targeted the Islamic State. Nicholas Rasmussen of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center testified before Congress that ISIL primarily threatened American interests “inside Iraq right now.” Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson said: “We know of no credible information that ISIL is planning to attack the homeland at present.”

Indeed, the Islamic State broke with al-Qaeda over the latter's emphasis on America, the “far enemy.” ISIL deployed an army engaged in conventional combat to conquer nearby lands. Even if the group established a “caliphate” of some permanence—so far the world's 1.6 billion Muslim have not rushed forward to swear allegiance to Caliph Ibrahim, as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi styled himself—the result, while unpleasant, would not by itself threaten vital U.S. interests. The murder of two Americans captured in the region was horrid but opportunistic. Morally abominable, yes. Cause for war, no.

No doubt the world would be a better place without ISIL, with its extremist ideology, murderous tactics, and flagrant brutality. Even al-Qaeda disavowed the group. But that doesn't make the Islamic State unique. Washington cannot rid the world of bad philosophies or people. Nor should it try, since its chief obligation is to protect the American people, not launch quixotic crusades for eternal peace.

Washington has never had much success in fixing the Middle East. The U.S. has been bombing Iraq since 1991. ISIL would not exist but for America's 2003 invasion. Saddam Hussein is dead, but so are more than 200,000 Iraqi civilians. Iran's influence has soared and much of Iraq's territory has been overrun by ISIL. Baghdad's government is in disarray and military turned into the Islamic State's most generous arms supplier.

Washington has been battling al-Qaeda since 2001. While the national organization is largely kaput, the group has spawned multiple national off-shoots which threaten their unwilling hosts as well as the U.S. Endless drone campaigns have undermined governments in Pakistan and Yemen and created more enemies of America.

The Bush administration justifiably overthrew the Afghan Taliban as punishment for hosting al-Qaeda. But 13 years of nation-building has been far less successful. Billions of dollars have been invested in a government noted mostly for its venality, incompetence, and unpopularity. While visiting Afghanistan I met no Afghan with a positive view of his or her political leaders, at least who wasn't working for them. The situation is reminiscent of South Vietnam, which created an impressive government bureaucracy and well-equipped military on foundations of sand.

Three years ago the Obama administration replaced its remarkable judgment that Bashar al-Assad was a reformer with the equally remarkable judgment that he was the latest incarnation of Adolf Hitler. In declaring that he had to go Washington discouraged rebel forces from negotiating with him but then failed to assist them in overthrowing him. Groups that look moderate only compared to ISIL have since lost ground. The latter's capture of the city of Raqqa, once noted for its liberal culture, gave the Islamic State a base for launching its successful Iraq campaign.

Washington joined European states in ousting Libya's Moammar Qaddafi in the name of the Arab Spring. Qaddafi's ouster let jihadists and weapons leak throughout the region. Today the country is in collapse, with U.S. diplomats murdered in Benghazi and evacuated from Tripoli. Yemen, the subject of a lengthy and heavy drone campaign, appears headed in a similar direction.

Based on this extraordinary record, Washington plans to rid the world of ISIL.

Alas, targeting the "caliphate" removes the most important deterrent to the Islamic State attempting to stage terrorist attacks in the U.S. If ISIL finds its conventional ambitions frustrated by Washington, the group might switch direction and cooperate with groups such as al-Qaeda. Even if the administration campaign largely disables the Islamic State, the latter's adherents may shift to other radical groups, swelling the number of terrorists targeting America. In fact, in a declaration of solidarity with ISIL the al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front called on jihadists worldwide to strike at Washington and its allies in retaliation for their "war against Islam." The administration's campaign falsely justified as "counterterrorism" could spawn more terrorism.

The administration almost certainly will be drawn ever deeper into the conflict. Washington officials have set impossible objectives: to “degrade,” “defeat,” “crush,” “destroy,” and “eradicate” the group. Washington has not achieved such a result since the total war defeat of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan seven decades ago. Pinprick aerial bombing won’t wipe out adherents of the Islamic State. If the group survives or, worse, advances, the president will face enormous pressure to escalate, which means boots on the ground for combat, as well as to provide intelligence and train/advise friendly forces. He can ill afford a second “red line” fiasco.

Yet U.S. policy in Syria, the scene of ISIL’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. Seeking his overthrow, while a worthy objective in the abstract, ignores the practical consequences of a deluge likely to follow, as in Iraq. Washington has gotten policy almost precisely wrong: undermining government forces, which are most capable of combatting the Islamic State, while encouraging Damascus to ignore ISIL in favor of the “moderate” forces favored by Washington, since they are most likely to trigger foreign intervention.

Now the administration intends to step up its efforts to train and arm the “moderates,” some of whom cooperate with the Islamic State and may have sold kidnap victim Steven Sotloff to his killers. The likelihood of these groups defeating both ISIL and Syria’s military is small. Even with U.S. aid they will remain the weakest combatants and focused on the Assad regime. While U.S. bombing will hamper the Islamic State’s efforts, the group has been adapting and advancing. The administration could end up helping ISIL plant its flag in Damascus. Then what?

Finally, Christian America again is allying itself with authoritarian regimes, variously seen as both sectarian and apostate, against those claiming to be true Muslims. And Washington can’t even claim to have been attacked first. The U.S. is demonstrating that, like God, it is concerned about a sparrow anywhere falling to Earth. Only Washington shot down the sparrow. America seems ever determined to make more enemies by jumping into other people’s, groups’, and nations’ conflicts.

The administration’s campaign is particularly misguided because there are so many other candidates to take on the Islamic State. After Iraq’s 1990 invasion of Kuwait no one was prepared to liberate the latter. While NATO invoked Article 5 after the 9/11 attacks, the alliance would not have acted against al-Qaeda or the Taliban without prodding from its most important member. A few countries such as Great Britain cheerfully followed Washington over the abyss into Iraq in 2003, but none would have led. Although many countries advocated the overthrow of Libya’s Qaddafi and Syria’s Assad, all expected the U.S. to do the job.

In contrast, plenty of nations have an incentive to confront the Islamic State. The organization is essentially at war with every major country in the Middle East. ISIL’s territorial claims directly threaten Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon, as well as autonomous Kurdistan. The group’s stance as self-proclaimed Sunni guardian challenges Iran and Israel. ISIL’s Sunni radicalism targets Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf kingdoms, as well as assorted Islamist and secular insurgents in Syria. The Islamic State’s political extremism undercuts Egypt’s campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood. European nations created many of the region’s artificial

borders which have generated much strife and birthed many of the radical outsiders who joined ISIL to do violent “jihad.” Thus, a score of nations, territories, and groups has an incentive to eliminate the Islamic State.

No doubt, Washington’s allies prefer that the world’s superpower take care of the problem for them. But they are capable of acting. Turkey alone has 400,000 men under arms. Ankara, Jordan, and the Gulf states possess air forces with ground attack capabilities. Iran has substantial conventional and paramilitary capabilities, and enjoys Baghdad’s trust. Iraq’s offensive power remains limited, highlighting the need for political reform, but the Baghdad regime seems able to prevent further ISIL advances. Moreover, Iraq could reverse the Islamic State’s gains by making a deal with disaffected Sunnis who view ISIL as protection from the majority Shia. The Europeans could play a sophisticated and substantive support role.

Since its spectacular summer successes the Islamic State has lost momentum and the element of surprise. Why can’t all of these powers defeat a movement thought to deploy between 20,000 and 30,000 fighters, many relatively untrained recruits arriving after the organization’s recent gains? Indeed, ISIL has succeeded only because of its adversaries’ self-inflicted weaknesses: civil war (Syria), sectarianism (Iraq), and surprise (Kurdistan). The Islamic State’s enemies now are on alert and even its allies are more wary. Indeed, the group’s support from Sunni tribalists and former Baathists always has been conditional: few are interested in returning to the 7th century to worship Caliph Ibrahim.

The anti-Islamic State coalition is divided and fractious; several members distrust, even despise, each other as much as they do ISIL. But necessity tends to force official compromise and unofficial cooperation—for instance, other Gulf States now are working with Qatar, which they recently ostracized for backing the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups.

More tough bargains are needed. Baghdad can’t easily rely on Shia Iran while pacifying Sunnis. But if the regime hopes to recover lost territory, it must find a way. Syria’s Assad government and secular insurgents would best make a deal rather than turn their country over to medieval jihadists. Sunni kingdoms dislike Shia and secular regimes almost as much as Sunni radicals. Unfortunately, U.S. domination only superficially disguises such differences by reducing everyone else’s role.

In short, the Islamic State’s many enemies won’t defeat ISIL if they don’t have to. Instead, the U.S. is determined again to lead, organize, train, arm, and bomb in the name of coalition warfare. Other countries will help out a little, but so far—unsurprisingly—their contributions are modest. The administration gleefully cited the many governments backing American efforts. Yet Washington’s allies provided a grand total of 14 airplanes for the initial Syria bombing runs. Britain later contributed two jets after parliament okayed that nation’s participation. Most coalition members are likely to do only as much as they believe necessary to limit Washington’s kvetching.

America should leave ISIL to its neighbors. Washington may have to preempt groups actively engaged in terrorism against the U.S., but should not target organizations which hypothetically have the potential ability at some future point to possibly attack America—especially when

military action is more likely to turn them toward terrorism. In an odd twist of U.S. policy, the administration used airstrikes on the Islamic State, which had planned no attacks on America, as an excuse to bomb the Khorasan Group, an affiliate of the Nusra Front that allegedly was plotting against America. If these claims are true, why didn't Washington bomb the Khorasan Group before and why is Washington backing an opposition movement which spawned such an active terrorist threat?

Moreover, the U.S. should make clear that it won't continue intervening in an attempt to clean up the mess created by its last bombing, invasion, or occupation. Washington has been making a mess in the region at least since supporting the 1953 coup which placed the authoritarian Shah in power in Iran. At the current rate the U.S. never will be at peace in the Middle East. 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—months certainly, years probably. But 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 cost or consequence.

To encourage regional solutions, Washington should abandon its commitment to a united Iraq. The U.S. should accept whatever Iraqis desire, whether increased federalism, virtual autonomy, or full-fledged independence. Defeating ISIL requires support from Kurds and Sunnis, neither of whom accept Shia hegemony in Baghdad. Without Washington's support the Baghdad authorities would have more incentive to compromise.

Moreover, the administration must set priorities in Syria. Washington should drop its campaign against Damascus and leave the Assad government free to combat the Islamic State. The claim that Washington can provide just the right weapons in the right quantities to the right groups at the right moments to propel weak secularist insurgents past both government forces and ISIL surely is a "fantasy," as the president once admitted. Only by abandoning support for "moderate" opponents will the administration give the Syrian military both the opportunity and incentive to confront its (and America's) most feared enemy, the Islamic State.

Finally, the U.S. should informally accommodate Iran's increased role in Iraq. Washington cannot prevent Tehran from aiding its neighbor. In fact, Iran already has intervened militarily. Discreet bilateral discussions, separate from the ongoing nuclear talks, could explore areas of cooperation, or at least strategies to avoid conflict. Although enhanced Iranian involvement risks inflaming Sunni opposition, Iran can help contain and eliminate the Islamic State.

By any standard Washington has made a hash of the Mideast. President Obama sought to reassure Americans when he opined "Keep in mind that this is something that we know how to do." That should worry them even more as he continues Washington's policy of endless war in the Middle East. As Yogi Berra said, it's "déjà vu all over again."

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