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Introduction

Without doubt, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) represents a significant failure of U.S. policy. However, such a reverse was not entirely unexpected. The Iraqi government had exacerbated internal divisions and weakened military forces by placing sectarian and political considerations before good governance. As a result, Baghdad lost control of portions of its territory, most notably the city of Fallujah, months ago. While the seizure of Mosul, Tikrit, and other territory last month came with great suddenness, it reflected problems long in the making.

Although serious, the rise of ISIL does not yet pose the sort of dire, let alone existential, threat to American security requiring dramatic and immediate action. While the government in Baghdad appears ill-prepared to regain its lost territory and suppress the rebels, the Sunni group ISIL appears to lack the strength necessary to capture Baghdad, let alone gain control of majority-Shia nation. In Syria the ISIL radicals face simultaneous military challenges from the government, moderate opposition forces, and even slightly less extreme jihadists, as well as the political task of establishing a functioning government in areas under its control.

Most important, so far, at least, ISIL, unlike al-Qaeda, has not confronted the U.S. To the extent that the group succeeds in creating a traditional government over a defined territory, it will establish a "return address" for retaliation should it seek to strike America. This suggests a more manageable problem at the moment, at least, than that posed by al-Qaeda in 2001.

Of course, Iraq's near collapse still offers a challenge with unpredictable, and certainly negative, consequences for the U.S. But Washington should react circumspectly, avoiding further entanglement where possible in a conflict likely to generate further unintended consequences of potentially significant magnitude.

Lessons from ISIL's Advance

There are a number of lessons to ponder from ISIL's expansion across Syria and particularly into Iraq. They suggest lessons both in developing a short-term response and shaping longer-term strategies.

Intervention brings unintended consequences which often are unpredictable and uncontrollable. Debates over blame and policy alternatives which might have avoided today's situation are interesting but underestimate the inherent problems of intervening in such a region and such a conflict. No doubt, multiple administrations could have acted differently and more competently. But hindsight always is clearer.

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Those judging a policy such as invading and occupying Iraq should take for granted that some assumptions will be erroneous, some policies will be mistaken, and some outcomes will be unplanned. If the strategy cannot survive the unexpected, its flaws run far deeper. Such an intervention—seeking to transform another society from outside, despite significant differences in history, religion, culture, tradition, ethnicity, interest, and more—inevitably creates a large risk of failure. And such an action almost inevitably will replace one set of problems with another set of equal if not greater magnitude.

Indeed, our experience in the Middle East highlights how one intervention almost always begets another and another. The 1953 coup against Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh elevated the Shah to full power. His authoritarian misrule led to his ouster in 1979. The triumph of Islamic radicals in Tehran caused Washington to back Iraq's Saddam Hussein's aggressive war against Iran. In 1990 Hussein acted as the U.S. had feared the Iranians would act, expanding in the Gulf, leading to the first Gulf War and a force deployment in Saudi Arabia, which Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz later acknowledged to be one of Osama bin Laden's grievances.

The second Gulf War removed Hussein—along with his heavy-handed suppression of sectarian strife and role as counterweight to Iran. Even had the new government in Baghdad been amenable to a continued U.S. military presence, the latter would have offered little remedy for the sectarian hostilities which have exploded with full force today. Developing U.S. policy today requires recognizing the potential of another round of unintended consequences.

Speaking of Iraq's sectarian proclivities, the president recently opined that "old habits die hard." He was correct. However, his sentiment even more accurately applies to Washington's compulsion to intervene militarily all over the world seemingly without regard to long-term consequences.

America's interest varies dramatically based on the character of potential adversary groups such as ISIL. The world is filled with forces representing various degrees of antagonism and hostility toward the U.S., but most have little occasion to act on those sentiments. They may lack the desire, opportunity, or means to strike, or fear the consequences of doing so. The latter—deterrence—kept the most horrid dictatorships of Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao Zedong's in check for decades. That prospect also is why ugly regimes such as North Korea threaten their neighbors rather than America.

In general, a restrained U.S. response emphasizing the promise of overwhelming retaliation, with allies taking responsibility for more direct contact, is the best approach in such cases. Directly intervening in conflicts without direct impact on America and initiating preventive wars where intentions and capabilities are unclear, as against Hussein's Iraq, usually create bigger problems than those solved. For this reason alone, such interventions should be last resorts.

Very different is the threat posed by transnational groups, such as al-Qaeda, which focus their ire on America and are almost impossible to deter. Although trade-offs remain important—for instance, promiscuous and especially misdirected drone strikes may create more enemies than they kill—the potential for attack against America is higher and the need for preemption (which differs from preventive war) is greater. Enemies planning attacks must be incapacitated, whether killed, captured, or debilitated.

Although ISIL's character is not immutable, so far it acts more like a party in a traditional civil war than a terrorist group. In fact, the organization even offers social services and religious

education more characteristic of a traditional government. ISIL's break with al-Qaeda apparently reflected at least in part the latter's focus on the "far enemy," that is, the U.S. In contrast, ISIL wanted to become something akin to a "real country." Which makes it far more dangerous for the governments of Iraq and Syria, in particular, than for America.

To the extent that the organization establishes effective control over a territory, which remains problematic, it will have less incentive to strike the U.S., since doing so would, as with the Taliban in Afghanistan, risk its geopolitical gains. The group continues to pose a serious challenge, and one which could morph into something different and more menacing over time. But today Washington has an opportunity for a considered, restrained, and measured response.

Moreover, Iraq is not likely to fall under ISIL control and become a terrorist state. Although these Islamic radicals, deploying a small but disciplined military force, have been able to grab most of Sunni-dominated Anbar Province, they lack the resources necessary to conquer Iraq or even take Baghdad. The slide toward sectarian strife, exacerbated with ISIL's claims to have executed hundreds of Sunni soldiers, will strengthen popular Shiite resistance.

Moreover, the organization's success so far has depended on Baathist loyalists and tribal leaders more interested in winning regional autonomy and a fairer distribution of national spoils than in returning to the 7th century. The group's ostentatious brutality, apparently another factor in its break with al-Qaeda, also is likely to engender resistance. Some clashes already have been reported and the prospect for permanent and stable Islamist rule is uncertain.

U.S. military action almost certainly would result in more costs than benefits. Into this violent and unpredictable imbroglio President Obama is sending some Special Forces and contemplating "targeted, precise military action," presumably air and drone strikes. Some observers have called for confronting not just ISIL, but also the Baghdad government to force it to broaden its support and demobilize Shiite militias, and Tehran, to limit the latter's influence and compel the withdrawal of any military units.

Unfortunately, Washington already has learned the limits of military power, especially when imposed from afar with little popular support for long-term occupation in pursuit of what amounts to international social engineering. The more the U.S. attempts to do, the less likely it will do it well. Iraq's most serious problem today is that the state lacks credibility and will, and the military lacks leadership and commitment. These America cannot provide.

Military action is even more problematic. Most tempting may be limited drone strikes against ISIL's leadership, but such a campaign would require accurate intelligence. Moreover, the killing of the leaders of ISIL's earlier incarnations did not break the group or stop its activities. Today ISIL is too big to simply decapitate.

Nor does a broader use of airpower offer an easy solution. The allies employed some 25,000 strikes on behalf of highly-motivated opposition forces in Libya and the latter still took several months to triumph in a desert-oriented campaign. Air attacks have limited effectiveness in urban warfare and cannot liberate captured cities. To restrict "collateral damage" airpower best relies on ground support for targeting, something that could not be left to frankly untrustworthy sectarian Iraqi forces. Unfortunately, targeting Sunni areas almost inevitably would mean killing people, including noncombatants, once allied with Washington against al-Qaeda—as part of the "Sunni awakening" which was the key to the success of the Bush "surge." Turning former Sunni allies into enemies would put America's future position at risk while encouraging terrorism from another direction. The U.S. cannot escape blowback if it joins another Mideast conflict.

America loses by giving a blank check to Baghdad or attempting to transform Baghdad. Next to ISIL's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the man most responsible for the ongoing debacle is Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The latter has misgoverned, exacerbated sectarian tensions, and weakened his nation's governing institutions. To support his government is to reward his counterproductive behavior and encourage continuation of a strategy which has brought his country to near ruin. The tighter the U.S. embrace, the less likely he will either reform his government or reach beyond his narrow Shia base of support.

Moreover, tying America to his government would prove particularly dangerous if the conflict turns into a sectarian war. ISIL's atrocities and threats have galvanized Iraq's Shia majority, with young men joining the military and Shiite militias cooperating with security forces. The result looks likely to become a bitter and potentially long struggle between essentially lawless paramilitaries rather than a decisive conventional campaign by conventional forces. Washington does not want to be drawn into such a conflict.

Indeed, as noted earlier, ISIL has succeeded to its current degree in Iraq because it has won support from former Baathists and Sunni tribes. Some of the latter worked with America as part of the Sunni Awakening. At the latter's height tens of thousands of Sunnis were working with the U.S. against al-Qaeda and other foreign jihadists. The U.S. might deplore their cooperation with ISIL today, but they have done so for reasons entirely unconnected to America. They are not and must not be turned into America's enemies.

For understandable reasons the administration has been working to oust Maliki in favor of a more pliant and inclusive leader. Unfortunately, this effort is unlikely to turn out well. If unsuccessful, future cooperation with Baghdad will be made more difficult. Yet this is not the first U.S. attempt to get Maliki to be more responsible, and he so far has successfully resisted U.S., as well as domestic, pressure. His spokesman publicly called for support rather than pressure from Washington. As much as other Iraqis may want to replace him, they are less likely to act under American duress, especially while their nation faces a potentially existential threat.

Even if Washington's efforts turned out to be successful, Maliki's replacement might not be much better. Talk of Ahmed Chalabi, for instance, gives no cause for confidence. And Washington would be tied to "its man" for good or ill. Maliki illustrates that downside.

Moreover, appearing to reflexively back Baghdad risks foreclosing potential solutions, including some form of federalism or even partition. The Iraqi Humpty Dumpty has fallen off of the wall. The Kurds are moving toward a vote over independence. The willingness of mainstream Sunnis to back ISIL demonstrates the depth of their alienation from Baghdad. The collapse of the Iraqi military suggests that the national government is unlikely to quickly reassert its authority. The U.S. and other interested parties, including Jordan, Israel, Turkey, and Iran should be talking informally and quietly about options to defuse the potential sectarian explosion. While Washington could help advance such an approach, no plan will succeed without support of regional states and local peoples. All options should be in play.

Backing the Syrian resistance against Bashar al-Assad's government risks further undermining the Iraqi government and ultimately American interests. The civil war in Syria obviously is a humanitarian tragedy, but it long has been well beyond Washington's control. The claim that if only the U.S. had given the right measure of support to the right group at the right time a democratic government representing all Syrians would have emerged is dubious: little about American involvement in the Middle East suggests the necessary combination of

perspicacity, nuance, competence, and humility. In any case, the conflict has moved well beyond any such moment.

The Damascus government is odious, but not as obviously inimical to U.S. interests as an ISIL "caliphate" reaching across Iraq and Syria. Further weakening the Assad regime increases the opening for ISIL and other jihadist forces. While aiding more moderate fighters might help them regain lost ground against radical forces, experience suggest doing so is more likely to create a new source of materiel resupply for ISIL—if the latter continues to triumph in clashes between the two. (Already the group has captured a wealth of U.S. weapons, including Blackhawk helicopters!) The U.S. risks being too clever by half, presuming that it can control the outcome of a war that so far has proved as unpredictable as any other in the Mideast.

Ultimately, Washington must set priorities. The overthrow of Assad is desirable in theory but, like the ouster of Hussein, may yield unexpectedly bloody consequences in practice. One likely result would include further strengthening ISIL, a more clear and present danger than Assad. Attempting to play both sides, helping the government battling jihadist extremists in Iraq while opposing the government fulfilling the same role in Syria, risks dual failure.

ISIL is more a problem for America's friends and allies than for America. To the extent that the group remains an aspirant to national power rather than an advocate of terror against the U.S., it most directly threatens countries in the region. These states, overwhelmingly Muslim other than Israel and Lebanon, possess greater credibility in confronting a group claiming to represent Islam. Washington should expect these nations to respond to the threat.

Unfortunately, American officials seem reluctant to relinquish control, despite their evident and longstanding difficulty in shaping geopolitical circumstances to advance U.S. ends. Given the costs of action, it makes more sense to expect the nations with the most at stake to be most responsible. The outcome may not be precisely to Washington's liking, but it isn't likely to be so even with more direct American intervention.

Multiple actors are interested in ISIL, which has claimed territory as far as Kuwait, Israel, and Turkey. First and most important is Iraq. The best hope for creating a more responsible and unifying government comes from the threat posed by ISIL. Indeed, the most obvious strategy for ending the danger of a "caliphate" is weaning away the group's Sunni allies. They must come to see greater benefits in cooperating with a reformed government in Baghdad than in reconstructing an ancient caliphate.

Second is Iran. Washington's reluctance to countenance Tehran's involvement in Iraq is understandable but irrelevant. Hussein's loss always was going to be Iran's gain, the Bush administration's intentions notwithstanding. There is nothing Washington can do to change that today. The more America is willing to tie itself to the Maliki government the less the latter might need to rely on Iran, but the impact likely would be marginal. The overwhelming religious, cultural, personal, economic, and geopolitical ties would remain. The U.S. always will be a distant and alien power. Under these circumstances, it would be better to have Iran rather than America deeply involved in Iraq what may end up as a barely disguised sectarian conflict.

Third is Turkey. Recent events, such as ISIL's capture of Turkish diplomats and truck drivers, have tempered Ankara's enthusiasm for overthrowing the Assad regime. Turkey is a Muslim nation with significant military capabilities which borders both Iraq and Syria. No doubt, the Erdogan government would find military involvement in the current struggle discomfiting, and Baghdad might be little more enthusiastic. However, from America's standpoint U.S. military involvement would be far worse.

Fourth is Saudi Arabia (and other Gulf States). Although not directly involved in the fighting, Riyadh has been funding and arming opposition forces in Syria. Washington cannot expect independent nations, even friendly ones, to automatically follow U.S. policy, but it should emphasize that any aid to radical groups such as ISIL is highly counterproductive. The group already has multiple sources of funding, most not subject to U.S. pressure. However, states claiming to be friendly to America should not be adding to its financial or military resources, especially nations which look to the U.S. for their defense.

Fifth, other countries, including Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon, have an interest in rolling back ISIL's gains. They all have different capabilities, and the implications of their involvement vary dramatically. However, Washington should be burning the diplomatic wires to encourage them to take action according to their interests and abilities. The U.S. has enough challenges in the Middle East and elsewhere around the world to jump into another conflict.

The U.S. should downplay Iran's involvement in Iraq since there is little Washington can do to prevent or limit it. Tehran's role in Iraq has caused great discomfort, but that was inevitable once the Bush administration removed Hussein from power. Although as I noted earlier American policy might have some impact at the margin on the degree of Iranian influence, the natural connections between the two Shia-majority nations always will outrange Baghdad's relations with Washington, especially as long as the U.S. is at odds with Tehran.

Rather than verbalize its unease and thus demonstrate its impotence, or engage in high level talks and ratify Iran's role, the Obama administration should quietly ensure that any U.S. military involvement does not clash with actions taken by Tehran. America's role should remain advisory, at most, but it would be best to ensure no inadvertent complications. The crisis in Iraq has placed a greater premium on improving relations with Iran—and especially resolving the nuclear issue, if possible. However, it would be a mistake to link the issues since Tehran's nuclear status remains the most critical bilateral challenge for Washington (as well as of great interest to allied states, including in Europe, and Persian Gulf, and Israel), and a successful, peaceful resolution, however unlikely it might appear at this point, would open the door to resolving or moderating other disputes.

Suggested Approach to Iraq

Rather than engage in a well-publicized argument over relative blame of the past two administrations, U.S. policymakers should emphasize that the greatest fault, other than of Baghdadi and ISIL's other practiced killers, lies with the Iraqis. Having sown the wind, the Maliki government now is reaping the whirlwind. Thus, Washington should continue to place responsibility on the Iraqi government to adopt a more inclusive political approach, including discussions of a more federal government structure.

The U.S. also should promote a better coordinated regional approach by the many states affected by ISIL's rise. Far better that Muslim nations challenge Muslim radicals than American forces do so. Washington's interests in the Iraqi meltdown are real, but not nearly as serious as those of surrounding countries.

The Obama administration should rethink the advisability of further involvement in the Syrian civil war. A vision of the unlikely perfect, the replacement of the Assad regime with a liberal, democratic opposition, should not become the enemy of the more realistic good, a negotiated compromise limiting the power of radicals such as ISIL. The spillover into Iraq has become a prime consideration.

Finally, Washington should limit its involvement where the threat remains indirect. ISIL is a bad actor, but not yet one warranting a direct American military response. Recent experience in the region and beyond demonstrates that war should be a last resort. ISIL has grown most obviously out of past U.S. policy mistakes. Washington cannot afford a repeat experience.

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