

Misanalysis Makes a Mess

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U.S. policy in Syria is failing because the Obama administration is prioritizing the urgent (rolling back ISIS) over the truly important (preventing Iran and Russia from rearranging Middle East security to their benefit).

Does the Obama administration support or oppose Russia's brazen deployment of military force in Syria? Amazingly, it is tough to tell.

On the one hand, in his United Nations speech, President Obama offered a thinly veiled denunciation of Russia when he pointedly stated that "some major powers assert themselves in ways that contravene international law." But on the other hand, Secretary of State Kerry lauded the "fundamental principles" Washington shares with Moscow in Syria and even stood next to his Russian counterpart at a press conference just hours after Russian warplanes attacked rebels -- anti-Bashar al-Assad but not pro-ISIS -- in an in-your-face display of Moscow's true priorities. After Washington lamely called for Assad's departure for four years, one cannot fault America's regional allies for interpreting President Obama's cynical acceptance of Assad's continued and open-ended rule as a blessing of sorts for the muscular defense of the embattled Syrian leader by the new Russia-Iran axis.

How did we get caught in this muddle? How did the perfectly natural American outrage at the brutal nihilists of ISIS shape-shift into a supine response to the most direct and serious Russian challenge to America's global position in four decades, a nonchalant acceptance of Iran's deployment of troops and materiel to the Mediterranean littoral, and a willingness to legitimize the continued rule of a maniacal despot responsible for more than a quarter million killed

and the depopulation of nearly half his entire country?

The answer is that this policy is the logical extension of a principle that has been at the heart of President Obama's approach to the Middle East for the past seven years. This is the idea that the world had consigned to history "20th-century threats" to global peace -- especially, the appetites for power, prestige, and wealth of voracious states -- leaving in its wake only the still serious but very different "21st-century challenges" of failed states, climate change, and so on.

As applied by the Obama administration, this idea has had three corollaries. The first, following the Bush administration and public opinion in the wake of the September 11 attacks, is that Sunni jihadist terrorism -- represented first by al-Qaeda and now by ISIS, a threat fueled by the blinding corruption, ideological extremism, and gross mismanagement of Sunni-led states -- represents an existential threat to the West, akin to the thousands of Soviet warheads once aimed at American cities. Against this threat, it is legitimate to deploy American military assets, but only in targeted and limited ways, such as dispatching Seal Team Six to kill Osama bin Laden.

That is because of the second corollary, which holds that America cannot and should not wield power to navigate the threats of disorder the way it wielded power to confront traditional aggressors; indeed, wielding such power (so the argument goes) only aggravates some of the most dangerous threats we face and diverts us from the alleged real job of "fixing" the root social and political causes of disorder. But the 21st-century world is also one of opportunities, not just limitations. One such opportunity was the third corollary -- the opportunity to bring Iran in from the cold, where it could be transformed from a radical, nuclear-proliferating, renegade state into a rule-abiding, status quo partner in the fight against the jihadists.

Each of these ideas is wrong. Some are obviously wrong; clearly, for instance, rapacious states have survived into the postmodern era, and old-fashioned force must sometimes be used to protect our allies and interests against them. As for Iran, whatever the wisdom of a narrow arrangement to postpone its nuclear weapons ambitions, it is farcical to believe that the Supreme Leader can be a true partner of the United States in any common enterprise. The spectacle of American diplomats chasing after the Iranians at the United Nations last week to engage their help in an array of regional concerns, only to be rebuffed, was both sad and revealing.

The most difficult of these wrong ideas for Americans to internalize is the real scope of the terrorist threat. The enormity of 9/11 made "Never Again" the motto of two administrations, with "Again" defined so broadly as to include everything from cataclysmic attack to lone-wolf incidents in Times Square, Chattanooga, and Fort Hood. The result is to blur the distinction between terrorism that can threaten the fiber of a nation, against which successive presidents rightly unleashed the full power of our military, intelligence, and law enforcement capabilities, and terrorism that -- however horrific -- may be the unacceptable but perhaps inevitable price of leading the world's liberal democracies.

Where does ISIS fit in this? Its potential to execute or certainly inspire terrorism short of a 9/11 mass casualty attack is significant, given the allegiance to it by many Muslims, its resources, and the total war it preaches against the rest of the world. But that threat still remains largely potential, with the likelihood of a catastrophic ISIS attack on the homeland not substantially greater today as a result of its success in creating a caliphate in western Iraq and eastern Syria.

To be sure, even if ISIS is not now a threat to the homeland, destroying it is justifiably an urgent priority for international action. ISIS has enslaved as many as ten million people, threatens to seize even more of Iraq and Syria, and is a major contributor to the downward spiral of dysfunction not only destroying the Middle East but sending hundreds of thousands of refugees looking for shelter in Europe. But urgent is not the same as important. The important priority is preventing the Russian-Iranian alliance from demolishing the regional security system by

establishing a substantial security presence inside Syria, from which the two could -- separately and together -- project power throughout the Levant, cynically exacerbate the refugee crisis, and advance security, diplomatic, and possibly even energy policies to protect their friends and interests.

Taken together, the administration's wrong assumptions led it to an analysis that misreads the Middle East situation, and to a set of policies that misprioritizes the urgent (rolling back ISIS) over the important (preventing anti-American, anti-Western powers from rearranging Middle East security to their benefit). But it's not too late. If the Russian-Iranian power-play in Syria, like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan a generation ago, compels the president to reassess his policy, he will find that has realistic options. The smartest of those options fall far short of launching another ill-fated Iraq-style massive military operation, which is the usual "alternative" option asserted by the president's advisers. Specifically, the president should operate on the basis that, while defeating ISIS cannot be the highest priority, hitting it hard can also checkmate both Vladimir Putin and Iran's chief strategist, the Revolutionary Guards commander Qassem Suleimani. This includes rapidly increasing operations against ISIS -- with more U.S. ground forces deployed as advisers, forward controllers, raiders, and in some cases armored spearheads -- with the goal of retaking terrain. We should reach out to Turkey to create a safe-zone in northern Syria, get as serious about a CIA-led anti-Assad/anti-ISIS rebel-training program as we were with the mujaheddin in Afghanistan, and reinforce local allies (including Israel) with the military assets to counter the best the Russians can put into the field. Whatever relations we have with the Russian-Iranian coalition should be limited to safety-oriented mission de-confliction.

For President Obama, playing by "Putin/Suleimani rules" won't be easy, but it may be just what it takes to restore a sense of balance and proportion to our Middle East policy and counter the very real Russian-Iranian threats to our allies and interests.

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