U.S. Air Support for Tikrit: The Right Decision

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Brief Analysis

At a time when easy choices no longer exist in the Middle East, Washington's decision to intervene militarily is a sound one, but only if the administration recognizes Iraq's current political and security realities.

The United States made the proper decision on Wednesday to begin airstrikes and other combat support operations in and around Tikrit, including reconnaissance and brigade-level advisory coordination. This was not an easy choice because Iranian-backed militias and Iran's own Qods Force are prominently in the Tikrit fight. Yet given the dire state of U.S. interests in the Middle East -- a situation partly of Washington's own making -- America is beyond easy decisions in the region. At this point, most any U.S. action short of major ground deployments is more likely to improve stability than indecision or nonmilitary measures.

There are four reasons for this assessment. First and foremost, America is in a war with the "Islamic State"/ISIS. The group's tenacity in Tikrit demonstrates how difficult this blight on the region will be to wipe out. As long as it exists, its depredations in three countries and counting will stimulate even more disruption, including: threats to friendly states; Iran exploiting its role as a defender of Shiites against ISIS and al-Qaeda to roll through a good chunk of the Middle East; and, in the end, a downward spiral into Sunni-Shiite conflict throughout the region. ISIS cannot be contained, and time is not on Washington's side; America needs to get on with the job. Tikrit is where the fight is engaged, and "marching toward the sound of the guns" has always been sound military strategy.

Second, the prestige of Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi is on the line. Washington owes him for restoring at least limited Kurdish and Sunni Arab faith in the Baghdad government after the disastrous last few years of Nouri al-Maliki's tenure. Never mind the flashy role played by Qods Force leader Qasem Soleimani or the "made in Iran" nature of the current offensive -- if the Tikrit campaign breaks down, Abadi will be blamed, with Maliki and other Shiite politicians more amenable to Iranian influence waiting in the wings. But if the offensive succeeds, he will reap

at least some of the credit, particularly if assisted by American firepower.

Third, Iraq is too important a state to allow to disintegrate or fall under effective Iranian control, given its geographic location, glorious role in Arab history, status as a U.S. strategic partner, and extraordinary oil reserves (143 billion barrels, or half the size of Saudi Arabia's, along with an estimated 45 billion barrels in the Kurdistan Regional Government) -- not to mention the price America has already paid to give the country a chance for stability. President Obama acknowledged this importance by deploying military personnel there last summer.

To succeed today, however, Washington needs to recognize that the strategic political weight in Iraq lies with the country's 60 percent Shiite population. They own the government, Baghdad, and most of the oil fields. The Kurds are critical allies, of course, but in terms of securing Iraq as a whole, their contribution is limited given their territorial disputes with Arabs to the south and their oft-announced hopes for eventual independence. Likewise, the Sunni Arab minority punches below its weight -- partly due to Saddam Hussein's legacy and perceived Sunni Arab domination of a country in which they are a distinct minority, and partly because of Sunni Arab resistance to a democratic regime that diminishes their status.

In short, where the Shiites go, so goes Iraq, or at least the portion of the country with the most territory and key oil fields. Many Shiites are drawn to Iran given religious affinities and Tehran's support for local political groups and militias. But these close ties are not written in concrete. For the most part, Iraqi Shiites are Arabs, not Persians, and most follow the Hausa school of Shia Islam in Najaf, not the Iranian brand promulgated out of Qom.

To effectively counter Iranian influence, Washington needs to be more openly solicitous of Iraqi Shiite security needs, since security remains their paramount concern. American forces made progress with them between 2003 and 2011 by providing direct security assistance; today, at a time when Shiites face a direct ISIS threat, the United States needs to do so again and be seen doing so. Although Tikrit is a Sunni Arab area, it has symbolic value for Shiites well beyond that of Mosul and Anbar province. The city is close to Shiite Arab areas and shrines, and it was the site where ISIS slaughtered over a thousand mostly Shiite air force cadets last summer.

After the fall of Mosul and the commitment of the first tranche of U.S. advisors last June, the Obama administration waited about two months to begin airstrikes while ISIS drove toward Baghdad and other Shiite areas. Washington had understandable reasons for this delay, including the need to pressure Iraqi politicians on finding a replacement for Maliki. But in their desperation, the government, the Shiite population, and their religious leader Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani generally threw their lot in with the all-too-willing Iranian-backed militias and Iran itself. Washington should not make that mistake again.

Fourth, successful U.S. engagement now -- after the "Iranian solution" has evidently failed to break the jihadist hold on Tikrit -- would demonstrate an important point: you can't get rid of ISIS without U.S. help, regardless of what the Iranians do. And with such engagement would come support for Iraq's Sunni Arabs and Kurds well beyond what the Iranians and their friends are willing to provide.

The main downside of intervention, of course, is that the United States will be seen as somehow coordinating or allying itself with Iran and its allies. However much Washington denies it and avoids direct communication with the Qods Force and Shiite militias, this perception will be true to some degree. In a perfect world, U.S. forces would have a capable Iraqi army with which to partner, but that does not exist at the moment.

To some degree, this image problem is self-generated by the administration. The United States has quietly coordinated with Iran several times in the past fifteen years, on Afghanistan, at times in Iraq, and routinely between naval elements in the Persian Gulf. This has been understood by all as tactical necessity signifying little. But the manner in which the Obama administration has conducted the nuclear negotiations -- including its frequent hints of a possible post-deal condominium with Tehran at a time when Iran is running amok throughout the region -- is what

has allies from Riyadh to Tel Aviv to Ankara worried.

To alleviate these concerns, Washington should shift the conversation away from questions about whether U.S. forces will avoid striking areas where Iranian or Shiite militia forces are engaged. Instead, the administration should focus on clarifying that whatever America might do at the tactical level to deal with the current biggest threat, Iran remains a strategic rival that needs to be contained.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Iraq and Turkey. ❖

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