

The ISIS Fight and the State of the Union Address

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Jan 21, 2015

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Brief Analysis

Four Washington Institute fellows discuss what the president's address shows about his priorities in the Middle East, analyzing what he did and did not say and comparing his latest remarks to his past speeches.

JAMES JEFFREY

In last night's State of the Union speech, President Obama had the opportunity to educate the American people on the unique challenges posed by the "Islamic State"/ISIS, as well as the tough choices the United States and others

will have to make as they deal with this phenomenon. Instead, he cited the issue only in passing, reiterating his "degrade and ultimately destroy" commitment without giving any idea what the next steps are beyond mentioning the increasingly risible effort to arm a Syrian opposition on slow simmer (see [PolicyWatch 2357, "Train and Equip Not Enough for U.S.-Backed Syrian Rebels" \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/train-and-equip-not-enough-for-u.s.-backed-syrian-rebels\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/train-and-equip-not-enough-for-u.s.-backed-syrian-rebels)), and the passing of a Congressional resolution to authorize the use of force against ISIS. This was in contrast to the extensive airtime he dedicated to touting his initiative on Cuba, which -- regardless of one's views on that decision -- is an almost irrelevant issue given the various crises occurring around the globe.

The impression garnered from the speech is that ISIS, rather than a force threatening to tear apart the Middle East, is just one of many problems being "managed," like Ebola, by "wise" American leadership using other countries' troops. In and of itself, an anti-ISIS strategy relying on allies and local forces makes good sense, and the president was correct in asserting that the coalition is stopping the group's advance. But he made only brief reference ("including our military power") to the crucial role of U.S. airstrikes in this success.

At the same time, he signaled repeatedly that what concerns him most in the foreign policy arena is not ISIS, but the prospect of the United States getting carried away in combating the jihadists and other threats. On several occasions, the speech returned to a theme from his 2008 presidential campaign in which a somehow rogue America is creating rather than solving security problems with its military: "When we make rash decisions, reacting to the headlines instead of using our heads; when the first response to a challenge is to send in our military -- then we risk getting drawn into unnecessary conflicts"; "we've learned some costly lessons over the last thirteen years"; "Instead of getting dragged into another ground war..."; "Instead of sending large ground forces overseas..."

This message is keenly relevant when one considers how Washington will deal with ISIS in the dangerous months ahead, when the coalition must move from the relatively simple job of containing the group to the very difficult one of taking offensive action to destroy it. This wariness about the use of American military force is not simply State of the Union rhetoric -- it tracks with public statements by the president's top advisors that avoiding any casualties is a national security goal, and with the administration's continued refusal to deploy Special Forces to help the local forces expected to take the fight to ISIS in Mosul and Fallujah.

ISIS -- along with al-Qaeda and its various offshoots -- cannot be contained easily or for long without serious rollback. Time is not necessarily on Washington's side; from Yemen to the Golan Heights in just the past week, we have seen how the Assad-ISIS-Iran-al-Qaeda dynamic threatens regional stability in ever new ways. A policy focused on avoiding military "mistakes" above all else is not sufficient to deal with this problem and reassure allies.

The president will have opportunities in the weeks ahead -- including the submission of a draft Authorization for Use of Military Force against ISIS -- to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the way forward on this problem. This includes having U.S. Special Forces accompany local forces, as Gen. Martin Dempsey has discussed and Canada is already doing. More broadly, the president should clarify what his timeline is and how he plans to deploy trained Syrian opposition forces, including against the Assad regime.

DAVID POLLOCK

This tough reality is all too well illustrated by the contrast between the president's recent rhetoric on the subject and the latest events in Yemen. Only four months ago, he hailed that country as a model for "successful" U.S. efforts to counter global terrorist threats without undue commitment. But now, Yemen is falling apart as never before: Shiite Houthi rebels, allied with Iran, have chased Washington's local ally out of his presidential palace; the south is once again on the verge of secession; and, most directly threatening to U.S. security interests, al-Qaeda is resurgent and clearly intent on exporting jihad, not just within the region but to Europe and beyond, as last week's

Paris atrocities prove. This may be labeled a "manageable" threat to America, but not to its key allies -- and the administration is demonstrably not even managing it now.

Moreover, the implication in the president's speech, in which he also emphasized his single-minded determination to complete a nuclear deal with Tehran, is that outreach to Iran will somehow help with such difficult challenges. Yet even if a nuclear deal is signed, there is no good reason to expect Iranian cooperation on almost any other regional issue (except perhaps Afghanistan). On the contrary, Iran would then more likely be economically empowered and strategically emboldened to expand its far-flung support for terrorist, subversive, and sectarian activities in Yemen, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and more. Certainly this is the dominant expectation in the region among Arabs, Turks, Kurds, and Israelis alike. And it is reinforced by the administration's apparent willingness to accept new diplomatic efforts that could enable Iran and Russia to preserve their client regime in Damascus indefinitely.

Others may well ask: what is a better alternative? For the purposes of this speech, the wiser choice would have been to stand up, at least oratorically, for America's friends in the region rather than merely doubling down on efforts to placate its adversaries.

ROBERT SATLOFF

The Middle East-related passages in the State of the Union address are as noteworthy for what they did not discuss as much as for what they did. The president made no reference to the dictator he three years ago said should step aside (Bashar al-Assad), the last Arab regime targeted by U.S. forces (Libya), the one-time counterterror success story turned sour (Yemen), or the diplomatic initiative that once occupied his secretary of state nearly full time (the Israeli-Palestinian peace process). On the other side of the ledger, he made no mention of two pieces of good news: the peaceful democratic process in Tunisia and the call for Muslim reformation by the president of Egypt.

Indeed, the only two items that attracted significant attention in his speech were the fight against ISIS and the nuclear negotiations with Iran, suggesting that these issues virtually monopolize presidential attention allotted to Middle East policy these days. In fact, the focus on these two items only tends to confirm what many analysts -- and most Middle Easterners -- already believe: that the two items are organically linked. It is ironic that on the very day Iranian-backed Houthis routed government forces in Sana and Iranian media mourned the "martyr's" death of an Iranian general operating with a Hezbollah terrorist cell inside Syria, the president characterized critics seeking to stiffen U.S. policy toward Iran as the ones seeking to "go to war."

ANDREW TABLER

The president completely reframed the Syria issue in terms of combating ISIS, veering away from previous speeches in which he outlined pressure on the Assad regime and support for the opposition to build a future Syria "free of dictatorship, terror, and fear." This is completely in keeping with Washington's Iraq-centric strategy for fighting ISIS, which leaves the question of what forces will defeat the group in Syria unanswered. There was no recognition that allowing the Syria war to fester and jihadists to grow has led to the hard dilemma the administration now faces: the Assad regime is crippled, politically bankrupt, and unable to take and hold all of Syrian territory, while the moderate opposition has weakened vis-a-vis the jihadists due to internal divisions and lack of U.S. military support.

Without greater public messaging and military assistance, the Syrian moderates and Sunni allies who seek to replace Assad with a more inclusive government are unlikely to devote the effort and forces needed to "destroy" ISIS. Meanwhile, most of the region's Sunni majority believe Washington is effectively siding with Shiite Iran and its Iraqi Shiite partners in an increasingly sectarian war centered in Syria and Iraq.

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