

While Still Risky, Military Intervention Against ISIS May Be the Only Good Option

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In addition to hitting ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the United States should target the Assad regime's military infrastructure to ensure that Damascus cannot take advantage of the situation.

There are risks when attacking ISIS, but some more manageable than others. If President Obama is serious that the objective now is to "degrade and destroy" ISIS, then U.S. air strikes must be stepped up against the Islamic State.

The U.S. cannot rely simply on military advisers to the Iraqi Army, an Iraqi political agreement, and a few air strikes here and there. Nor can it stop at the Iraq-Syria border because ISIS certainly does not. Destroying ISIS will only happen if it is hit hard in both northern Iraq and eastern Syria.

Yet the U.S. should not give Syrian President Bashar Assad a free pass while it takes out his enemies. Officials repeat that in Syria, the enemy of our enemy is not necessarily our friend. The government needs to stand by that, and it has low-risk options.

Assad has only 15 to 18 heavy runways capable of taking the massive Russian and Iranian cargo planes stuffed with weapons. Bombing even a handful of these runways out of commission would seriously impair Assad's ability to restock his arsenal.

Striking both Assad and ISIS would have the added benefit of boosting moderate rebels in Syria. Otherwise, action against ISIS runs the risk of enabling Assad to devote more resources toward defeating groups that the U.S. has not designated as terrorists.

Instead, the U.S. can buy time to help arm and train moderates. We should not throw them under the bus as an unintended consequence of not at least degrading Assad's capabilities while weakening one of his most dangerous enemies.

It may be the case, as the President has repeatedly said, that there is no military solution in Iraq or Syria. Yet it is hard to imagine a viable political solution without an improvement in the military situation. Obama staked much of his reputation on getting American troops out of Iraq and Afghanistan, and it does not surprise that he is not keen on returning. But the most extreme Islamist group the world has ever seen now controls huge swathes of territory across Iraq and Syria.

Although Obama has kept the U.S. out of the conflict on the basis of "don't do stupid stuff," it is hard to see how military involvement could have made the situation worse. Now, it is hard to see how the situation will get better without it.

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