Advancing U.S. Interests in Iraq Will Require More Than Airstrikes

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In ordering limited airstrikes in Iraq, President Barack Obama has reluctantly become involved in a crisis he wished to avoid. Given that Iraq's leaders seem too diverted by the political turmoil in Baghdad to address the grave threats to their country, one can perhaps understand his hesitation. Nevertheless, his narrow goals for the U.S. airstrikes -- providing humanitarian relief and protecting U.S. personnel and facilities in Erbil and Baghdad from the extremists known as the Islamic State -- carry their own risks.

U.S. personnel in Iraq must be protected -- rather than evacuated, as their counterparts in Libya recently were -- because they are there in service of strategic American interests, which President Obama has not enumerated but rightly hesitates to forsake. But advancing these interests will take more than stop-gap measures.

For one thing, while airstrikes appear to have allowed Iraqi forces to regroup, they may ultimately prove insufficient to roll back the Islamic State's advances. The U.S. approach also leaves the initiative to the extremists; U.S. forces would go idle if the group pauses its advance, shifts its focus to consolidating its hold over the territory it has seized, or ratchets up terror attacks and sabotage in areas it does not control.

The president's approach also fails to treat the Islamic State as a threat to the entire region. It has advanced in Syria, attacked Lebanon, and poses risks to Jordan and Saudi Arabia. These forces brutally oppress the populations under their control, including Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis who do not share the group's extreme ideology.

So why define the U.S. mission so narrowly? The announced policy appears to be a compromise between two options debated by analysts and officials since the Islamic State took control of Mosul in June. The first approach was to withhold military support until a new, more inclusive Iraqi government was formed; this would, the thinking went, avoid removing incentive for Iraq's Shiites to take a more conciliatory approach toward Sunnis and Kurds (and thus would avoid the U.S. appearing to take sides in Iraq's sectarian dispute).

The alternative was to use military force to set back the Islamic State sooner rather than later in order to halt Iraq's descent into sectarian conflict -- which would make political compromise more elusive -- and to persuade Iraqi Sunnis that politics, not the Islamic State, was the right vehicle for redressing their grievances.

The Islamic State's rapid advance led the Obama administration to split the difference: order airstrikes, but on very

narrow terms, in hopes of halting the extremists and buying more time for Iraqis to form a new government, while withholding broader military support in order to keep the pressure on Iraqi Shiites to compromise. This is a familiar pattern for President Obama: When presented with policy options A and B, he tends first to delay and ultimately to choose parts of each.

But a compromise between two policy options is not necessarily a viable course of action. And advancing U.S. interests will require a more robust, proactive strategy, steps such as aid for Syrian rebels and the Kurdish peshmerga and a broader effort to cripple the Islamic State behind which the U.S. can rally regional and international support.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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