

How Obama Created a Mideast Vacuum

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By taking an overcautious approach in Syria, the president has highlighted America's failure to have an open discussion about the real strategic lessons of the Iraq war.

Few issues have confronted President Barack Obama with tougher dilemmas than Syria. Over the course of the nearly five years of the war within Syria, Obama has faced choices on how the United States should respond and he consistently decided to do the minimum. From the outset, when Bashar Assad's response to calls for reform was draconian and turned peaceful demonstrations into an uprising, the president's first instinct was avoidance. He looked at Syria and he saw entanglement in another ongoing Middle East conflict where our involvement would be costly, lead to nothing, and potentially make things worse. In nearly every meeting on Syria when presented with possible options to affect the Syrian civil war, the president would ask "tell me where this ends."

He was surely right to ask this question. But he failed to ask the corollary question: Tell me what happens if we don't act? Had he known that not acting would produce a vacuum in which a humanitarian catastrophe, a terrible refugee crisis, a deepening proxy war and the rise of ISIL in Iraq and Syria would occur, his responses might have been different. However, it was hard for him to ask that question because when he looked at Syria, he saw Iraq.

Given the painful legacy of the Iraq War, it was not surprising that he did so. In his eyes, Iraq was a colossal mistake. He had run against it. He had been elected to get us out of Middle East wars not into them. But was Syria really Iraq? As someone who believed (wrongly) that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, I made the mistake of supporting the Iraq War. Surely, other proponents of the war should be willing to acknowledge now that it was wrong to seek regime change and not understand the vacuum that we would create in doing so; it was wrong to go to war without a serious, well-thought out plan for what it would take to create a credible transition, including the forces on the ground -- military and police -- needed to ensure security and the means to establish governance; it was wrong for us to become the administrator of Iraq, becoming the symbol of occupation, instead of having a United Nations interim administration; it was wrong to go to war without thinking through the consequences of unleashing a Shia-Sunni conflict that might not be limited to Iraq.

But Syria has always been a different issue. This was not an American invasion of a country but an internal uprising against an authoritarian leader. Assad consciously made it a sectarian conflict, believing he could survive only if the Alawites, and other minorities, saw their survival depending on his. Soon, thereafter, it was transformed into a proxy war largely pitting Saudi Arabia and Turkey against Iran. A vacuum was created not by our replacing the Assad regime but by our hesitancy to do more than offer pronouncements -- by overlearning the lessons of Iraq, in effect. And, that vacuum was filled by others: Iran, Hezbollah and Iran's other Shia militia proxies; Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar; Russia; and ISIL. Unless the U.S. does more now to fill this vacuum, the situation will spin further out of control.

In many ways, the vacuum in Syria has been compounded by the sense that the U.S. is retrenching in the region, creating a larger void that has helped to produce the increasing competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Iranians saw they ran little risk with the United States as they ramped up their regional activism and made the Qods force -- the action arm of the Revolutionary Guard outside of Iran -- more prominent in both the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts. Indeed, Qassem Suleiman, the head of the Qods forces, who was previously a shadowy figure, has become a very public presence appearing at times on the ground during the battles over Tikrit in Iraq, al Qusayr in Syria, and other places in both countries. For the Saudis, the nuclear deal and the greater Iranian regional involvement fed their perception that the Obama administration was not prepared to set any real limits on Iran -- or act on its red lines. As a result, it has decided to draw its own lines. It has done so in Yemen and will probably find it difficult to extract itself. Its execution of Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr may have been done as much for domestic reasons, particularly given the number of Sunni Al Qaeda operatives that were being executed at the same time, but the Saudis knew the Iranians would react. They had, after all, threatened the Saudis with retribution if they put him to death.

The Saudi-Iranian competition probably won't escalate into direct conflict but will make them see the existing proxy wars in strictly zero-sum terms. It will surely make it harder for either to be willing to back down in Syria, and is bound to complicate the administration's hopes to use the Vienna diplomatic process to, in its words, "bring peace and security to Syria." Even without the deepening Saudi-Iranian divide, the prospects for Vienna were not great and, in any case, depend far more on Vladimir Putin: he has the ability to force the Assad regime to respect

a ceasefire, stop the barrel bombs, and permit the creation of humanitarian corridors for the delivery of food and medicine to the areas that the non-ISIL opposition controls. Only in such circumstances will there be any possibility of getting the Saudis, Turks and others who are supporting the opposition to persuade rebel forces to implement a ceasefire -- the key to the Vienna process going anywhere and an essential element of the Obama strategy for defeating ISIL. Indeed, so long as there is no meaningful ceasefire between the Assad regime and the non-ISIL opposition in Syria, the Sunni states and tribes will not truly join the fight against ISIL. (If nothing else, they need to be able to show that the onslaught against Sunnis in Syria has stopped and they have succeeded in protecting them.)

While President Obama sees Syria as a quagmire, Putin, for now, does not. He continues to believe that achieving his ends in the war is more important than ensuring that the Vienna process works at this stage. Moreover, whereas the president believes Putin will not want to repeat the mistakes of Afghanistan and will see the need to extricate Russia from Syria at some point, Putin shows little sign of being inhibited by his reading of Russian involvement in Afghanistan -- perhaps, knowing that he does not intend a similarly large ground presence and perhaps also believing that we will simply not raise the costs to him. Putin may well be driven by history, but it is his need to make up for the period of Russian weakness and U.S. primacy; he wants to demonstrate that Russia is a superpower and arbiter of events. He sees U.S. retrenchment, and the vacuum it has created, as an opportunity to reassert Russia's prerogatives in the Middle East.

For President Obama, the Iraq experience continues to loom heavy in his calculus. Like presidents before him, he is being guided by his reading of an analogy. There is nothing wrong with that -- provided the analogy is apt.

Presidents and their advisers use analogies to shape judgments, particularly when facing hard choices that involve interventions. For Lyndon Johnson, "Munich" was the analogy that disastrously guided him on Vietnam: if we did not stop the communists there -- if we "appeased" them there -- we would face a much greater and more dangerous threat later on. In the bipolar world of the Cold War, the Munich analogy was powerful and blinded Johnson and those around him to the realities that communism was not monolithic, that the Soviets and Chinese were rivals, and that the war in Vietnam was nationalistic. George H. W. Bush was also guided by this historical reference point when responding to Saddam Hussein in 1990. Indeed, in Oval Office meetings, I heard him use the Munich analogy as we mobilized the world against the Iraqi leader after he seized Kuwait; for Bush 41, we could not let this aggression stand lest the law of the jungle replace his hopes for a new world order in the aftermath of the Cold War. President Bush may have used the analogy, but he also clearly defined a limited objective which was to reverse the aggression in Kuwait and not produce regime change in Iraq. The means employed matched the stated objective.

Analogies are going to be used, but they need to reflect real lessons. We have never had a serious discussion in this country about the lessons of the Iraq War. The critics of the war never acknowledged there was anything to discuss; indeed, they saw those who supported the war as fundamentally misguided. For their part, the proponents of the war have been so put on the defensive that they have been reluctant to acknowledge what they got wrong and how things might have been done differently.

We should be tempered by the Iraqi debacle, but we should not overlearn the lessons of the war and misapply them. Not every conflict in the Middle East is a replay of Iraq -- and our choices for responding to them should not be reduced to doing nothing or putting massive numbers of troops on the ground.

It may not be easy to find the Goldilocks solution where we don't do too much as in Iraq or too little as in Syria, but until we have a serious debate about Iraq (and for that matter Syria) and consider what needs to be learned from these conflicts, we will thrash around using false analogies and making bad judgments. Having some guidelines for what we might be prepared to do militarily would help -- e.g., being prepared to put some troops on the ground, including deploying spotters for directing air attacks, embedding forces with local partners perhaps to the battalion level, and using special operations elements for hit-and-run raids might allow us to manage our involvement while avoiding the slippery slope that the president has feared.

For sure, even these guidelines should be informed by our first asking hard questions in each case about our stakes and whether we should or need to act, and, if so, in what ways. It is obviously not just better but also necessary for local partners to assume a major responsibility in Middle East conflicts. President Obama is right about that. But we also need to know what will produce them -- who might actually fight and where, what will motivate them, what they would need from us, whether they believe we will stand by them, and whether we or others have leverage on them. In each case, we should assess the range of military options we have. We should be mindful of what the Pentagon calls mission creep. We are more likely to avoid that if, like George H. W. Bush, we define our objectives clearly from the start and make sure the means we are prepared to apply match them.

At a time when there is a general consensus on the need to fight ISIL but no consensus on how to do it, the Iraqi legacy and its lessons are the elephant in the room. Confronting it and having an open discussion about it -- especially in an election year -- may be a necessary part of producing a strategy that can work. It may also be essential for signaling those in the region and outside it that we will no longer be inhibited by its legacy.

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