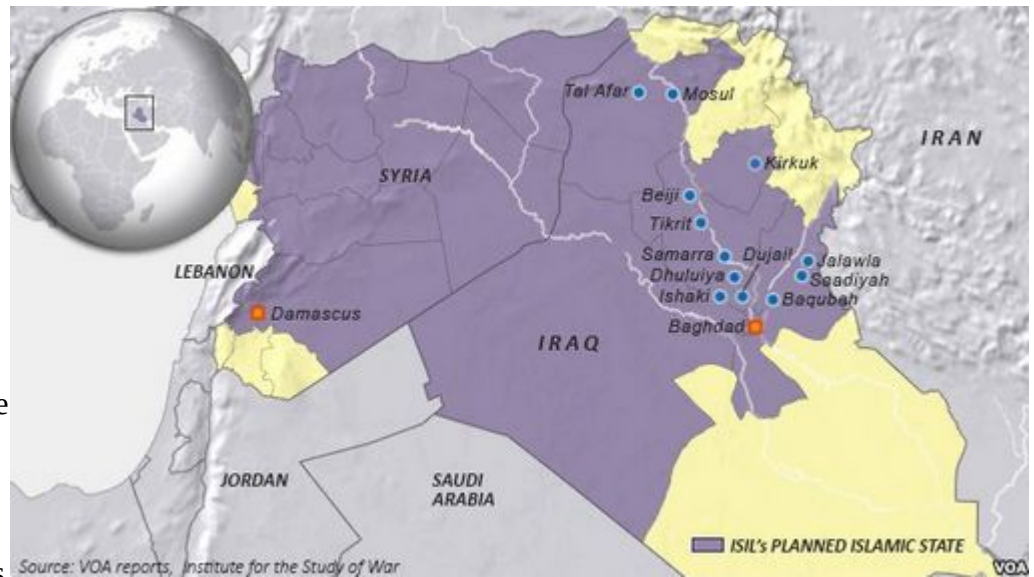


The U.S. and ISIS

At the start of classes one year ago, I was having to explain to my students why the United States appeared to be on the verge of going to war against the Syrian government. At the beginning of this semester, exactly one year later, I'm having to explain to my students why the United States may be on the verge of going to war against Syrian rebels.



It is not surprising, therefore, that while the horrors unleashed by forces of the so-called Islamic State are all-too-real, there is skepticism regarding the use of military force.

Already U.S. planes and missiles have been attacking ISIS forces in northern Iraq. Given the real threat of a heightened genocidal campaign against Yazidis and other minorities and the risks of ISIS control expanding into the Kurdish region, even some of those normally averse to unilateral U.S. military intervention abroad were willing to acknowledge it may have been the least bad option.

Within days, however, there were already indications of “mission creep,” as what had been officially declared an exclusively defensive mission turned offensive when the United States provided air support for Kurdish and Iraqi forces, which seized the Mosul Dam from ISIS forces.

Even if one can make a convincing strategic case for such a military operation, the failure of President Obama to go before Congress for authorization of this renewed military intervention in Iraq is extremely disturbing.

Ironically, however, President Obama has been getting the most high-profile criticism from those wishing he had been more aggressive with projecting American military power. For example, in a well publicized interview in *The Atlantic*, his former Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, appeared to blame the rise of ISIS on Obama's failure to sufficiently arm and support the so-called moderate rebels of the Free Syrian Army.

Such a charge defies logic, however. The Free Syrian Army consists of literally hundreds of separate militia without a central command, largely composed of relatively inexperienced fighters, who would have been no match for the well-armed, experienced, disciplined fighters of ISIS, regardless of the amount of weapons the U.S. might have provided. In fact, it was an awareness of ISIS's potential dominance of the Syrian rebel movement, which served as an important reason why the Obama administration didn't go beyond the relatively limited arming and training of a few small groups affiliated with the Free Syrian Army.

Indeed, part of ISIS's military prowess comes from weapons they captured from overrunning FSA positions and from their ranks supplemented by FSA fighters who, in the course of the three-year battle with Assad's regimes, became radicalized and switched sides.

In any case, ISIS has found an even stronger foothold in Iraq, a direct consequence of the U.S. invasion and occupation. In a profile of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a one-time moderate Sufi turned Salafist extremist, [the New York Times observed](#), “At every turn, Mr. Baghdadi’s rise has been shaped by the United States’ involvement in Iraq — most of the political changes that fueled his fight, or led to his promotion, were born directly from some American action.”

Almost immediately after the 2003 invasion, U.S. occupation forces systematically dismantled the country’s secular national institutions, which were quickly filled by both Sunni and Shia extremists (actions which Hillary Clinton, as a U.S. Senator, strongly supported).

The biggest division among Iraq’s Arabs, however, is not between Sunnis and Shias but between nationalist and sectarian tendencies within both communities. Under the corrupt and autocratic U.S.-backed Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Shia sectarians dominated. This resulted in an initially nonviolent Sunni backlash, which was met by severe government repression. This backlash was eventually hijacked by ISIS, which rid the major Sunni-dominated cities of government control.

As with the Thieu regime in South Vietnam in the 1970s, the United States can provide all the arming and training of an allied armed force it wants, but if people aren’t willing to fight and die for the regime, they cannot win. Whether the new Iraqi leadership will actually be willing to rid the government of Shia hardliners and become more inclusive, pluralistic, and democratic remains to be seen.

Ironically, though, the eventual demise of ISIS will more likely stem from the group’s own fanaticism than from any action by Baghdad. ISIS—which even the Al-Qaeda network believes is too extreme—sees not just those who aren’t Sunni Muslims as “infidels,” but anyone who doesn’t subscribe to its extremist ideology. Since almost everyone under its rule is therefore at risk, the prospects of the Iraqi and Syrian people eventually rising up against ISIS is high.

Most Muslims are terribly offended by the actions of the self-proclaimed caliphate. Almost every true caliphate from the time of the Prophet Muhammad through the Ottomans—while not granting full rights for non-Muslims—allowed religious minorities to worship freely and run their own judicial system and provided them legal protections.

Just as Sunni tribal leaders were more effective than either U.S. forces or the Iraqi government in driving out Al-Qaeda from northwestern Iraq in 2007-2008, they may be the key in ridding their region of ISIS. Massive Western military intervention, by contrast, might create a backlash that could strengthen political support for the extremists.

This does not mean that some limited well-targeted U.S. air strikes can’t be moral defensible in some cases when innocents are imminently threatened by a well-armed genocidal cult. At the same time, it is important to remember that the United States has been bombing Iraq on and off for nearly a quarter century and things have only gotten worse, for the people of Iraq, and for the security interests of Iraq’s neighbors and ultimately for the United States.

There may be a lesson in that.

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