

## Yet Another Middle East Folly?

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According to his speech on September 11, 2014, President Obama is considering limited air strikes in Syria and Iraq, principally to aid a group of ‘freedom fighters’ in Syria in their struggle to overthrow the Assad regime, and also to degrade ISIS.

I cannot see how air strikes will help us achieve our long-term objectives in the Middle East. There are just too many negative elements in such a plan, and too few reasonably clear positive elements.

Consider a recent article by John Arquilla, *Islamic State Threat Overblown*, in the San Francisco Chronicle, Sept. 12, 2014, page A14. Professor Arquilla studies and teaches defense analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California.

He provides four good reasons to view ISIS as a lesser threat to American security and interests (quote):

1. *Its advance into Iraq was easily stopped with just a tiny leavening of American air power and special forces.*
2. *The very fact that ISIS seeks to hold ground and fight with tanks and artillery makes it highly vulnerable to counterattack.*
3. *Support from disgruntled Iraqi Sunnis – so important to ISIS – can be easily undermined by a more inclusive government in Baghdad.*
4. *ISIS is fundamentally aimed at overthrowing local regimes, not in pursuing “the far enemy” (that is, the United States).*

Let me add a few more points that should be obvious to anyone following the news from the Middle East:

1. Air strikes too often result in civilian casualties, often in the form of destroyed schools, hospitals, apartment buildings, etc. The survivors will know exactly who is to blame for this (us), and will want to exact revenge for their lost family members and homes.
2. An air strike with guided missiles directed by operators located in Texas or California is without question a “precision operation”. But only if the target is in fact clearly an “enemy”. Just who is the “enemy” in this conflict? I don’t think we have any one enemy clearly identified, let alone narrowed down to one or two top “leaders”.
3. All right, suppose an air strike knocks out a vehicle supposedly carrying some high-level enemy leader. *How was that candidate for an air strike chosen?* I’ve never read an analysis of just how that side of it works. Someone on the ground had to finger the target. The potential for corruption and gamesmanship here is very high. Who are these informers, really, and what are their motivations? For that matter, which side are we on? Given all that uncertainty, the effectiveness of those precision air strikes are very much in question. They will likely be knocking out our friends and generating much more hatred toward us.

4. I count at least SEVEN major combatants in this conflict – the Assad regime; the so-called “freedom fighters” who first rose up to unseat Bashar Assad; an Al Quaida contingent in Syria; the Iraqi government; Iran; the Kurds; and now ISIS. There may be more, given the random car bombings still going on in Iraq.

Of those seven combatants, there appears to be only three that could reasonably be considered to be fighting for a democratic government – the freedom fighters, the Iraqi government, and the Kurds.

Of these, we chose not to assist the freedom fighters several years ago, when it might have been possible for them to succeed in overturning Assad, with some air support by the U.S. Obama made that decision clear in a series of speeches – it came down to our inability to sort out just who were the genuine “freedom fighters” and who were just another front for Al Qaida. That, of course, is history. There no doubt were many real fighters for freedom – but they were left with a simmering distrust, a sense of betrayal, if not outright hatred of the U.S. Until we are willing and able to move in with massive ground and air support on their behalf, and clear out both ISIS and the Assad regime, I see no way to recover any of their good will. Mostly, we just don’t know who our friends are, and would have trouble sorting them out if we did move in like a big daddy Mafia chieftain.

As to the Kurds, we might win points by defending them. But half of the Kurds are in Turkey, and Turkey has its own issues with Kurdish demands for independence. The other half of the Kurds are in northeast Iraq, largely inaccessible, and were mostly ignored by the U.S. during the Iraqi war. Like the Kurds in Turkey, the Iraqi Kurds would like independence from Iraq, for good reason. Yet our support for the Iraqi government is interfering with that, which leaves us with poor relations and a lack of trust with the Kurds.

Then there’s the Iraqi government. Al Maliki is stepping down, which is at least not bad news, since the suppression of the Sunni population of Iraq has mostly been of his making. But who is going to replace him, and will that really sap any of the energy of the ISIS movement? Getting rid of a problem head of state isn’t a positive step, just removal of a negative factor. This is a Shiite dominated nation, which was also long under an autocratic rule by a Sunni minority and Saddam Hussein’s Baath party. Hussein is gone, the Shiites took over, and then the Shiites did everything they could to disenfranchise the Sunnis.

Finally, our media and our government are unwilling to admit that this seemingly impossible situation is at its heart a *religious war*, fought over a few abstract and historic differences within Islam that have persisted for over a thousand years. Worse, Islam has no central authority (like the Pope for the Catholics) to settle theological differences between its factions. Theological differences in America are debated (but never settled) in seminaries, and almost never by force of arms. We have the first amendment separation of church and state, and an elected government dedicated to neutrality toward theological issues to thank for that.

Our separation of church and state does not require that we never air the political and governmental problems that can be traced to religion. Yes, our police, the courts, the FBI, our representatives should maintain impartiality with respect to religious persuasion, and focus on the deeds and activities that threaten the public welfare. I don’t see that the *media* need be so sensitive about pointing out the problems with major religious factions. More open speech and criticism is needed, not less.

No such freedom of speech exists in any of the Islamic nations. For example, our closest ally, Saudi Arabia, is controlled by a hereditary monarch, and that state enforces Shariah law. The monarchy has attempted to moderate Shariah from time to time, but has been rebuffed by massive demonstrations in favor of maintaining the purity of Islamic tradition and law.

The Muslim countries have no constitutional guarantees of protection against persecution by religious authorities. Consider Egypt and its revolution, brought on by large numbers of intelligent citizens who wanted to see an end to theocratic rule. Egypt has found it impossible to write and adopt an enlightened constitution that keeps the Imams out of political power. Their struggle against Islamic forces – the Muslim Brotherhood in particular – will no doubt continue forever.

Turkey continues to struggle against Islam in its government. Its constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but a large segment of its public has trouble accepting that, when its dominant religion insists that Islam, not the elected government, should be supreme.

The deep history of Islam, and many passages in the Koran, makes it very clear that this particular religion has a serious problem accepting any constitutional government with separation of church and state. The entanglement of religion and state through Shariah law, centuries of rule under Caliphs, Kings and Muslim autocrats, along with no designated central doctrinal authority, has made it very difficult, if not impossible, to move toward a modern democracy.

What the world so desperately needs is a Martin Luther, or a Gandhi, to somehow arise from within a Muslim state, who can lead these people into a more enlightened view of modern civilization.

When ISIS announced that it intended to form a Caliphate, I considered that good news – for a few days. The ISIS leaders could have focused on an enlightened view of Islam, for example, following the example of Indonesia. Instead, the intolerant and vicious side of Islam appeared, through its beheadings of journalists, and – worse – the mass slaughter of non-Muslims, and even Shiite Muslims, in its territory, on purely theocratic grounds. ISIS is no Lutheran movement, working to reform a corrupt religion. It is simply yet another medieval fanatical gang of religious thugs determined to “purify” its people by force, expulsion or beheading. That would also be the fate of any critic or would-be reformer.

I don't know who will become the reformer of Islam, or when it may happen. There are so many forces working against any would-be reformer. Several Muslim states now reward any person “insulting Islam” with the death penalty. An “insult” can be as innocuous as depicting Mohammed in a cartoon, or writing a novel, as Salmon Rushdie discovered. For that matter, any scholar (such as myself) writing an essay suggesting that the “insult” law should be repealed, may well find him or herself under a death threat issued by some Mullah.

This is a religion that desperately needs reformation. No one has yet stepped up to the plate and attempted this. Reformation must come from within the faith – it cannot be imposed from the outside. Nor can it be forced by the United States through air strikes or an invasion, as we've learned to our horror by our misguided invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Coming back to the situation in the middle East – I claim that American air strikes on whatever targets – even those with identifiable ISIS killers – are more likely to generate more fury toward America than win us friends. I just don't see how obliterating a few ISIS leaders

would blunt a possible attack on a domestic U.S. target. We have strengthened our domestic defense and surveillance considerably since September 11, 2001. Many attacks have in fact been thwarted quietly through improved intelligence and monitoring fanatics.

Will there be attacks by ISIS on the United States? Some of its leaders have warned us about that. It's very likely. But I wonder if this is a situation of "big hat, and no cattle", of a few hotheads sounding off? Let's see if an ISIS attack on the U.S. is really feasible. I'm sure the CIA and its European compatriots are tackling that question now.

Our best defense is working with what allies we have in Europe and the Middle East, toward establishing a lasting peace. An Islamic Caliphate might be a reasonable compromise for the Middle East, somewhat like another Ottoman empire, but we should pray that it follows the pattern of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566), not Saddam Hussein, Bashir Assad, or ISIS.