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Obama's ISIS Strategy: Doomed for Failure

Robert W. Merry

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"He remains mired in the same thinking that started with George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq in 2003 and has generated growing chaos in the region ever since."

Another problem is that it relieves regional players of the responsibility for protecting themselves from ISIS and rising above ongoing petty squabbles and less pressing strategic aims. "U.S. policy," writes Freeman, "should encourage the nations of the Middle East to develop effective political, economic, and military strategies to defend and advance their own interests, not rush to assume responsibility for doing this for them." But, instead of facing a coherent

Middle East counterforce, ISIS now is “blessed with an enemy divided into antagonistic and adamantly uncooperative coalitions.”

A second principle explored by Freeman centers on correctly identifying the enemy. He makes clear that ISIS is indeed such an enemy, as it is gathering the strength to destroy the vestiges of stability in the region. Without Muslim leadership and a strategic vision, he writes:

“the existing political geography of the Arab world...faces progressive erosion and ultimate collapse. States will be pulled down, to be succeeded by warlords, as is already happening in Iraq and Syria. Degenerate and perverted forms of Islam will threaten prevailing Sunni and Shi’a religious dispensations.”

On the other hand, Iran not only doesn’t pose such a threat, but views ISIS as an enemy. The same is true of Syria’s Bashar al-Assad, who has been attempting to fend off an insurgency, led largely by ISIS, bent on destroying his regime. But, while the Obama administration is working assiduously to reach an anti-nuclear arrangement with Iran, some within the United States are seeking to sabotage those talks so that tensions between the two nations will rise. And, while Obama has initiated bombing attacks against ISIS in Syria, he still identifies Assad as an enemy of America.

It’s as if Obama has come up with a punchy new catch phrase to synthesize an important element of his foreign policy: The enemy of my enemy is my enemy. It’s difficult to see how that could make much sense in any context.

Freeman believes the United States must begin working with nations within Islam that could emerge as civilizational leaders in the region, bringing together the countries truly at risk from the spread of ISIS and fostering actions designed to smooth over petty intra-civilizational squabbles. Iran, being a non-Arab nation, can’t play that role, though it can help considerably in the fight against ISIS. The potential leaders are Egypt and Turkey. “But both are problematical.”

Egypt is preoccupied with its internal struggle against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Palestinian movement Hamas. Turkey is fixated on upending Assad and thwarting Kurdish factions contributing to its domestic terrorism challenges. And yet ISIS represents a threat to both, and the U.S. tendency to assume leadership in far-off regions merely allows those countries to ignore the true nature of the threat. That’s another reason for America to pursue policies that

are “measured, limited, and calculated to avoid relieving regional players of the primary responsibility for protecting themselves.”

Could this kind of measured, limited and calculated approach succeed in turning the tide of ISIS in the region? There’s no way to answer that question short of adopting that approach on an experimental basis. But the current approach—applying a half-hearted bombing campaign under U.S. leadership—can’t work and probably will pull America into another quagmire. Perhaps it’s time to apply the wisdom of the 1950s and America’s Cold War strategy—a lighter footprint, more deftness, diplomatic finesse and stealthy action when necessary.