

The Obama Administration: From Ending Two Wars to Engagement in Five – with the Risk of a Sixth

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Presidents propose action, and then reality intervenes. This cycle holds special irony in the case of President Obama. A year ago, it looked like he might end two of the longest wars in U.S. history by the time he left office. As of today, President Obama has involved the United States in five evolving conflicts, and there is little prospect any of them will be over by the time the next president is inaugurated, unless the United States chooses to disengage and lose.

War 1: Afghanistan

First is the Afghan war. The coming “Transition” at the end of 2014 will not end the U.S. role in the conflict or allow the United States to claim any form of success. The administration has ceased to provide any meaningful unclassified data on either the progress of the fighting or of Afghan forces. Rather, the administration and U.S. agencies can only be accused of lying by omission. The latest semiannual report on the Afghan war has no meaningful metrics on the trends in the fighting, dropped all detailed metrics on the readiness of Afghan units, and totally understates and ignores the negative trends in media reporting, UN casualty data, and Afghan public opinion data from recent surveys like those from the Asia Foundation. It sharply understates political risk and does not address the major economic problems and risks raised by the World Bank.

The president has already had to admit that his previous plan to cap the U.S. training and assistance mission at 9,800 will not work, that at least 12,000 to 15,000 more troops must be deployed, and U.S. combat airpower may be needed in the future. In practice, he may well have to go much further.

The United States does not need to reintroduce major combat units, but it also makes no real world sense for the United States to size support of Afghan forces to a fixed number of personnel, or commit to cut them in half by the end of 2015, or reduce them to nearly zero by the end of 2016, without any regard to the actual course of the fighting. Neither does it make sense for the most recent semiannual report on the Afghan war to lack clear plans for either military or civil aid. The president has made promises that he simply should not have made, and probably cannot keep without losing America’s longest war.

War 2: Islamic State or ISIS

The second war is the battle against the Islamic State (also called ISIS or ISIL). Senior U.S. military officers have already said that it may take up to three years to drive the Islamic State out of Iraq. Realistically, they will probably not be able to fully destroy the Islamic State, only degrade it. This is to say nothing of what will happen to the Islamic State in Syria, or to the other jihadist forces now fighting there. The United States has already had to add more troops to the train and assist mission, significantly expand its deployment of strike aircraft by adding A-10s, and admit it is badly short of drones and other intelligence and targeting assets.

Forming a large coalition has still left the United States in the lead, and it is far from clear that it has brought any unity of action to our Arab allies or to any other states in countering Islamic extremism, dealing with the growing range of jihadist movements, limiting the flow of foreign volunteers, doing everything possible to cut off the flow of money to extremists, and developing broader efforts to combat extremism and address its

internal causes. There is almost universal agreement that violence and extremist movements continue to grow sharply in the MENA region, and that no one is yet winning the “long war” on terrorism.

War 3: The Civil War in Iraq

Like the Afghan conflict, the Iraq War is anything but over. The future of Iraq, the stability of the Gulf, the ability to contain and deter Iran, and the ability to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq all depend on the course of the civil war in Iraq. Since the original withdrawal of U.S. forces at the end of 2011, the United States has now been quietly intervening in the Iraqi civil war for nearly 12 months. Its efforts include helping to push Maliki out of office and ushering in the new Iraqi PM Haider al-Abadi; creating a political structure that offers some hope of bringing Arab Shiites, Arab Sunnis, and Kurds together into a functioning government, and uniting Iraq’s political structure and its various security forces.

The success of the United States in fighting the Islamic State, in creating something approaching a coherent security structure in the Gulf, and making Iraq independent of Iranian influence all now depends on the size and capability of the U.S. military train and assist mission in Iraq as well as U.S. and allied airpower.

As is the case in Afghanistan, this not only will involve some actual U.S. fighting – air strikes are a form of combat and war and the United States has already lost one F-16 and its pilot – but a need for a steadily larger presence of U.S. train and assist forces on the ground. Moreover, some may well have to go forward and be deployed in combat zones to be effective. Leading from the rear has its limits in rebuilding an Iraqi ghost army, creating a Sunni National Guard, and aiding the Kurds.

As is the case in Afghanistan, U.S. major combat units are probably not necessary, and might well involve the United States in sectarian and ethnic conflicts. However, setting rigid rules to limit all boots on the ground may cost the United States success in both Iraq and the war against the Islamic State. As for having a clear strategy, a workable plan, and meaningful reporting on any aspect of the fighting in either Iraq or against the Islamic State, transparency – like truth – seems to be one of the first casualties in war.

War 4: The Civil War in Syria

As for the fourth war, the United States is involved in the Syrian civil war whether it likes to admit it or not. It is actively training what one hopes will become both moderate and effective Syrian rebel forces. However, the most capable rebel forces in the field that the United States has trained and equipped to date suffered major defeats in November from a different jihadist force called the Al Nusra Front. Moreover, the administration has never really explained what the 10,000 or so new rebel forces it plans to help train are intended to do, or how they can make a difference.

As for airpower, the United States is already using airpower in Syria in ways that inadvertently aid the Assad regime, Iran, and Hezbollah in some ways. The Assad regime has sharply increased its air attacks on rebel forces, and even carried out its own attacks on the Islamic State.

Moreover, like the Afghan War, the United States has provided no meaningful public reporting on the details and effectiveness of its campaign on the Islamic State and other Jihadist movements in either Iraq or Syria. About all that does seem clear is that it flies far more strike sorties than it has the intelligence and targeting capability to execute, and that many of the strikes it does execute may only have marginal effect. According to the *New York Times*, “Of the 450 strikes in Syria through last week, about 25 percent were planned, military officials said. Of the 540 strikes in Iraq through the same period, there were even fewer, only 5 percent of the total.”

It is far from clear that Assad’s forces can really exploit the situation, but it is equally far from clear how the United States intends to address a war where well over 191,000 civilians had been killed by mid-November 2014 and there were well over 300,000 seriously wounded or injured more than in a nation of some 17 million remaining residents. Moreover, there are some 3.2 million refugees outside Syria and 6.45 million displaced persons – half of

whom are children. A total of 9.2 to 10.8 million Syrians are at risk, 4.6 million are in besieged or hard to access areas, and a \$5,100 per capita income in 2011 may have been cut by 50%.

Reports that the United States is negotiating with Turkey to trade the use of the air base at Incirlik for U.S. support of some kind of rebel safe or no fly zone in Syria indicate that the United States is trying to dodge around the issue by tailoring that zone so it only covers the largely rebel-held area along the Turkish-Syrian border east of Aleppo. The United States so far has not agreed to this idea, but if it does nothing, the Assad regime, Iran and Hezbollah continue to benefit by default. If it does act, there is no clear way it can avoid being dragged into the Syrian civil war on a much deeper level.

Moreover, it already is operating at the margin of Turkey's civil war with its own Kurds, and the Syrian Kurdish struggle for some form of human rights and dignity, and the tension between Iraq's Kurds and the Iraqi central government.

Even if the Kurds do not become another source of conflict, the United States has already shown it cannot stand aside in a conflict that now involves every nearby regional power and Russia, and where U.S. action against the Islamic State now aids Assad's tyranny and other regional enemies. The United States is confronted with the need for far more serious action at every level than the Administration has discussed to date, or face a situation where today's human tragedies in Syria will get worse for every remaining month of Obama's term in office.

War 5: The War in Yemen and Against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula

The fifth war being fought is in Yemen and to some extent in Saudi Arabia. The most immediate issue is that the government and armed forces which the United States has been aiding have been effectively been overrun by Houthi Shi'ite rebels from the north that now control the Yemeni capital. These Houthi gains and the infighting that has led to the virtual disintegration of the government forces the United States has backed with money, arms, advisors, and drone strikes has also given Iran at least some influence in shaping a new potential threat along the Saudi border and near the Red Sea and Bab el Mandeb.

Equally important, it has sharply reduced the U.S. and Yemeni ability to attack the forces of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which is a major terrorist threat to Saudi Arabia as well as the nucleus of another potential "Islamic state." It has also increased the risk of a breakaway movement in the south.

This is a serious setback in a war that President Obama suggested on September 10th was one in which the United States was making major progress. It is also a war on the border of two key Gulf oil and gas exporters: Saudi Arabia and Oman. It is a reminder that the struggle against extremism is scarcely one that can focus on the Islamic State at a time when the U.S. State Department START global data base on terrorism shows an increase in major terror incidents. The START global terror database demonstrates that major incidents have risen from less than 300 major incidents a year in the MENA region during 1998 to 2004, to approximately 1,600 in 2008, and increased again from around 1,500 in 2010 to 1,700 in 2011, and jumped to 2,500 in 2012, and 4,650 in 2013. These unsettling statistics represent a fifteen-fold increase since 2002, and threefold increase since 2010.

It is also a time when the number of Salafi jihadist groups has sharply risen. A recent study by the RAND Corporation on trends in terrorism in 2014 found a 58-percent increase in the number of Salafi jihadist groups from 2010 to 2013, and that the number of Salafi jihadists more than doubled from 2010 to 2013, according to both RAND's low and high estimates.

It is a troubling time when another report, by the nonprofit Institute for Economics and Peace, found that terror-related fatalities climbed 60 percent in 2013, and that only five countries — Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Syria — account for four-fifths of the almost 18,000 fatalities attributed to terrorism in 2013. The highest terrorism index in the world was for Iraq at 10. Iraq had the worst record of all, with more than 6,300 fatalities. Syria had a score of 8.12. Yemen had a score of 7.31. Egypt was 6.5. Lebanon was 6.4. Iran had a score of 4.9. Bahrain was 4.41. Saudi Arabia was 2.71. Jordan was 1.76. The UAE was 0.29. Kuwait was 0.04. Oman and Qatar were zero.

Even the most successful U.S. effort against the Islamic State will have limited value unless the United States can work with its allies to defeat a broader and growing threat.

War 6? Preparing for War with Iran While Negotiating With It

Finally, there is the risk of a sixth war. Iran happens to be an enemy of some of our enemies in the region at this time, but it is scarcely our friend. A point made abundantly clear by its relentless and harmful efforts in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, and its support of Hamas, and Shi'ite movements in Bahrain and Yemen. The current P5+1 negotiations may or may not reduce the nuclear threat from Iran, but Iran has been equally relentless in increasing its missile threat to the Arab Gulf states and its build-up of sea-air-and missile forces to carry out asymmetric attacks or a broader war that threatens the flow of Gulf oil exports from the Gulf and the global economy.

There is no war as yet, but the United States cannot afford illusions. U.S. actions in Iraq and Syria do not make Iran a friend or ally. Iran wants to expand its role and influence throughout the region, and U.S. actions that weaken its enemies may end in giving Iran more power in both states. Mishandling of this situation can also alienate our Arab allies as well as Turkey. In theory, every regional state – Arab or Persian, Sunni or Shia – should share a common interest in regional stability. But in reality, this is far from practice on any side.

As is the case with so much of U.S. policy and action in the region, the Obama Administration has provided no clear assessment of the situation, no picture of its strategy for dealing with Iran, and only tenuous transparency as to its actions. It has, however, quietly built up its forces in the Gulf, adding guided missile defense ships and a Special Forces command ship, as well as altered the balance and structure of its air, missile, and naval forces.

The scale of the U.S. effort in support of its Arab Gulf allies – and the level of preparation for war – is also indicated by the sheer scale of the arms transfer to the Gulf. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) reports that the Arab Gulf states took delivery of more than \$106 billion dollars' worth of arms between 2004 and 2011 versus only \$2.4 billion for Iran. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) reports that the Arab Gulf states placed over \$13.1 billion in new orders between 2009 and 2003 versus only \$194 million for Iran.

What is even more striking, is that speeches by Secretary Hagel – and reports by the U.S. Defense Security Assistance Cooperation Agency – show the U.S. alone signed \$54.8 billion in new Foreign Military Sales (FMS) agreements with Saudi Arabia during FY2006-FY2013, \$18.3 billion with the UAE, and over \$80 billion worth with the entire Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and has well over \$50 billion worth still in delivery. These arms transfers are backed by U.S.-led exercises and access to U.S. intelligence, battle management, and targeting capabilities. This strategic partnership is more than a matter of rhetoric, and it is buying a level of deterrence based on the capability to fight a major war.

Scarcely “Peace for Our Time!”

The U.S. participation in 5 (+1?) wars does not mean it faces the repetition of the kind of major conflicts that shaped the earlier fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, the need to commit major land combat units, or anything like the future costs in blood and dollars. There are also good reasons for U.S. military intervention in the region. The United States did not create most of the security problems in the Middle East and the Gulf, but “9/11,” and the U.S. dependence on the health of the global economy and the stable flow of global oil interests, have shown the United States has vital security interests in the security and stability of the region and partnership with its regional allies.

The practical problem, however, is that the Obama Administration has yet to demonstrate that it has a successful strategy or plan for dealing with any of these wars, much less all five. It seems far too focused on hopes for dealing with the nuclear part of the Iran threat and lacks focus on the rest.

The Obama Administration has not presented any clear plans in terms of U.S. deployments, U.S. military action, U.S. spending, civil-military action, or partnership with its allies. Its plan for Afghanistan seems to be to do too little and leave too early, and its plan for Iraq seems to be to react and rely on hope over experience.

There is token transparency at best, no meaningful progress reporting, and few if any metrics and signs of accountability.

At this point in time, President Obama's statement that "We don't have a strategy yet" on August 28, 2014 seems to apply to more than the Islamic State, Iraq, and Syria. It seems to apply to having a viable strategy for any of the wars the administration will have to fight through its end. And yes, while events sometimes force changes in strategy, a good strategy forces changes in events.

The United States should not simply wander out of major conflicts into minor conflicts. The administration needs to show it can make hard choices, make the right plans, and show it has the kind of analysis and metrics to show it is achieving success. The Congress needs to demand accountability, proper reporting, and transparency. The media and think tanks need to look far harder at the overall course of events. The 5 (+1?) wars the United States is currently engaged in – without foreseeable end – present far too many risks for the United States to handle in the way it has to date.

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