

America's Never-Ending War in the Middle East

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While President Obama continues – at least for now – to resist redeploying large numbers of U.S. soldiers to fight the Islamic State on the ground, the military components of the anti-Islamic State strategy he has laid out effectively recommit the United States to its post-9/11 template for never-ending war in the Middle East. In the end, such an approach can only compound the damage that has already been done to America's severely weakened strategic position in the Middle East by its previous post-9/11 military misadventures.

Thirteen years after the fact, most of America's political and policy elites have yet to grasp the strategic logic that motivated the 9/11 attacks against the United States. Certainly, *al-Qa'ida* was not averse to damaging America's economy and punishing its people. But Osama bin Laden knew that effects of this sort would be finite, and thus of limited strategic value; he had no illusions about destroying "the American way of life."

The real objective of the 9/11 attacks was to prompt American overreaction: to goad Washington into launching prolonged military campaigns against Muslim lands. These campaigns would galvanise popular sentiment across the Muslim world against the United States, mobilise Middle Eastern publics against regional governments (like the one in bin Laden's native Saudi Arabia) that cooperate politically and militarily with it, and rally them in favour of *jihadi* fighters who resist American domination. Looking ahead, the *al-Qa'ida* leader anticipated that local backlash against U.S. overreaction to a terrorist provocation would ultimately undermine the regional foundations of America's ability to project massive amounts of military force into the Middle East,





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compelling it to disengage from the region and go home.

Viewed through this frame, the United States fell for bin Laden's plan with appalling alacrity. America's post-9/11 invasions *cum* campaigns of coercive regime change in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya have been strategic failures, leaving the United States weaker – in terms of its ability to achieve its stated goals in the Middle East, its economic position, and its standing as a global superpower – than before. And the most important factor ensuring the failure of these campaigns was that they eviscerated the perceived legitimacy of American purposes in the Middle East for the vast majority of people living there. As a result, America's self-declared "war on terror" has made the threat to U.S. interests from violent *jihadi* extremists vastly more broad-based, complicated, and dangerous than it was thirteen years ago.

Doing the Same Thing...

Now, in response to the Islamic State's dramatic rise, the Obama administration wants to go down the same, well-worn, and colossally self-damaging path of strategic overreactions. The administration's strategy for dealing with the Islamic State is a veritable case study in Einstein's (apocryphal) definition of insanity – "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result." For there is absolutely no rational basis on which to think that, this time, the United States will get a different – presumably better – result. This makes Obama's military campaign against the Islamic State exactly the sort of "dumb war" that, as a presidential candidate in 2008, he promised American voters he would oppose.

President Obama can declare all he wants that the Islamic State isn't Islamic, but the movement starts its fight against the United States with an extraordinary level of support from Sunni Muslim publics. In July 2014 – that is, before the United States began its current air campaign against Islamic State targets in



Iraq – a poll by the (Saudi-owned) pan-Arab newspaper Al Hayat showed that 92 percent of Saudis believe that the group "conforms to the values of Islam and Islamic law." In Jordan and Kuwait, Facebook posts by the Islamic State draw tens of thousands of likes in just a few hours; Twitter feeds and other social media suggest that there is a considerable reservoir of popular support for the movement among Jordanians, Kuwaitis, Saudis, and other Arab populations. Saudi Arabia and Jordan have generated large contingents of young men who have left their home countries to fight with the Islamic State, which draws holy warriors from across the Sunni world.

Under these conditions, U.S. military action against the Islamic State will once again play into the *jihadi* grand strategy: to draw "crusaders" (the West, embodied by the United States) and "infidels" (Shi'a) into battle against Sunni holy warriors, thereby rallying support for them across the Sunni world.

Far from deterring Islamic State provocations, U.S. airstrikes will actually incentivize it to do more. The movement did not execute any of the American journalists it has been holding hostage (for well over a year in some cases) until after the United States started bombing it in August. That

month, as an Islamic State fighter beheaded journalist James Foley for what (thanks to an initial posting on YouTube) turned out to be a worldwide audience, the group warned that, if U.S. military forces continued bombing, it would execute another prisoner, Steven Sotloff. Of course, the bombing continued; at the beginning of September, as it had promised, the Islamic State beheaded Sotloff for another worldwide video audience.

These gruesome executions have sparked enough elite outcry and sufficient turnaround in American public opinion to prompt the Obama administration to escalate U.S. military action against the Islamic State. But one utterly predictable consequence of not just escalating the U.S. air campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq but expanding it into Syria (as President Obama seems set on doing) will be more provocations like the beheadings of Foley and Sotloff.

In effect, the Islamic State is continuing the strategy pioneered by bin Laden thirteen years ago, daring Washington to escalate U.S. military operations in Iraq and Syria. Sustained U.S. military action against the Islamic State – even if confined to what Obama calls "a systematic campaign of airstrikes against these terrorists" – will, in the eyes of Arab publics, cast the

movement and those allied to it as resisting continued U.S. efforts to dominate the Muslim world. This will not only boost the Islamic State's already substantial popular support in the Muslim world; it will further erode America's already severely weakened strategic position in the Middle East.

...Over and Over Again

Likewise, Obama's pledge to boost American "support to forces fighting these terrorists on the ground" will put the United States in the surreal position of combating the threat to U.S. interests posed by *jihadi* fighters by funding, arming, and training... *jihadi* fighters. The proposition that there is a moderate Syrian opposition with enough military potential and – even more importantly – popular support inside Syria to overthrow the Assad government is a myth. To claim in addition that these mythical moderate oppositionists can take on and defeat the Islamic State is either blatantly dishonest or dangerously delusional.

To have even a token chance of dealing effectively with the Islamic State, Washington needs to acknowledge the mistaken premises of its Syria policy – that Assad has lost the support of most Syrians and can be overthrown by externally-supported oppositionists – and recognise that ending the anti-Assad insurgency is essential to cutting off the Islamic State's base in northeastern Syria. Ostensibly moderate and secular Syrian opposition groups have, for the most part, been well penetrated by their Islamist counterparts.

The White House is (to put it mildly) dancing around reports that elements in one of the supposedly "moderate" and

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secular Syrian opposition groups to which the Obama administration now wants to provide hundreds of millions of dollars in additional military and financial support sold Steven Sotloff to the Islamic State militants who would later behead him. For those reports highlight a big problem with the administration's strategy: the main thing that will be achieved by stepping up U.S. support for "moderate" Syrian oppositionists is to open up more channels through which the Islamic State can obtain more Western weapons and military equipment than it already has.

Needed: A Real Regional Strategy

The point about the mistaken premises of the Obama administration's Syria policy highlights another debilitating contradiction at the heart of its stated strategy for stopping and, ultimately, dismantling the Islamic State. This contradiction grows out of the gap between the administration's rhetoric on the need for a regional strategy vis-à-vis the Islamic State and the actual conduct of its regional diplomacy.

Without doubt, there needs to be a regional strategy for dealing with the Islamic State. Obama and his senior advisors pay lip service to this idea. But their notion of a regional strategy encompasses only established and unrepresentative Sunni regimes dependent on Washington for their security – e.g., Saudi Arabia, the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt, and Jordan. These governments, by providing various types of support to Sunni militants in Iraq and Syria, have actually facilitated the Islamic State's extraordinary ascendance. There is no way that this sort of "regional strategy" can meaningfully contribute to halting and ultimately undermining the movement.

A real regional strategy against the Islamic State would necessarily include Russia, Iran, and Syria's Assad government – in leading positions. For those actors are all essential players in any serious effort to contain and roll back the multifaceted challenge this movement poses. Yet senior

Obama administration officials have ruled out working with either Iran or the Assad government, and Russia's foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, complains that the administration's dialogue with Moscow about the Islamic State – if it can appropriately be called "dialogue" – is much more *pro forma* than substantive.

Obama's strategy toward the Islamic State provides damning testimony as to how little he has done – or, in his second term, is willing to do – to challenge the foreign policy orthodoxies against which he ran his initial presidential campaign, and which have done so much to weaken America's international position in the two and a half decades since it came out of the Cold War as the most powerful state in history. 

About the Authors



Flynt Leverett and Hillary Mann Leverett are authors of *Going to Tehran: America Must Accept the Islamic*

Republic of Iran (New York: Metropolitan, 2013), which has just been released in paperback, with a new Afterword. They had distinguished careers in the U.S. government before leaving their positions on the National Security Council in March 2003, in disagreement with Middle East policy and the conduct of the war on terror. They teach international relations, he at Penn State, she at American University.



"There is a whole slew of highly dubious assumptions and narratives about Iran and the US's relationship to it that are rarely challenged in any meaningful way in standard media circles. The Leveretts and *Going to Tehran* are vital to thinking critically about these claims... Both because of their expertise and their long immersion in these issues, they (and their data-filled book) deserve a prominent voice in all serious debates about Iran."

--Glenn Greenwald, *The Guardian*