Obama and U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Looking Beyond Syria and ISIS

Anthony H. Cordesman

It is something of a tribute to the way our democracy functions that 51 diplomats could openly question the U.S. “strategy” in Syria (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/06/17/world/middleeast/document-state-dept-syria.html), that Secretary Kerry would hear them out and seemingly support some aspects of their dissent, and that the White House would not react by cracking down as a result. The practical problem, however, is that this is still another case where the United States focuses on only part of the problem, seems to lack any clear overall strategy for dealing with ISIS, Syria, and Iraq, and needs to find a more credible approach to seeking regional strategy.

The Broader Range of Threats

The United States needs to do far more than simply taking a stronger stand in dealing with the immediate fighting in Syria and its narrow focus on ISIS. Yes, ISIS (ISIL, Daesh) is a very real threat, but so is al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula—which is the primary extremist threat to Saudi Arabia. Syria is a terrible human tragedy, but so are Iraq, Libya, and Yemen.

An “ISIS-centric” strategy for fighting extremism can, at best, defeat one movement while generating new movements and threats. A “Syria-centric” strategy ignores the equally grim realities developing in Iraq and Yemen, and the failures in all too many other Middle Eastern states—as well as in Central and South Asia—that will ensure new extremist threats rise and continue.

Ever since the uprisings in the Arab world began in 2011, the United States has faced far greater challenges than ISIS or the overall threat posed by violent Islamist extremism. It has been faced with the fact that far too many governments in the region have failed their peoples in key aspects of governance and economic progress. The United States has seen upheavals that show all too clearly that several states face critical tensions on a sectarian, ethnic, and tribal level. And finally, the United States has seen the struggle for the future of Islam increasingly become a struggle that divides Sunni and Shi’ite, and separates religion from the forces needed to provide secular progress.

Syria exemplifies these risks, but so do Iraq, Libya, and Yemen. Moreover, stability involves more than dealing with immediate threats. Repression may buy time in states like Algeria and Egypt, but it cannot deal with any underlying problem, and will lead to new uprisings and explosions at some point in the future. Post-2011 “successes” so far consist only of a very uncertain Tunisia. The spillover of upheavals and civil war in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen states now affects the security of Morocco, Jordan, and Lebanon, and poses new challenges for every Arab state in the southern Gulf in dealing with their own internal problems and the evolving threats outside their borders.

The nuclear arms agreement seems to be a success, but Iran is still as real a threat as is violent Islamist extremism. There is still hope that Iran may evolve some more moderate form of government, but little the Supreme Leader has said or done has made this seem likely in the near future. In practice, the legacy of the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq War,
and Iran’s mix of fears and search for regional influence are still leading Iran to reinforce three major ongoing threats to the other states in the region:

- The first is the expansion of Iranian influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and growing tensions over Bahrain, Kuwait, Shi’ites in Saudi Arabia, and the pilgrimage to Mecca.
- The second is a growing threat from Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles, and development of future capability to carry out long-range strikes against key military facilities and critical infrastructure with conventional warheads.
- The third is the steady build-up of Iranian capability to threaten maritime traffic in the Gulf, at the Strait of Hormuz, and in the Gulf of Oman.

As has become all too clear, these developments have also led to more serious challenges from outside powers. Turkey has gone from focusing on economic engagement in the Middle East to confrontation with Syria, Russia, and the Kurds. Russia’s intervention in Syria has been far more anti-Arab rebel than anti-ISIS, and Russia has now begun to transfer advanced arms to Iran—such as the S300 surface-to-air missile system—as well as create real military bases in Syria. China has been cautious, but is clearly seeking port facilities near the Gulf, and has bought limited port access in Djibouti.

A U.S. strategy must address all of these threats in ways that are public enough to make real commitments and to be convincing. The United States faces real questions about its willingness to remain a major power in the region; growing problems in dealing with outside powers; and key European allies like Britain and France, who continue to underfund their forces and power projection capabilities.

**The Need for a Broader Strategy than Dealing with the Immediate Crisis in Syria or Fighting ISIS**

President Obama is correct in pointing out that there are no easy or simple answers to dealing with these threats, that U.S. influence is limited, that military force alone cannot create stable governments and economies, and that simplistic solutions and strategies cannot succeed. In all too many ways, the narrow focus of criticisms of his policy that were leveled by the 51 diplomats within the State Department exemplify this.

There are good reasons for trying to bring real stability to Syria and meet the needs of its people. Syria, however, presents a far more complex set of challenges than the diplomats’ letter seems to have addressed. What will creating “no-fly” or safe zones in Syria really mean? What will bombing Assad government military targets really mean, and what will the consequences actually be? Will it really empower the rebels, and if so, which rebels? If it is some form of Assad-rebel-Kurdish compromise, how will Syria work? What will Turkey do? How will this compromise impact Iraq, Iran, Turkey and the other Arab States?

What would it really take to begin to stabilize Syria? How many outside powers would agree to any solution the United States backed? What rebel forces can be trusted to fight, and how many rebel factions can be trusted to govern? How does the United States deal with the impact of the fighting on refugees, internally displaced persons, and go from emergency relief to nation rebuilding? How does one reshape Syria into some form of credible balance of power between Alawite and Sunni, or Arab and Kurd? How can Syria’s
economy be rebuilt and reformed to actually meet the needs of its people? How much of this can the United States credibly do and at what cost?

And Syria is only one country, just as ISIS is only one group of terrorists. Iraq’s “victories” against ISIS have been real and important in tactical terms, but they also have created a new flood of largely Sunni Iraqis fleeing the fighting with nowhere to go. Current reporting indicates that the number of Iraqi internally displaced persons is now over 4 million. Only about half the total of people without homes, jobs, or businesses in Syria, but a massive failure on the part of the Iraqi central government that will have a lasting and bitter legacy in terms of Sunni and Shi’ite tensions.

The grim developments in Anbar also raise critical questions about what will happen if ISIS’s “caliphate” is driven out of Mosul. Its fighters will not disappear. They will become fighters and terrorists somewhere else, or will go underground in western Iraq and Eastern Syria. The resulting power vacuum can also lead to new kinds of fighting between Iraqis that may be linked to similar fighting in Syria. As is the case in Syria, the expansion of Kurdish control can trigger a different kind of fighting. As is the case in Syria, defeating ISIS can also greatly empower Iran in terms of influence and its military and security role.

Focusing on Syria does not address the fact that Iraq and Syria are part of one major battle against ISIS that involves far broader power struggles in two different countries. More than that, it does not address the need to deal with the equal complexity of the instability in other countries like Libya and Yemen, the need to help other Arab states maintain moderate rule and develop, the challenge of Iran, repression in Egypt, or all of the other issues that affect regional stability.

**Facing the Need for Complex Strategies and the Limits to U.S. Power, Resources, and Influence**

While President Obama may be right in stating there are no good, simple, and easy options, this does not mean the 51 diplomats were not correct in stating the current U.S. approach in Syria had failed or that his overall strategy comes close to properly serving his successor.

Yes, there are immense difficulties in taking real world action in most of the Middle East, and all the options present important downsides and risks. Yes, U.S. strategy must be nuanced, take account of the limits of U.S. influence and power, accept the fact that it may take years to shape an effective outcome in many countries, and that it will often be impossible to help other states until—and if—they can develop leaders and patterns of governance that will allow them to help themselves.

The history of Syria and Iraq since 2011 does makes it all too clear that U.S. ability to reshape the government of either state may be very limited and that the United States does not have the leverage to control either the behavior of any major faction or government, or ensure that it can remain in power. It is equally clear that the United States may often have to provide military aid to governments and movements that are not capable of effective governance or capable to truly serving their peoples. It is also clear that the United States may have to use force to address security when this can only address part the problem in creating a viable nation. It may have to rely on humanitarian aid knowing that by definition humanitarian aid does not provide lasting security, acceptable governance, or any real future.
But, simply focusing on negotiating some short-lived and unstable ceasefire or compromise approach to governance in Syria, or focusing on defeating ISIS without any clear goals for creating effective governance and development in either Syria or Iraq is an abdication of the need to at least try to develop effective plans and strategies. The United States needs to have a common strategy for dealing with ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere.

The United States needs to set clear goals for shaping some new form of government in Syria, and nation building—possibly using the UN, World Bank or IMF—that offer serious hope for the future. It needs to encourage the development of similar proposals for new structures of Syrian governance and development. It needs to more openly address the need for similar changes to governance and development in Iraq, and find ways that international bodies like the UN, World Bank or IMF can help.

The United States needs to push far harder for Iraqi efforts that help the peoples affected by military victories against ISIS, it needs to find ways to suggest practical options for power sharing and “federalism,” and it needs to pay far more attention to the risk that defeating ISIS in the wrong way will give Iran even more power and influence and create more problems in dealing with our other Arab allies.

Above all, the United States needs to make it clear that it will pursue a strategy based on broad regional stability. It needs to show that it has clear long term goals for the region, for aiding its allies, and for bringing some degree of lasting improvements in governance and development. Train and assist, fighting ISIS, arms sales, missile defense, negotiating ceasefires, and seeking diplomatic dialogue are all useful tools, but they are not a strategy.

The United States needs to clearly address its security policies for the region in ways that clearly link the need to deal with all forms of violent Islamic extremism. It needs to show it is acting to ensure that Iran is contained and deterred in ways that clearly leave Iran the option of showing it really is moving towards more moderate policies and better relations. It needs to give our regional allies tangible reason to believe that the United States is in the region to stay.

Some of this effort may have to wait until the next Administration, but the Obama Administration can lay the groundwork now. The current Administration cannot afford to go on dealing with ISIS on a piecemeal, tactical victory by tactical victory basis, without setting clear goals for what happens if ISIS loses control of population centers. There must be an overall approach to regional strategy that is defined in terms of specific forces and actions, not merely concepts and rhetoric.