

Reassessing U.S. Policy Options with Regards to the Islamic State

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ABSTRACT

The Islamic State, previously known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, is currently the biggest and most publicized threat to Iraq. Less than five years after the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Red Dawn, the brutal transnational insurgent group has exploited the internal struggle within the Iraqi government to achieve its goal of forming an Islamic Caliphate, and it has continued to occupy territory and gain momentum in the recent months. US policymakers must be mindful to prevent another decade-long conflict that drained American national resources for a policy goal that is unachievable. Terrorism is both a tactic used to achieve a policy agenda and a strategy for doing so. Therefore, it is not an end in itself but exists to achieve policy goals. Rather than committing the military on another endless pursuit to eradicate terrorism and nation build in Iraq, the U.S. should frame its action to achieve regional goals in support of U.S. geopolitical imperatives. The world is transforming to what appears to be a new Cold War and the U.S. must posture itself to meet this threat by transitioning the nation to contain Russia and get out of the mindset in over-focusing on the struggle against Takfiri extremist groups such as the Islamic State.

The Islamic State (IS) is an insurgent threat within the Mesopotamian region that has the potential to drive an over-commitment of U.S. resources once again in an attempt to solve a centuries-old conflict in a historically disputed region riven by ethno-sectarian violence and discord. The IS is known for its brutal tactics to achieve a self-proclaimed Caliphate in the greater Iraq and Syria region.¹ The purpose of this paper is to provide recommendations regarding the current crisis in the Iraq-Syria region with respect to the IS threat. Previously known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), it is currently the most publicized threat inside Iraq and Syria and in fact around the globe. In understanding IS and its effects in the region and beyond, it is important to review the historical context of the geopolitical setting of the greater Middle East as a whole, the ethno-sectarian struggles inside Iraq, and the origins of the IS. This will allow an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the IS as the Intelligence Community (IC) and other advisory bodies help to conceptualize and develop policy options to defeat this dangerous group. In combining this knowledge about the IS, this paper will then review U.S. national geopolitical priorities with respect to current capabilities and limitations before finally offering several achievable policy options in support of US national interests.

Before diving into individual players in the Middle East and their relationship with each other, it is important to first understand the realist paradigm and how nations in the Middle East and beyond must view themselves and their neighbors to formulate strategies to achieve national goals. This realist approach to international affairs is a practical way of looking at the reality at it is and not what it ought to be. It recognizes individual state sovereignty, capacity, interests and political climate that players in the region must work toward to achieve existential survival and national goals.² Geography is real and competition is not optional. A country must be able to deal with its advantages and disadvantages within its territory and come up with reasonable solutions to facilitate its own security and prosperity.³ After recognizing a nation's geopolitical needs and climate, policymakers must be aware of how to sell their strategy to their domestic and international consumers. Policymakers must also recognize that the languages used among themselves may sometimes need to be different than the message to convey to the public for reasons of security or that the message is not yet ready for public consumption. The use of morality may be acceptable on an individual or community level as guiding principles of what is right and wrong, but policy makers must not confuse these principles for national level decisions because these decisions must be guided by geopolitical imperatives. That does not mean that killing and pillaging another country are acceptable acts by the U.S., because these acts are not morally wrong but rather they are both unnecessary and bring discredit to the U.S. However, morality can be used as a tool to achieve popular support, but not as a principle in itself to guide policies. With this understanding, policymakers can use these perspectives in combining the

¹ STRATFOR. *The Organizational Hubris of the Islamic State*. JUL 03, 2014.
<http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/organizational-hubris-islamic-state#axzz37o2W6mqr>
(accessed JUL 22, 2014).

² Snow, Donald M. *National Security for a New Era*. 5th Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2014. Kindle Edition. Pg. 38.

³ Ibid. Pg. 40.

context of the Middle Eastern region and beyond to formulate a strategy to deal with the IS threat and use the situation to achieve national goals regionally and globally.

THE CONTEXT OF IRAN

Before one can understand the current situation with IS in Iraq, it is important to comprehend the Middle Eastern region as a whole, because relationships between Iraq and surrounding nations directly influence the struggle within Iraq. One of the key power brokers in the region is Iraq's eastern neighbor, Iran. Before 1979 ended, the former Persian Empire struggled to balance between the pro-Western ruling class and Shi'a religious majority.⁴ As a result, Iran ousted its last Shah and became the Islamic Republic of Iran.⁵ In an attempt to establish itself as a theocratic state during the Cold War, Iran rejected support from both superpowers and ran the country by adapting the Islamic way of governance with a Shi'a twist and at least a nod to Persian and more recent political norms.⁶ Due to a lack of official external support, Iran suffered economic hardship compounded by an Iraqi invasion that resulted in an eight-year war in which over a million Iranians died.⁷ That conflict had such a jarring and, paradoxically, rallying effect on Iran that it has since been named the Sacred War.⁸ Despite tough sanctions, Iran reached out to the U.S. through backdoor diplomatic channels to overcome its logistical shortage of military equipment.⁹ An example of such covert activity was the Iran-Contra affair exposed in the mid-1980s where secret arms sales took place despite U.S. public sanctions on Iran as a repercussion of the hostage crisis in 1979.¹⁰ Since then Iran has struggled to stimulate its economy due to internal turmoil between a progressive movement comprised largely of young people with over 50 percent of the population born after the 1979 Revolution along with women that seeks greater economic opportunities, and a hardline conservative group, currently in power, that controls all aspects of the government and the economy, to include the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' ownership of over half the Iranian economy.^{11,12}

Action such as the Iran-Contra affair is an indication that despite the radicalized religious nature of the Islamic Revolution, Iran learned to transcend its rhetoric and to make decisions in support of national needs. Although Iran's economy is a victim of its own internal political and religious struggles, Iran must soberly appraise its geographic realities and political situation if it wishes to rise to prominence in a region full of Sunni rivals. Iranian leadership must rise above

⁴ Gabriel, Satya J. *Class Analysis of the Iranian Revolution of 1979*. Edited by Resnick, and Wolff Gibson-Graham. 2001. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/sgabriel/iran.htm> (accessed October 21, 2014).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ganji, Akbar. *Who Is Ali Khamenei?* September/October 2013.

<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/139643/akbar-ganji/who-is-ali-khamenei> (accessed October 21, 2014)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Khosronejad, Pedram. *Remembering the Sacred Defence: Iran-Iraq War Memorials*. September 2011.

⁹ The National Security Archive. *The Iran-Contra Affair 20 Years On Documents Spotlight Role of Reagan, Top Aides*. NOV 24, 2006. <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB210/> (accessed JUL 21, 2014).

The Telegraph. *ISIS militants declare an Islamic state in Iraq and Syria*. JUN 30, 2014.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10935034/Isis-militants-declare-an-Islamic-state-in-Iraq-and-Syria.html> (accessed JUL 23, 2014).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Berson, Caroline. *The Iranian Baby Boom: Why the Islamic republic has such a youthful population*. June 12, 2009.

¹² Maloney, Suzanne. *The Revolutionary Economy*. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/revolutionary-economy> (accessed JUL 22, 2014).

its religious rhetoric, leveraged as a population control measure, to negotiate the challenges of the current international culture in order to project its national power in a Sunni dominated region. In this sense, the Iranians are among the most realist of realist powers, seeking to overcome their own security dilemma even as they seek to overcome economic problems to become a major regional power or, even better from the government's perspective, a hegemon and an acknowledged leader of the Muslim world in place of Saudi Arabia despite the fact that Iran is a Shi'a nation.

THE CONTEXT OF SAUDI ARABIA AND ITS RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE US, SOVIET UNION AND AFGHANISTAN

Saudi Arabia is Iraq's southern Sunni neighbor that balances the power in the region against Iran. Saudi Arabia is a holy land for Sunni Islam, where Muslims worldwide make pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina.¹³ It traditionally holds a strong diplomatic and economic relationship with the U.S. since the end of World War II.¹⁴ The basic agreement that has lasted for decades between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia after the War is that the U.S. provides regional security while the Saudis and other oil-producing states in the region provide oil. Despite political and economic differences between the two countries, they are willing to ignore them as long as each side hold up their end of the agreement.¹⁵ However, when the opportunity presents itself, the U.S. has leveraged on Saudis' preexisting conditions to achieve geopolitical goals despite their differences.

An example of this was the Afghan-Soviet War in the 1980s. The U.S. had to contain the Soviet Union from achieving its geopolitical breakout strategy through Afghanistan. Through Saudi, Egyptian and Pakistani support, the U.S. bled the Soviets on a decade long armed conflict by supporting the Sunni majority Mujahedeen in Afghanistan.¹⁶ The extremist ideology within the Saudi population, not the ruling family, served its purpose for the U.S. by inciting wealthy families to donate money and provide manpower to help their Sunni brothers from foreign oppression.¹⁷ The decade long conflict in Afghanistan against the Soviets contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union. When the Cold War ended, veterans of the Afghan-Soviet War including the Saudis, returned victorious against the Soviets, but they felt betrayed by their American sponsors. Once U.S. goals in the region were achieved American support was shut off, leaving the fighters to their own means, stranded in a foreign land.¹⁸ Afghanistan was left to its own demise where interethnic rivalry ensued. Eventually, the Taliban came out on top as the most powerful among various tribes and factions in Afghanistan and dominated the country until the U.S. toppled the regime after 9/11.¹⁹

¹³ British Library. *Mecca and Medina*. <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/meccamedina.html> (accessed Oct 21, 2014).

¹⁴ The Economist. *Saudi Arabia and the United States Awkward relations*. MAR 29, 2014. <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21599767-american-president-and-saudi-king-will-have-unusually-edgy> (accessed JUL 22, 2014).

¹⁵ Friedman, George. *America's Secret War: Inside the Worldwide Struggle Between America and its Enemies*. New York: Doubleday, 2004. Kindle Edition. Location 3583.

¹⁶ Ibid. Location 307.

¹⁷ Ibid. Location 257.

¹⁸ Ibid. Location 435.

¹⁹ Ibid. Location 516.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IRAN, IRAQ AND KUWAIT

When Ayatollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah in 1979, U.S. diplomatic relations with Iran ceased to exist when Iranian students held the U.S. Embassy (USEMB) in Tehran hostage.²⁰ In persuading Iraq to disrupt Iran after its Islamic Revolution, and as a result of the embarrassment of the USEMB hostage crisis, the Carter administration indicated to Saddam that the U.S. would not interfere if he reclaimed Kuwait as Iraqi territory.²¹ However, the U.S. was not expecting Saddam Hussein to follow through with his ambition to invade Kuwait.²² This unspoken policy was merely a tool to manipulate the situation in the region to ensure balance of power between Iran and Iraq.²³ This political maneuver turned Iraq into an immediate counterbalance with its Shi'a rival while draining Iran's economic power, thus protecting U.S. interests in the region. As a collateral benefit, the U.S. honored its status quo in securing Saudi Arabia by building a massive collection of air and naval bases throughout the Arabian Peninsula.

Prior to the invasion of Kuwait, U.S. Ambassador in Iraq at the time, April Glaspie, visited Saddam Hussein in voicing U.S. concern of his military buildup along the Kuwaiti border.²⁴ During their conversation, Ambassador Glaspie inadvertently suggested that the U.S. would not intervene by saying that the U.S. had "no opinions in Arab-to-Arab conflicts like your border disagreement with Kuwait."²⁵ Although it was not the intent of Ambassador Glaspie, Saddam took it as an approval from the U.S. that military aggression toward Kuwait was an acceptable action.²⁶ A week later, Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait.²⁷

SAUDI ARABIA, IRAQ AND AQ

In preparation for the U.S. to push Iraqi forces back to their borders, the U.S. had to stage military forces in Saudi Arabia. The first imposition by the U.S. to push for popular support in Afghanistan was an easy sell for the Saudi Royal Family, but it was a different matter to allow non-Muslims to set foot in the Holy Land to attack another Muslim nation. The Saudi monarch did not have a choice, but the Wahhabi population, especially the educated and recent veterans from the Afghan-Soviet War like Usama bin Laden (UBL), rejected the idea and criticized the corruption within the Saudi government for working with the Americans.²⁸ In retaliation al Qaeda (AQ) was born with a stated objective of recreating the Caliphate by overthrowing all the corrupted Islamic governments in the region while using the glorious history of the Afghan-Soviet War as a rallying point along with its hatred of the western power that corrupted the Muslim world.²⁹ One way to establish the Caliphate, UBL thought, was to sever Muslim

²⁰ Ibid. Location 168.

²¹ Ibid. Location 355.

²² Ibid. Location 352.

²³ Ibid. Location 358.

²⁴ Walt, Stephen M. *WikiLeaks, April Glaspie, and Saddam Hussein*. January 08, 2011.

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/08/wikiileaks_april_glaspie_and_saddam_hussein (accessed October 21, 2014).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Global Research. *Gulf War Documents: Meeting between Saddam Hussein and US Ambassador to Iraq April Glaspie*. June 28, 2014. <http://www.globalresearch.ca/gulf-war-documents-meeting-between-saddam-hussein-and-ambassador-to-iraq-april-glaspie/31145> (accessed October 21, 2014).

²⁸ Friedman, George. *America's Secret War: Inside the Worldwide Struggle Between America and its Enemies*. New York: Doubleday, 2004. Kindle Edition. Location 545.

²⁹ Ibid. Location 435.

dependency on Western powers. Consequently, as the greatest of these, the U.S. became AQ's primary target.³⁰

For the next decade, the U.S. had to reconfigure itself to meet the challenges of a world without the Soviet Union. Meanwhile, AQ conducted numerous attacks and tested U.S. responses in finally devising the devastating attack on September 11, 2001. This attack triggered an overwhelming response from the U.S. people and government, making it abundantly clear that UBL and AQ had underestimated the will of the "weak" Western world to fight.³¹ The larger AQ's "invitation to struggle" worked, and since 2001 the U.S. has committed massive resources with over \$1.57 trillion U.S. dollars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and various regions around the world in an attempt to defeat AQ and "win" the global war on terrorism (GWOT).³²

The U.S. cannot conduct the long struggle against Muslim extremism, formerly known as the GWOT, alone, and so it has sought to recruit allies around the world to defeat AQ. Recognizing that Saudi Arabia was home to UBL and Wahhabism, U.S. policymakers pressed the Saudis to take part in the GWOT.³³ The support infrastructure inside Saudi Arabia that funded the Afghan-Soviet war continued to flow into Afghanistan to support the Taliban and AQ against the Americans, and to turn out ever-larger numbers of radicalized young men from mosques in the Kingdom and other Muslim countries.³⁴

The Saudis thus found themselves in an uncomfortable position between a long-time ally and its homegrown extremists, cooperating with both for their own advantage.³⁵ Wahhabism is deeply rooted in Saudi culture and it had the potential to compromise the Saudi Royal Family by sparking an uprising among its own people.³⁶ An indicator that the Saudi government was under anti-American pressure occurred when Turki al Faisal, a Saudi prince as the head of Saudi intelligence, was suddenly fired as the intelligence chief without an explanation two weeks before 9/11.³⁷ The relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia was already strained after the Khobar Towers attack in 1996 when the Saudi intelligence was unresponsive during the investigation of the aftermath.³⁸ The Saudis believed that the U.S. lacked the intestinal fortitude to endure long wars such as the one in Afghanistan, so they did not take seriously U.S. pressure to manage the AQ threat in their country.³⁹

Diplomatic pressure did not work in swaying the Saudis, so the U.S. had to take decisive action to stymie the support of wealthy families in Saudi Arabia. The U.S. did not want to sever diplomatic ties with the Saudis, only manipulate its policy to achieve U.S. objectives.⁴⁰ The way to get Saudi's attention was to create a condition that would cause the Saudis to reach out to the U.S. without direct intervention inside the Kingdom. The most appropriate lever to achieve this goal was to disrupt Saudi's counterbalance with Iran and Turkey, Iraq.⁴¹ Although there were a

³⁰ Ibid. 559.

³¹ Ibid. 566.

³² National Priorities Project. *Cost of National Security*. 2014.

<https://www.nationalpriorities.org/cost-of/> (accessed OCT 27, 2014).

³³ Friedman, George. *America's Secret War: Inside the Worldwide Struggle Between America and its Enemies*. New York: Doubleday, 2004. Kindle Edition. Location 3582.

³⁴ Ibid. 3657.

³⁵ Ibid. 3592.

³⁶ Ibid. 3582.

³⁷ Ibid. 3649.

³⁸ Ibid. 3546.

³⁹ Ibid. 3592.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 3802.

⁴¹ Ibid. 3802.

multitude of reasons that suggested U.S. justification to invade Iraq in 2003, Saudi Arabia was the primary aim and Iraq became the casualty of U.S. policy in the region.⁴²

When Saddam Hussein, a Sunni dictator from the Ba'ath Party, reigned over Iraq, he ruled the country with an iron fist. Mixed with Shi'a and Kurds amongst the minority Sunnis within Iraq's borders, Saddam oppressed his own people with horrific atrocities.⁴³ When the U.S. removed Saddam and proceeded to make a series of massive policy errors, it created a power vacuum within the country that led to sectarian violence and the arrival of a particularly vicious enemy—Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).⁴⁴

In fact, AQI sprang from one of the two Sunni extremist groups—Jammāt al Tahid and Jihad—the latter led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.⁴⁵ Zarqawi later renamed Jihad al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers, also known as AQI.⁴⁶ Zarqawi, a Sunni of Jordanian origin, was affiliated with UBL in the late 1990s. Although the two did not get along, UBL still gave money to Zarqawi to allow him autonomy in his operational focus in Jordan and Israel.⁴⁷ When the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003, al-Zarqawi embellished his relationship with AQ and by October 2004 he swore allegiance to UBL and became the leader of the AQ franchise in Iraq.⁴⁸ Known for his brutal and indiscriminate violence against civilians, al-Zarqawi received a stern warning from AQ's then-deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri warning him to end his unnecessarily barbaric behaviors.⁴⁹ As a result of al-Zarqawi's actions, he incriminated himself and tarnished AQ Prime's legitimacy in an attempt to unite Sunnis in the region and the world to form the Caliphate.⁵⁰ Prior to Zarqawi's death in 2006 by U.S. airstrike, he transformed himself into a marked man. Furthermore, both Shi'a and Sunnis turned against him and his organization during the Anbar Awakening,⁵¹ also known as the Sunni Awakening, or simply the Awakening, among the tribes of western Iraq.⁵² After al-Zarqawi's death, AQI joined the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), another Sunni jihadist group, and created a coalition. It suffered heavy losses as a result of intense U.S. and Iraqi coalition targeting.⁵³

⁴² Ibid. 3802.

⁴³ The White House: George W. Bush. *Tales of Saddam's Brutality*. September 29, 2003. <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/09/20030929-14.html> (accessed October 22, 2014).

⁴⁴ Al-Khalidi, Ashraf and Victor Tanner. "Sectarian Violence: Radical Groups Drive Internal Displacement in Iraq." *The Brookings Institution*. NOV 2006. http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2006/10/18iraq%20al%20khalidi/1018iraq_al%20khalidi.pdf (accessed JUL 22, 2014). Pg. 6.

⁴⁵ STRATFOR. *The Evolution of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant*. JUN 20, 2014.

<http://www.stratfor.com/video/evolution-islamic-state-iraq-and-levant#axzz37o2W6mqr> (accessed JUL 22, 2014).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Whitlock, Craig. *Death Could Shake Al-Qaeda In Iraq and Around the World*. JUN 10, 2006.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/09/AR2006060902040.html> (accessed JUL 22, 2014).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ The Institute for the Study of War. *Bar Awakening: Displacing Al-Qaeda From Its Stronghold In Western Iraq*. <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/anbar-awakening-displacing-al-qaeda-its-stronghold-western-iraq> (accessed October 22, 2014).

⁵² STRATFOR. *The Evolution of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant*. JUN 20, 2014.

<http://www.stratfor.com/video/evolution-islamic-state-iraq-and-levant#axzz37o2W6mqr> (accessed JUL 22, 2014).

⁵³ Ibid.

THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

Abu Bakr al-Qurashi or al-Baghdadi, the current leader of the IS, officially took over ISI in June of 2010 when his predecessors were killed in a raid.⁵⁴ The jihadist group was under intense hardship until 2011 when the U.S. withdrew its forces from Iraq, at which point ISI reemerged as one of the largest Sunni jihadist groups in the country.⁵⁵ Under the leadership of al-Baghdadi, ISI continued its agenda to undermine Shi'a in the country. When the Syrian Civil War broke out, ISI supported Syrian jihadist groups by involving itself directly with the fighting on the ground.⁵⁶ Due to ISI's involvement in Syria, al-Baghdadi renamed his organization ISIS or ISIL by announcing its absorption of Syrian groups like Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN) under Baghdadi's banner in April of 2013.⁵⁷ The leader of JaN, Abu Mohammad al-Golani, claimed that he was not consulted and found out through news media.⁵⁸ Al-Golani then proceeded immediately to reaffirm his group's allegiance to AQ.⁵⁹ Ayman al Zawahiri released a written letter later on that year directing both leaders to stop bickering and work together.⁶⁰ Furthermore, al-Zawahiri admonished al-Baghdadi for declaring a merger without consulting with AQ Prime's leadership and scolded al-Golani for publicly refuting the merger.⁶¹ Baghdadi rejected al-Zawahiri's order and strongly stated that ISIL would continue on its course.⁶²

In January of 2014, Baghdadi officially separated ISIL from AQ affiliation.⁶³ Since the separation, ISIL had been fighting alongside other extremist Sunni groups in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁴ On the first day of Ramadan in June of 2014, Baghdadi renamed ISIL to its current name as the Islamic State and declared himself as the Caliph, the Islamic ruler of the united Islamic State.⁶⁵ Claiming himself as a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed, he urged all Muslims to profess their loyalty to him as Caliph Ibrahim.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the IS has already begun its projection of power by working with groups in Syria loyal to it and occupying eastern cities and towns in Syria as well as northern Iraqi cities like Mosul and Tikrit. The IS continues its advance across both countries in an attempt to reach and control their capitals.

UNDERSTANDING PERSPECTIVES IN FRAMING POLICY OPTIONS

The U.S. can take advantage of the instability in Iraq and place itself in a position of advantage to maximize the potential to achieve policy objectives. The grand strategy in the

⁵⁴ Stewart, Scott. *The Organizational Hubris of the Islamic State*. JUL 03, 2014.

<http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/organizational-hubris-islamic-state#axzz37o2W6mqr> (accessed JUL 22, 2014).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ The Telegraph. *ISIS militants declare an Islamic state in Iraq and Syria*. JUN 30, 2014.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/10935034/Isis-militants-declare-an-Islamic-state-in-Iraq-and-Syria.html> (accessed JUL 23, 2014).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

overall Middle East region should be to minimize any disruption of oil from the region and prevent any one actor from becoming a regional hegemon that can threaten U.S. superpower status and preeminence in the region. The U.S. must look at the IS, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Iran as they are, with context through history, culture, needs and capabilities, and not what the U.S. wishes these players should be. The U.S. must consider the different players in the region as a whole, not just the IS or Iraq, while balancing them with current U.S. capabilities and needs along with domestic and foreign political climates.

A decade of U.S. invasions, military occupations, political coercion, contrived investment and \$17.9 trillion in national debt⁶⁷ are not enough for the U.S. to resolve what is essentially domestic political and civil chaos in Iraq. It is unreasonable for Washington to expect any particular outcome in that region without resorting to direct and long-term occupation, which would be tantamount to colonization and utterly impossible given the intense and violent anti-American sentiments this would produce. This 18th and 19th century methodology of power projection, however, is not in the interest of the United States, nor congruent with the spirit of its people. U.S. strategy must therefore rely on an approach that does not include micromanagement of individual nations and instead considers how various conditions of stability or chaos can be useful in the more general competition among global powers.

The details of the political future of Iraq are of relatively little import to the U.S. as long as it achieves policy goals it chooses to enunciate and pursue. Whether it is a successor faction to the IS, an evolution of the current government in Baghdad or a partition among Shia, Sunni and Kurdish territories, it only matters when one or multiple of these options are achievable to meet U.S. regional objectives. Iraq has never been a truly unified state, much less a nation-state. Ethnic rivalry will not stop in Iraq, so the U.S. must decide how much more resources it is willing to invest to sustain a puppet government and continue to go against the natural order in the country. Moreover, the impact to the U.S. of the emerging realities of a resurgent Russia, or of a potential large-scale civil unrest or, conversely, expansionism in China, presents the U.S. with a major set of policy and security dilemmas. These in turn are forcing policymakers to balance their time and the country's assets among several major national-security issues. The question, then, is how the current situation in Iraq can be used to the advantage of the U.S. and, in particular, be used to ensure a balance among non-American regional powers and thereby prevent the rise of regional hegemonies or great powers with interests highly inimical to those of the U.S. It is particularly important to prevent the aggregation of power in a region that has a low entry cost to direct naval or space competition with the U.S., namely Russia, China, Japan or India.

Since 2001, the U.S. has been engaged in an enormously costly global effort first to defeat AQ, and later to combat all forms of Takfiri groups and terrorism. The original incarnation of AQ was a group with a clear plan to create an Islamic superpower by aggregation of global communities through religious-political influence. With the credible geopolitical threat of AQ Prime quickly reduced⁶⁸ and no obvious regional power to challenge the U.S. directly, however, a combination of domestic American political influences and bureaucratic funding mandates combined to make the idea of going to war against an insurgent tactic appear

⁶⁷ Hall, Ed. *U.S. National Debt Clock*. October 20, 2014. http://www.brillig.com/debt_clock/ (accessed October 22, 2014).

⁶⁸ Snow, Donald M. *National Security for a New Era*. 5th Edition, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2014. Kindle Edition. Pg. X.

reasonable. Terrorism is a tactic and although it is used as a strategy to achieve political goals, terrorism alone cannot achieve enduring political goals. Terrorists must transcend above the violence or else face violence in return. The best approach is to spill the blood of regional players instead of putting U.S. lives in harm's way for an unending conflict. When both sides are exhausted, the U.S. can then come in to save the day and gain favors with the survivors of the conflict to manage the balance of power in the region. In believing that the U.S. can change the culture and history of a country, this has resulted in the U.S. engaging in military operations anywhere in the world where it has political access and the governments are experiencing local extremist Muslim insurgencies.

From the perspective of combating terrorism as an American grand strategy in the Middle East or anywhere in the world, there is little difference between a policy globally combatting insurgency and a policy of globally combatting terrorism. War is an enormously costly effort, because every life that is taken, every bullet that is shot out of a barrel and every gallon of fuel that is burned do not come back. It is expensive to build and maintain the machines and equipment for war. These expenses are taxed from the citizens and the cost spend on war do not magically come back to the pockets of the taxpayers. These expenses can only be justified when a clear goal of direct benefit to the nation can be identified. Violent arbitration on behalf of governments threatened by domestic insurgency or, as in much of the Middle East and North Africa, domestic defense of national structures arbitrarily invented in London and Paris at the close of either World War is not a reasonable use of American resources. Most importantly, these efforts are crippling distractions from geopolitical matters, which are of direct and grave interest to the U.S.

National resources are not unlimited. Priorities must be set to ensure resources do not continue to get wasted for unobtainable goals like the eradication of terrorism. Takfiri and other extremist organizations are undeniable threats and they are not going away anytime soon, but they are not the only threat. There is a time and place when it is absolutely necessary to deploy the U.S. military to achieve national objectives. However, policymakers should consider using other state and non-state actors to do the bidding for the U.S. before committing its own resources.

When the Cold War ended the polarizing influence of the U.S.-Soviet struggle, geopolitical competition for state and non-state actors did not stop. Despite expectations of a more peaceful world, the end of global polarization reactivated numerous dormant local conflicts, which had been otherwise suppressed by the larger influence of U.S.-Soviet competition. Insurgency, political instability, revolution, border wars and other forms of violent political struggle had always existed, but they became more pronounced when U.S.-Soviet struggle was no longer the center of attention.

While these struggles were essentially endemic to their own locales, the events of 9/11 forced the U.S. to respond in an overwhelming manner to stymie what had proven to be a credible, if latent, geopolitical threat in the form of a new pan-Islamic vision for a global Caliphate. Though the threat of the rise of an Islamic super-state was quickly averted, the U.S. political obsession with jihadist ideology and the specific insurgent uses of terrorism have caused the U.S. to over-extend itself for more than a decade. American distraction in the Middle East has provided Moscow space and time to rebuild its influence and aggressively move toward regional hegemony once again, now to the extent that once again U.S.-Russian competition directly echoes the Cold War. The U.S. military requires a period of disengagement and reorganization to recover from the ongoing emphasis on counterinsurgency doctrine and recover its force-on-force capability to meet the threat of renewed antagonism with Russia.

Iraq is in turmoil. This is a normal condition for any country headed by an unpopular government put in place by force of foreign military occupation compounded by the corruption within the government. The Islamic State is a Takfiri insurgent group that is limited in its ability to achieve a regional Caliphate, but it has the potential to achieve political primacy in at least Iraq and even Syria. If it relies strictly on terrorism to exert popular influence, it will erode its support base and marginalize itself like its predecessor, AQI. If it seeks more general credibility it will be forced to convert itself to a more generally palatable political group in the way Hezbollah, Arafat's PLO and the earlier incarnations of the Ba'ath Party have done. Intention does not trump capabilities. Although IS has global ambitions, it is still contained within the region because states like Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia would not allow the IS to cross their borders and disrupt their state of affairs and sovereignties. The goals and natural environment of IS are constrained to Mesopotamia however, and its specific course of action is not of direct interest to the U.S.. The more general alignment of regional powers should be framed in the context of minimizing the disruption of oil from the region while countering the rising Russia, which are direct interests to the U.S., and this is where assessment of IS plays a role in American strategy.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

The primary purpose of U.S. policy in the region should be to maintain a balance among powers and assist those major trading partners who are heavily reliant on oil from the region in maintaining unhampered access to that commodity. In the current context, this means balancing Turkish, Russian, Persian and potentially Arab influence. The goal must be to drive Turkey toward the U.S. in the interest of indirect control over the Bosphorus Strait, continue Egyptian and Israeli general alignment in the interest of keeping the Suez Canal open and secure, and the formation of a direct counterbalance to Russian influence in the Central Asian energy region. With Turkish, Egyptian and Israeli affairs dominated by geography, the more pressing question is how the remainder of the Arab and Persian territories can be best employed to counterbalance Russian influence in Central Asia. This is important because the resurgent of Russia is beginning to reclaim its former Soviet satellites like its short stint in Georgia during 2008 and the recent annexation of the Crimea at the beginning of 2014. If not contained, a fully resurrected Russia can throw off the regional balance of power around the globe to Cold War level.

One option is to provide limited advisory, financial and equipment support to empower the Shia-controlled government in Iraq to manage the Sunni IS threat. Recognizing the fragility and corruption of the Iraqi government, U.S. can reach out to Iran and its agents like Grand Ayatollah in Iraq Ali al-Sistani as an option for mobilizing the Shi'a community within Iraq to assist with the containment. This course of action would of course meet Saudi resistance and, although unlikely, has the potential to compromise U.S. relationship with the Saudi Royal Family and thus the oil investments in the country. Even if the Saudi relationship becomes sour, the newly formed Iranian relationship can allow the U.S. oil supply to divert to its new ally. This option is limited and neither the U.S. nor the Iranian public is ready for this relationship at this point in time.

From a U.S. domestic perspective, the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis is still in the forefront of most Americans' memories. Therefore, it is important to maintain diplomatic dialogue on a public forum to gradually desensitize the population in dealing with Iran and portray a more positive light to bring credibility to the inevitable resurgence of Iran, the former Persian Empire, as a, if not the regional power. This political action can also give U.S. the leverage in limiting Iran's nuclear program, discuss the lifting of sanctions in support of Iran's economy and possibly

begin trading. This is a mutually beneficial option to ensure that Iran does not align with Russia in the future, which is a much larger threat in the souring relationship with Russia.

In Iraq, the new Prime Minister (PM) Haider al-Abadi must learn to be a savvy politician than his predecessor in dealing with Sunni and Kurdish leaders in becoming a more inclusive government in spreading its oil wealth in Iraq.⁶⁹ President Jalal Talibani's recent Kurdish replacement, President Faud Masum, can hopefully provide the check and balance where Talabani was ineffective.⁷⁰ Even under the security blanket from Iran and the U.S., they are not physically there to guarantee the security of the party, and eventually the Sunni or Kurdish oppositions will likely find a way to neutralize him and his policy.

Another option is to replace the current Shi'a-dominated administration with a Sunni or pro-Sunni moderate leader. Although it may seem far-fetched, because neither the U.S. or Iran would allow that to happen at this time, however, it is possible if the IS can somehow manages to overthrow the current Iraqi government. This option is susceptible to Iranian infiltration and it is a reality that any Sunni ruler must face in an attempt to govern Iraq. Saddam Hussein's iron-fist approach, though effective, is no longer acceptable in the international arena. However, any human rights violation by the regime would be difficult for the UN to enforce without a deliberate military intervention. However, a ruthless Sunni leader similar to Saddam offers the U.S. and Saudi Arabia the opportunity a tool to balance out the Persians to the east. Looking at the same issue from a different perspective, a Sunni dominated Iraqi government can offer an opportunity for the U.S. to bring Iran closer as an ally, thus using this partnership to counter the Russian threat to the north.

If a Sunni ran Iraq, Saudi Arabia would be pleased and the Sunni population would be more prone to follow its Sunni leader. This would set the condition where the U.S. can be more inclined to influence Saudi Arabia to provide military support in fighting the IS jihadists in support of their Sunni neighbors and limited U.S. military involvement with special operations forces (SOF) as combat advisors to the Saudis. However, this has the potential to backfire with the Saudi Wahhabi population against the Royal Family especially against jihadist extremists such as the IS.

Conversely, Iran and the Shi'a population would resent this political maneuver. Iran will continue to threaten the U.S. with its nuclear weapon development program and possibly double down in supporting proxy groups in Afghanistan before final withdrawal of troops by the end of the year. There is also a risk that Russia can take the opportunity of the anti-U.S. sentiment to bring Iran closer diplomatically, thus undermine U.S. efforts to use Iran as a check and balance against the Russian Bear.

Another option is to stand aside and watch for a dissolution of Iraq into three different states.⁷¹ This would empower Sunnis, Shi'a and Kurds to safeguard their own ethnic regions. However, Iraqi oil fields are spread out unevenly and cannot be split up in a way that can satisfy each party. The Shi'a-populated south has a large portion of the oil fields and a small port to ship their raw goods, which creates an environment of tension and can eventually lead to armed conflict between the Kurds, Sunnis and Shi'as. UN peacekeepers can be placed in Baghdad and along the borders for all three independent "nations" to mediate the transition for an

⁶⁹ *Iraq: New Government Convened*. September 09, 2014. <http://www.stratfor.com/situation-report/iraq-new-government-convened#axzz3GqBHRqcj> (accessed October 22, 2014).

⁷⁰ Morris, Loveday. *Veteran Kurdish politician elected president of Iraq*. JUL 24, 2014. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/veteran-kurdish-politician-elected-president-of-iraq/2014/07/24/28448523-487b-4091-a4f1-fb7eefb87899_story.html (accessed AUG 13, 2014).

⁷¹ JB, interview by Timothy Lo. *Former Operations Officer in the Intelligence Community* (JUL 21, 2014).

undetermined amount of time. Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey would have to continue dealing (thus far ruthlessly and effectively) with insurgent and terrorist threats within their respective borders.

The situation in Iraq is dynamic and volatile, but the details of each policy options given above are unimportant. The question U.S. policymakers should ask is not just how to stop IS from taking over Iraq, but rather how the IS can contribute to American grand strategy, particularly by preventing the rise of a regional hegemon. The bottom line is that the U.S. must use the situation in Iraq to support regional goals in a way that limits commitment of national resources and maximizes the investment of players like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the region. The rhetoric of individual morality has no place in national strategic decision-making or foreign policy. However, morality can be used to manipulate popular support based on the political climate in national strategic decision-making or foreign policy. Democracy is not the universal solution to all foreign policy and the U.S. cannot be the world's counter-insurgency police. Trust and credibility are elusive terms because both Shi'a and Sunni play both sides of the coin to serve their interests. American national-security policies must drive the selection of courses of action.

Despite the fact that the Islamic State is currently limited in its ability to form a Caliphate and conduct attacks on U.S. soil, the U.S. intelligence community must remain vigilant in understanding this evolving threat and the larger political climate of the region. The U.S. has learned hard lessons about policy decisions on protracted wars like Vietnam, post-9/11 Afghanistan and post-2003 Iraq. Our policymakers must be more mindful in the future when they consider employing the military hammer, for not every problem set is a nail. Terrorism is a complex mix of tactical, strategic, military, and civil actions. Our conventional military forces are not designed to address this problem or to operate as a law-enforcement apparatus on a global scale to conduct counterinsurgency operations. SOF are better suited to deal with insurgency and terrorism because they are organized, trained, and equipped to deal with military operations other than war. However, the use of a combination of diplomatic and economic levers along with the projection of military power, all supported by carefully collected and thoroughly analyzed information can be more effective than military force alone when wielded appropriately.

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