

America's Full-Fledged Return to the Middle East

Dr. Imad Harb, Founder, Quest for Middle East Analysis

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President Barack Obama has finally arrived at a decision that will very much indefinitely postpone, if not end, the American pivot toward Asia and the Pacific. As announced, the pivot strategy had not meant a complete withdrawal from the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf where tens of thousands of American soldiers are based and essential land, air, and naval assets are deployed. But the mere announcement of the strategic re-balancing policy was sufficient to at least raise doubts among Gulf Arab allies and partners about the United States' long-term commitment to the defense, security, and stability of the area.

The Return of the United States

The President's success in cobbling together an international coalition to "degrade and destroy" the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), now operating as the Islamic State, will most likely allay such doubts and fears. The newly announced strategy to defeat the millennial jihadist organization will occupy the United States for years to come as leader of, and major contributor to, the campaign. The American foreign policy establishment and military will also both be involved in sustained diplomacy, executing and supervising military operations, and undertaking the training and equipping of local forces. In essence, the mission is a long war during whose pursuit the United States cannot change course or shift emphasis to the Pacific, although it will remain vigilant about Chinese designs and challenges there.



President Obama announcing the new strategy

The President's commitment to fight ISIS until its final demise is an obvious return to the centrality of counter-terrorism as a long-term strategy, centered this time in the Levant. Despite the successes against al-Qaeda and the killing of Osama bin Laden, terrorism does not seem to have abated. Indeed, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, seem to have succeeded in bringing the latter into the fold of terrorism's traditional hotspots of Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

With United States involvement in pursuing terrorists in these places (it is uncertain if al-Nusra will be a target in the new war), it is hard to imagine how this administration, and most likely the coming one, can spare additional energy or resources for a pivot towards Asia. The fact that there are al-Qaeda affiliates and offshoots operating in North Africa and today threatening Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa makes this conclusion even more poignant than ever before.

Each of President Obama's four strategic objectives for pursuing ISIS - strikes against its positions and assets in Iraq and Syria, support for ground operations of local forces and training the Syrian moderate opposition, counter-terrorist steps to limit funding and

recruitment, and humanitarian assistance to those in need- requires undivided attention and vigilance. At least two, strikes and supporting local forces, as well as the responsibilities of local Arab and regional partners, will necessitate constant American monitoring and supervision.

Hopes, Concerns, and Trepidations

But there are pitfalls that need to be avoided and concerns that must be addressed. First, pursuing and weakening ISIS in Syria should not allow a reciprocal strengthening of the Syrian regime or the associated re-capture by the Syrian army of territory gained by ISIS in northeast Syria. It could very well be advisable to postpone the campaign against ISIS inside Syria until a credible moderate fighting force can be assembled, equipped, and trained to withstand pressure from the Syrian army on its own. Neither should there be any possibility that gains against ISIS be exploited by al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra which, for all intents and purposes, poses similar long-term dangers as ISIS. This obviously makes the task of assembling a moderate Syrian opposition force an essential element in a successful strategy.

Second, establishing, arming, equipping, and training national guard units in the Iraqi Sunni areas may provide a badly-needed solution to the absence of state institutions in Sunni provinces, long neglected and marginalized by former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. However, such units must pledge allegiance to the unified Iraqi state and must be led by commanders committed to the goals of eradicating terror and its adherents and resurrecting state institutions. By the same token, any assistance to Kurdish forces in the north must be joined by pressure on Kurdish authorities to refrain from taking steps that

help centrifugal tendencies on the part of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Indeed, if the fight against ISIS is to succeed, close coordination within Iraq's state institutions between the central Iraqi government and Kurdish political and military leaders is essential.

Concomitantly, the new Iraqi government must waste no time in de-legitimizing Shiite militia groups called into action by al-Maliki when ISIS threatened Baghdad. Needless to say, such sectarian militias should have no role in re-establishing Iraqi state authority over its territory since their ideology, history, and practices have only served a divisive Shiite agenda beholden to Iran and serving its interests. Moreover, these militias have actually undertaken actions in Sunni areas of Baghdad and elsewhere that were tantamount to terrorist activities perpetrated by ISIS and other groups.



Secretary of State John Kerry at the Jeddah Conference

Third, regional actors have the responsibility to sustain the allied effort and bring it to a successful conclusion whatever the costs and sacrifices. While the United States and western allies have at least a moral obligation to fight the scourge of ISIS terrorism, and a practical imperative to protect their interests in the area and future internal security, it is the duty of actors in the region to assure a

successful campaign against the Islamic State. The just-concluded conference in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, attended by the United States, GCC countries, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey was an important step in the right direction and has produced a much-awaited agreement on future coordinated action to fight and destroy ISIS.

Regional actors can help fund the entire campaign, assist in training and equipping fighters, and provide actual help on the battlefield, especially because the United States will not contribute boots on the ground. Interestingly, the Jeddah conference did not include Iran as a regional actor concerned about the ISIS threat. In reality, it couldn't, since ISIS's existence is seen by many as a direct result of the continuing Syrian civil war, Bashar al-Asad's clinging to power, and Iran's involvement there. As the international effort gets under way, Iran thus must not be allowed to use it as an opportunity to rehabilitate itself with the United States or the regional actors.

It appears that the vacillation and hand wringing that characterized the Obama Administration's behavior over the last few months have finally been replaced by decisive leadership and commitment in the Middle East. Only the next weeks and months, perhaps years, will tell how successful the new foreign policy orientation will be. What is clear, however, is that the United States has once again become embroiled in the troubles of the Middle East and will be there for the foreseeable future.

*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily
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Images accessed 9/11/2014

President Obama's image

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2014/sep/10/obama-speech-strategy-destroy-isis-iraq-syria>

Secretary Kerry's image

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/11/us-iraq-crisis-kerry-idUSKBN0H50MA20140911>