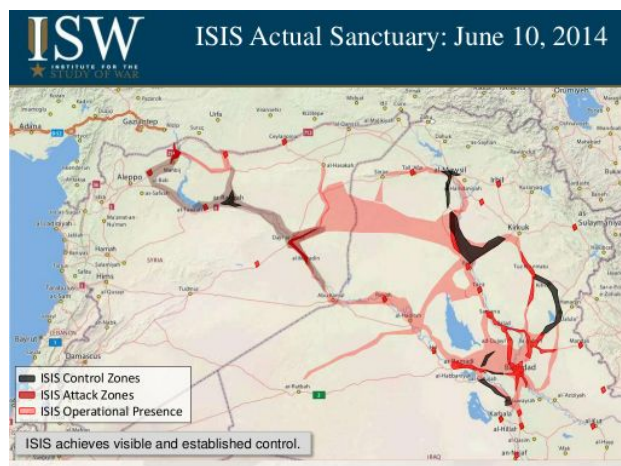


The American Change of Heart over Syria

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The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's (ISIL) flooding the Syrian battlefield and spilling over into Iraq, where it and its allies are within shooting distance of Baghdad, have become a nightmare for all parties concerned. Suddenly, American President Barack Obama asked Congress to approve a package worth US\$500 million to train and arm moderate Syrian rebels with the caveat that they be properly vetted so that the administration would not be caught flat-footed training extremists. The American initiative also relies on the cooperation of allies in the Middle East to provide financial assistance, arms and facilities to house and train an effective fighting force capable of stemming the tide of Islamic jihadists.



It seems that the days of American vacillation about fully sponsoring the moderate forces in the Syrian rebellion are over. Although the newest effort is not expected to produce the desired force overnight, it represents an important about-face in America's foreign policy in the Middle East. It also signals that President Obama has tired of being outmanoeuvred, and that he may have discovered that in some instances lofty appeals to reason in Syria have only produced more unwanted scenarios and undesired outcomes.

The change of heart over Syria signals a number of attendant insights. First and foremost, arming and training the moderate Syrian opposition speaks of a realization that, while the United States remains militarily disentangled, only military pressure applied on the Syrian regime can produce the desired outcome i.e. forcing the departure of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Additionally, and as American Secretary of State John Kerry made clear, only a credible moderate force can stand up to the murderous ISIL and prevent Syria from becoming a jihadist base.

Second, the absence of a credible military force of moderates in Syria has made ISIL's foray into, and success in, Iraq possible. For about two years now, ISIL has methodically chewed up territories in northern Syria at the expense of other opposition forces and has succeeded in establishing a salient from Aleppo's eastern countryside to the Iraqi border. Due to the exploitation of Sunni sentiments in Iraq's western provinces, the quite apparent Iraqi army weaknesses, and

striking short-term deals with disaffected tribes and Ba`ath Party elements, ISIL was able to push into Mosul, Salahuddin and Diyala provinces in an attempt to establish its 'Islamic Caliphate' with ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi its 'Caliph'. But such success spells the demise of the unified state of Iraq and the sense of security of Jordan and the Arabian Peninsula – two essential pillars of American strategic posture in the Middle East.



Third, and this has always been the case, arming the moderate opposition in Syria provides a necessary counter-force for the Lebanese Hezbollah whose intervention alongside the Syrian regime has scored the latter undreamt-of-battlefield successes, and ensured its survival and dominance in urban areas. Hezbollah's proxy status as the *de-facto* Iranian force in Syria, does not escape United States policy-makers, nor does its stranglehold on Lebanon's political process. Indeed, strengthening the moderate opposition in Syria may become the ultimate measure to ensure Lebanon's long-term stability and freedom from Iranian dominance.

Fourth, by performing an about-face in Syria, Washington may placate its Arabian Gulf allies and partners. A successful anti-Assad and anti-ISIL military force in Syria can address their concerns about Assad's potential political survival, Iran's real overreach in Syria and Lebanon, and ISIL's bold moves on Jordan's and Saudi Arabia's northern borders. With such a force, perhaps Bashar al-Assad would not feel emboldened enough to provide air support to Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's forces in Iraq, and ISIL would be hard-pressed to venture out of its enclaves in northern Syria. To be sure, America's Gulf allies have been urging Washington for a long time to see the bigger picture of an expanding Syrian civil war. Now, the latter cannot but respond quickly and forcefully lest vacillation and indecision cause the collapse of decades of patient alliance building and partnership.

Fifth, and finally, the change of heart regarding Syria may in one way or another have pronounced the folly of the strategy of pivoting to Asia. While the pivot does not intend to announce that America is washing its hands from the Middle East, the administration's hesitation and reluctance to move forcefully in the region has given the impression that Washington's role is waning and others, including ISIL, can stake claims to its inheritance. Indeed, ISIL's Iraq adventure may mean that Asia for all intents and purposes can wait, and that it is a strategic imperative that the United States re-double its efforts in the Fertile Crescent and its wider neighbourhood.

Of what remains to be answered for US policy toward the Levant, however, are concerns of what will happen in Iraq as centrifugal forces fray its seams. Prime Minister Maliki is both on the ropes and under pressure from Tehran to prevent ISIL and Sunni forces from rolling back Shiite gains dating back to 2003. The Kurds in the north are on the move toward consolidating an independent enclave and have already militarily claimed oil-rich Kirkuk. The



Sunni provinces are cautioning that Maliki's policies are forcing them to consider declaring their own exclusive region, knowing that they soon will have to deal with the ISIL cancer in their midst. It is thus essential that the United States stay on message that Iraq should remain united and that its political forces, chiefly Prime Minister Maliki, find the necessary compromises to form a national unity government in which they all share the responsibility of preserving Iraq's integrity, sovereignty and independence.

– Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International –

Images Accessed: 30/06/2014

Map of ISIS gains in Syria/Iraq

http://blog.foreignpolicy.com/files/fp_uploaded_images/140611_ISISmapiraq06102014.jpg

Baghdadi/ISIS image

http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/02958/Isis-leader_2958663b.jpg

Maliki image

http://shacabkamedia.com/warka/images/stories/2011/zahra/iraq_maliki.jpg