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Syria's Fallout: Rise of Islamic State jihadists

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

US President Obama's decision to launch air strikes against the Islamic State jihadists in Iraq is fraught with pitfalls and could persuade IS to consolidate its position in Syria.

Commentary

US President Barack Obama's decision to launch air strikes against the Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls a large swath of Syria and Iraq, is fraught with pitfalls. Even if it succeeds in stalling the group's advance in Iraq, the air strikes could persuade the Islamic State to re-focus its attention on Syria to consolidate its position in the knowledge that Obama is less likely to intervene to salvage the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

Obama's reluctance to support non-jihadist Syrian rebels in the early days of Syria's civil war has produced the very nightmare he had tried to avoid: the emergence of a well-organized, well entrenched, competent and ruthless jihadist force that not only threatens to partition, if not take control of Syria but also Iraq, and poses a serious threat to Lebanon and Jordan. Also Obama left the door open to regional Sunni states to support the Islamic State often through non-official channels while allowing aid to jihadists to go unchecked.

Obama is banking on the establishment of an inclusive Iraqi government capable of reaching out to the country's non-Shiite communities, to undermine support for the Islamic State's popular base, foremost among whom are Sunni Muslims. While there is no doubt that many Sunnis were driven towards the Islamic State by outgoing Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's pro-Shiite sectarian policies, that gambit is countered by the fact that the United States and its allies have allowed the jihadist group to flourish in a festering sectarian milieu in which US allies like Saudi Arabia were as much drivers as was the outgoing Iraqi leader.

Fears of mission creep

With tens of thousands of Yazidis trapped by the jihadists on a mountain in northern Iraq under dire circumstances and the security of Iraqi Kurdistan, until this latest crisis Iraq's most stable region, under threat, Obama had little choice but to take action. Fears of mission creep in the United States may however not be unwarranted if the Obama administration indeed intends to defeat rather than

just contain the Islamic State and attempt to maintain the territorial integrity of Iraq that is hanging by a bare thread.

However growing Saudi-fuelled sectarianism in the Middle East is likely to backfire on the US effort as many Sunnis will perceive the air strikes as an expression of a pro-Shi'ite policy. Sunnis widely believe that US policy had brought Shiites to power in Iraq with the toppling in 2003 of Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein, a Sunni. Iran, they fear, could return to the international fold if negotiations to solve the nuclear problem are concluded successfully. All of this comes on top of US reluctance to give Syrian rebels the means to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a leader of the Alawites, which is an offshoot of Shi'ism. The Sunnis sense of being embattled is reflected in the fact that they have acquiesced in the repression and effective expulsion of other Iraqi minorities such as Christians and Yazidis.

Few doubt the Islamic State's military performance, enhanced by advice from senior military officers who served under Saddam as well its strategic and tactical flexibility. With US air strikes targeting sophisticated primarily US military hardware captured by Islamic State fighters from fleeing Iraqi soldiers as well as concentrations of the group's fighters, the Islamic State is likely to revert in Iraq to its military origins: an infantry force that engages in guerrilla tactics and employs suicide bombers. It is a strategy that could reduce the effectiveness of air strikes.

Refocussing on Syria

On a grander scale, Islamic State may also complicate Obama's options by re-focussing on territorial gains in Syria. It virtually crushed this week all opposition in the eastern province of Deir ez Zour, Syria's sixth largest city. The Islamic State has proven its ability to fight on multiple fronts in contrast to Assad's war-weary military that appears to fight one battle at a time, with campaigns that persuade civilians to flee in a bid to isolate rebels and force them to surrender.

As a result, the Islamic State could first concentrate on capturing Aleppo, Syria's embattled largest city, rather than advancing towards the Iraqi capital of Baghdad, which no doubt would provoke intensified US military strikes. Successful in Aleppo, it could consider moving to threaten Damascus. Such a move would put Obama and America's Gulf allies in a bind: allow Syria with its borders with Israel, Jordan and Lebanon to fall to the strongest, most brutal jihadist group to have emerged to date or step in to save a despotic, brutal leader allied with Iran and Russia whose demise is a US policy goal.

The pitfalls for Obama don't stop there. If stopping the Islamic State in its tracks and eventually rolling back its advances with US air forces supporting Iraqi and Kurdish ground troops is the medium term goal, short term necessities force it to adopt measures that are more likely to lead to a break-up of the Iraqi nation state. With politicians in Baghdad struggling to replace Al-Maliki with a more inclusive Iraqi national government, highly motivated but poorly armed Kurdish Peshmergas with a long history of fighting Saddam are the US' main ally on the ground. The Obama administration's decision this week to arm the Kurds with light weapons and ammunition is likely to fuel Kurdish ambitions for independence that had already kicked into high gear with the collapse of the major units of the Iraqi military in the face of Islamic State advances.

Those fears are also justified given that the United States may not be able to continue differentiating between the situation in Iraq and in Syria. For the Obama administration, the stakes are high. While sympathetic to the goals in Iraq outlined by Obama, humanitarian relief for a community threatened with a massacre and protection of US personnel, many Americans, after a decade of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, are war weary. At the same time, US credibility is on the line in a region that has few security alternatives but the United States but is increasingly sceptical about its ability to live up to expectations.

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