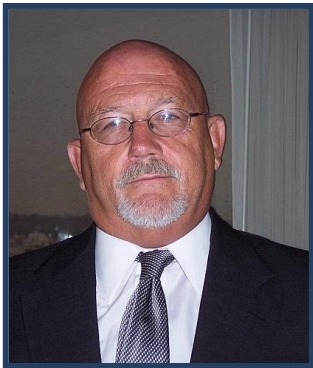




THE ISLAMIC STATE—AND IRAN—AND THE U.S. STRATEGY DEFICIT

By Mackubin T. Owens



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The emergence of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq has threatened to destabilize the Levant and Iraq, in many respects obscuring the challenges still posed by Iran. The Obama Administration originally dismissed the IS as a “JV” offshoot of al Qaeda, but its seizure of large swaths of territory belies that characterization. Its successes in the region now serve as a magnet for foreign fighters. We can belabor the administration’s role in enabling the rise of the IS—its failure to achieve an agreement to retain a U.S. military presence in Iraq and its fitful steps and missteps in Syria—but the real question is: what can the United States do now to blunt the IS?

In August of this year, Kori Schake, a senior fellow of the Hoover Institute and a member of the *Orbis* editorial board, wrote an insightful piece for the online “Shadow Government” feature of *Foreign Policy*. In her article, “An Administration with its Head Cut Off,” Dr. Schake criticized the Obama White House for its propensity to ricochet from one crisis to another without any attempt to apply a coherent strategic framework to its actions. As she remarked, this approach is driven by the administration’s apparent belief that if the United States takes a step back in the world, others will step forward. But in fact, the only actors to step forward have been our adversaries.

Her characterization of the Obama Administration applies in spades to the rise of the IS. Instead of developing any coherent strategy for dealing with the IS, the administration has reverted to form by responding in a piecemeal way. As former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked, “don’t do stupid stuff” is no real guide to the conduct of foreign policy. But what strategy should the United States adopt for dealing with the IS?

Strategy is a plan of action for using available means to achieve the ends of policy. Strategy does three things. First, it links ends and means, seeking to minimize any mismatch between the two. Second, strategy helps to establish a priority among ends. Since means are always limited, it is not possible to achieve all the ends of policy simultaneously. Strategy ensures that choices are made among competing ends. As Frederick the Great observed, “he who tries to defend everything ends up defending nothing.” Finally, strategy helps to conceptualize resources as *means*. In other words, it translates raw inputs such as manpower and money into the divisions and fleets that will be employed for the object of war. To carry out a strategy, one must have the right instruments, whether military, diplomatic, or economic. Even the best-conceived strategy will fail unless it can rely on the right instrument to implement it.

Strategy is both a process and product. As such, it is dynamic. It must adapt to changing conditions, for example: geography, technology, and social conditions. A strategy that works under one set of conditions may not work under different ones. To develop and execute a strategy requires that one be able to comprehend the whole and be able to bring the right instrument to bear at the right time and in the right place to achieve the object of the war. Risk assessment is always a part of strategy, both in terms of development and execution.

What is an appropriate strategy for dealing with the IS? The first requirement is to identify the goals of our policy. What is a realistic end state for the United States in the region? The lessons of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the “Arab spring,” illustrate that the spread of liberal democracy in the Middle East is not a realistic outcome. The best we can hope for is a region stable and peaceful enough that it does not incubate threats to the security of the United States and its friends and allies. This outcome requires the United States to defeat the IS while continuing to thwart Iran’s ambition to become a nuclear state.

A second requirement of a coherent strategy is to identify the enemy. In the case of the Greater Middle East, that enemy is *radical political Islam*, which is the major cause of disorder in the region. Radical political Islam takes two fundamental forms. The first arises from Sunni Salafism: al Qaeda and its mutations to include the IS. The second arises from the Shia form of Islam sponsored by Iran. The Obama Administration has gone out of its way to deny the role of radical political Islam, going so far as to seek accommodation with Iran on nuclear issues.

Indeed, Reuters reported on November 6, 2014 that President Obama sent a secret letter to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei last month stressing the two countries’ shared interest in fighting Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the letter in mid-October said cooperation between the United States and Iran on combating the militant group was tied to a deal being reached between Iran and other nations on its nuclear program.

But to ally with Iran against IS would be the height of folly. Dangerous as the IS may be, it is less of a threat to the interests of the United States and its friends and allies in the region than a nuclear Iran.

The third requirement of a coherent strategy is to organize and energize our allies. But as Dr. Schake observes, our allies feel we undercut their efforts to work with us. “We miss rare and important opportunities to advance interests and align allies to better manage our common challenges.”

During military operations against Libya, the Obama Administration famously claimed to be “leading from behind,” a phrase that generated much mirth among observers. But as Schake points out, such an approach can work if it is part of a larger diplomatic strategy. Effectively practiced, “leading from behind” is called coalition warfare. “It would protect and strengthen our allies, punish jihadists, constrain Iranian malignity, build cooperation among disparate American security partners, and incentivize Islamists toward political practices democratizing states can manage.”

Citing Lawrence Freedman’s new book, *Strategy: A History*, Schake observes that:

strategy creates power by using the means available to us more effectively than others can. Very often those means will not be those of the U.S. government; they will be setting allies up to be successful, and encouraging civic groups outside government control or international institutions. But these means can only be effectively harnessed to the government's purpose when the government influences how others think about the problem. The only way to lead from behind is through the power of developing a common understanding and the practical matter of quietly assisting allied efforts. Developing a common vision often requires allowing ourselves to be persuaded by others' views and it often requires supporting efforts by others even when we are not persuaded of their argument. But this is no less than we very often expect of them in support of our policies.

The fourth requirement of a coherent strategy is to apply the appropriate tools of national power to the maximum extent possible within the constraints of prudence. One element of prudence is to ensure the match between strategy on the one hand and social and political conditions on the other. Any strategy that ignores political reality is doomed to failure.

For instance, there is no question that the American people are concerned about the rise of the IS. However, they are not predisposed to approve the reintroduction of U.S. ground troops into the region. This of course could change, just as American attitudes toward the use of force changed as a result of 9/11, but at least for now, it seems clear that the best military option is the application of airpower, in conjunction with ground forces provided by friends and allies in the region.

This combination is what changed the situation in the Balkans in 1999. Until local ground forces joined the fray, NATO (mostly U.S.) airpower was having a limited effect on the Serbs as they attempted to incorporate parts of Kosovo. This is because airpower is of limited utility against dispersed forces. However, ground forces make it necessary for the enemy to concentrate, and enemy troop concentrations are the kind of targets that make the application of airpower effective.

But the use of airpower must be serious. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that the employment of U.S. airpower against the Islamic State is *not* serious. During the air campaign against Serbia in 1999, NATO averaged 138 combat sorties per day. Against the IS, the United States is averaging seven.

Without a coherent strategy for dealing with the IS—and Iran—the United States is doomed to stumble from one crisis to the next. The administration needs to establish realistic goals for the region, identify the enemy, line up allies, and then apply the means necessary to achieve those goals.

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