Let the Middle East Fight Its Own War on ISIS

Tonight President Obama will address the American public and explain his decision to expand the ongoing Middle East war with more US bombings in Iraq and Syria. The decision to expand the US military campaign comes amidst high public emotions stirred by two gruesome beheadings. Yet Obama is leading us into a prolonged trap; the fight against ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIL) is a fight that the region itself should lead.

It is also a fight that should be waged more through politics and economic development than bombs. The United Nations can and should provide the framework for an effective response, not the US. Yet again, as with George W. Bush, Obama will needlessly set the US up as the leader of a crusade against Islam.

We should understand from the start (as painful as it is true) that the US had a major hand in creating the new ISIS monster. The US funded the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s, which then morphed into al-Qaeda. Then the US destabilized Iraq from 1990 onward and Syria from the mid-2000s, in effect giving al-Qaeda and its affiliates a new stronghold. (As Assad moved closer to Iran, the US and Saudi Arabia took up the effort to topple him.) ISIS broke away from al-Qaeda, and then captured the weaponry that the US had supplied to the Iraqi army. Now, President Obama is getting us still deeper into this never-ending battle with monsters stoked by our own ill-advised policies.

The regional powers know these actors all too well, and have funded them along the way, in particular Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Some of ISIS leaders are reportedly former military men of Saddam Hussein, who in turn was funded by America in the earlier era before the US declared him to be the new enemy. If the regional powers want to end ISIS, they can do it. Of course they’d rather have the hated US do it, with the US thereby bearing the anti-Islamic sentiment in their place. The regional powers should take the lead in confronting ISIS, not the US. And when they do so, they should do so under a UN...
mandate. This would be possible to achieve since Russia and China, like the US, France, and Britain, have no interest in another renegade fundamentalist paramilitary.

Moreover, in this case the enemy of our enemy is actually a thug, not a friend. We have been working around the clock with the Saudis and others to provide logistics support, finances, and arms to the Free Syrian Army. Though the official line in DC is that Obama has refused to engage in Syria, in fact we've already spent a small fortune supplying and training the FSA and have facilitated support for the FSA from regional neighbors like Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

Yet the FSA's goals and methods are certainly not the same as America's, as shown by their own record of beheadings and other atrocities. Before signing up for the FSA, have a look at what has resulted in this so-called Syrian civil war. There are now around 200,000 dead Syrians. Yes, Assad would have crushed the opposition with a few hundred dead if it had not been for us. Now vast numbers are dead; the country is in ruins; 5 million are refugees; and Assad is once again nearly our partner as a foe of ISIS.

So why is Obama leading us further down this failed path? The US fights these failed wars mainly because of domestic politics. Here the precedent of Vietnam is as deeply instructive as it is widely forgotten (or denied). The US wasted two decades and many billions of dollars, killed more than a million Vietnamese, and left over 55,000 Americans dead in a futile and ultimately lost war. Why? On the public level, the fight was supposedly about the communist threat, regional dominoes, and communist world domination. The Vietcong were the ISIS of the day. Yet the real reason for two decades of futile war, as revealed devastatingly in the Pentagon Papers, was US domestic politics. Each U.S. president knew the war they were waging was unwinnable, but they fought it to avoid the embarrassment of looking "soft on communism" before the next US election.

This time, the timeline against ISIS will be at least through 2016. We can't win this war any more that we could win the Vietnam War, but Obama dare not "lose" the war on terror before the next election. Therefore we continue the same hopeless policies of the
past dozen years, double down, and carry them through 2016.

These wars are therefore as open-ended as they are futile. How, then, did the Vietnam War actually end? Simple. Richard Nixon resigned the presidency in 1974, and Ford let the final defeat occur a year after (and then was himself defeated in 1976).

If the US had a real strategy for national success, we would let the Middle East face and resolve its own crises, and demand a UN framework for action. We would team up not with NATO, but with the UN Security Council, and put others (for once!) into the lead. We would actually mobilize to solve the real problems facing the region: poverty, hunger, drought, and unemployment. Those are the crises that at the end of the day cause men and boys to fling their lives into useless and suicidal slaughter. If just once in our times US politicians had the bravery to build coalitions to improve the lives of the people through development rather than through bombs, the US public would be amazed to see how much agreement and goodwill could quickly generate. Instead we head to war.

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