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# What's Their Plan?

## Obama's Strategy for Fighting ISIS Isn't All About Us

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THERE are three things in life that you should never do ambivalently: get married, buy a house or go to war. Alas, we're about to do No. 3. Should we?

President Obama clearly took this decision to lead the coalition to degrade and destroy the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, with deep ambivalence. How could he not? Our staying power is ambiguous, our enemy is barbarous, our regional allies are duplicitous, our European allies are feckless and the Iraqis and Syrians we're trying to help are fractious. There is not a straight shooter in the bunch.

Other than that, it's just like D-Day.

Consider Saudi Arabia. It's going to help train Free Syrian Army soldiers, but, at the same time, is one of the biggest sources of volunteer jihadists in Syria. And, according to a secret 2009 U.S. study signed by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and divulged by WikiLeaks, private "donors in Saudi Arabia constitute the most significant source of funding to Sunni terrorist groups worldwide."

Turkey allowed foreign jihadists to pass into and out of Syria and has been an important market for oil that ISIS is smuggling out of Iraq for cash. Iran built the E.F.P.'s — explosively formed penetrators — that Iraqi Shiite militias used to help drive America out of Iraq and encouraged Iraq's Shiite leaders to strip Iraqi Sunnis of as much power and money as possible, which

helped create the ISIS Sunni counterrevolt. Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, deliberately allowed ISIS to emerge so he could show the world that he was not the only mass murderer in Syria. And Qatar is with us Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and against us Tuesdays and Thursdays. Fortunately, it takes the weekends off.

Meanwhile, back home, Obama knows that the members of his own party and the Republican Party who are urging him to bomb ISIS will be the first to run for the hills if we get stuck, fail or accidentally bomb a kindergarten class.

So why did the president decide to go ahead? It's a combination of a legitimate geostrategic concern — if ISIS jihadists consolidate their power in the heart of Iraq and Syria, it could threaten some real islands of decency, like Kurdistan, Jordan and Lebanon, and might one day generate enough capacity to harm the West more directly — and the polls. Obama clearly feels drummed into this by the sudden shift in public opinion after ISIS's ghastly videotaped beheadings of two American journalists.

O.K., but given this cast of characters, is there any way this Obama plan can end well? Only if we are extremely disciplined and tough-minded about how, when and for whom we use our power.

Before we step up the bombing campaign on ISIS, it needs to be absolutely clear on whose behalf we are fighting. ISIS did not emerge by accident and from nowhere. It is the hate-child of two civil wars in which the Sunni Muslims have been crushed. One is the vicious civil war in Syria in which the Iranian-backed Alawite-Shiite regime has killed roughly 200,000 people, many of them Sunni Muslims, with chemical weapons and barrel bombs. And the other is the Iraqi civil war in which the Iranian-backed Shiite government of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki systematically stripped the Sunnis of Iraq of their power and resources.

There will be no self-sustained stability unless those civil wars are ended and a foundation is laid for decent governance and citizenship. Only Arabs and Muslims can do that by ending their sectarian wars and tribal feuds. We keep telling ourselves that the problem is “training,” when the real

problem is governance. We spent billions of dollars training Iraqi soldiers who ran away from ISIS's path — not because they didn't have proper training, but because they knew that their officers were corrupt hacks who were not appointed on merit and that the filthy Maliki government was unworthy of fighting for. We so underestimate how starved Arabs are, in all these awakenings, for clean, decent governance.

Never forget, this is a two-front war: ISIS is the external enemy, and sectarianism and corruption in Iraq and Syria are the internal enemies. We can and should help degrade the first, but only if Iraqis and Syrians, Sunnis and Shiites, truly curtail the second. If our stepped-up bombing, in Iraq and Syria, gets ahead of their reconciliation, we will become the story and the target. And that is exactly what ISIS is waiting for.

ISIS loses if our moderate Arab-Muslim partners can unite and make this a civil war *within* Islam — a civil war in which America is the air force for the Sunnis and Shiites of decency versus those of barbarism. ISIS wins if it can make this America's war *with* Sunni Islam — a war where America is the Shiite/Alawite air force against Sunnis in Iraq and Syria. ISIS will use every bit of its Twitter/Facebook network to try to depict it as the latter, and draw more recruits.

We keep making this story about *us*, about Obama, about what *we* do. But it is not about us. It is about *them* and who they want to be. It's about a pluralistic region that lacks pluralism and needs to learn how to coexist. It's the 21st century. It's about time.

I invite you to follow me on Twitter.

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