



The war against the Islamic State

As the US takes on ISIS, the implications for Israel and the Middle East range from Iran's nuclear program to the peace process

AMERICA'S STRATEGIC response to the atrocities of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was too slow, too little and too late. Washington finally woke up only after public outrage at the cruel beheading of two American journalists. And even then, the initial statements were as confusing as most recent US policies and actions in the Middle East have been.

At first, President Barack Obama admitted that he didn't have a strategy to confront ISIS (now simply dubbed Islamic State – IS) and argued that there was no immediate danger to the American mainland. Within days, however, IS became a major threat and Obama promised to “contain, degrade and destroy” the “barbaric terrorist organization” via a broad coalition of Western and Muslim states. In outlining his new strategy, he insisted that the US would not dispatch ground troops and only use airpower to attack IS targets.

Yet, in Congressional testimony that same week, General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, opened the door for an American ground operation. “If we reach the point where I believe our advisers should accompany Iraqi troops on attacks against specific ISIS targets, I will recommend that to the president,” he declared. The next day though, both Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry fervently denied any intention of participating in a new ground war.

The IS threat provides an opportunity to restore some of America's lost leadership and credibility in the region. But given the objective difficulties and Obama's limited commitment, this may prove to be beyond the president's capacity.

A key element in Obama's strategy places

the onus for the ground fighting and the ultimate defeat of IS on the states and groups directly affected and their Arab allies. To this end, Obama promised to help train and equip the Iraqi army, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces and the moderate secular opposition in Syria. The trouble is that while the US wants the Arab states to fight IS, the Arab states want the US and the coalition to do the job for them. Without significant and sustained Arab participation in military operations it is difficult to see IS being defeated.

Today, both Obama and major European leaders acknowledge that ISIS represents the primary threat to states and governments in the Middle East

The emerging modus operandi, aerial bombing and training of local forces, may not be sufficient to destroy the terrorist organization. The Iraqi army has been trained for almost a decade but seems to suffer from structural weaknesses as well as a lack of morale and motivation. It isn't clear how new US aid will fix these serious shortcomings. The Peshmerga units are better organized and more motivated, but too small and limited to be really effective.

Moreover, military successes in Iraq will merely push IS back into its strongholds in

Syria, where the battleground is very different and far more complex. In Syria, IS, the Syrian Free Army, Jabhat al-Nusra and other opposition forces are fighting to topple the Bashar Assad government, but in order to emerge as the alternative regime, they are also fighting each other.

Elimination of IS requires intensive military operations in both Iraq and Syria.

Here, too, American policy seems contradictory. Obama says he will bomb IS targets in Syria, which could help Assad survive. But he has also promised to train and equip the secular opposition in Syria, which is fighting both Assad and IS.

For his part, Assad would have liked to have been included in the anti-IS coalition to further secure his regime. But after being left out, he declared, with strong Russian and Iranian backing, that any unilateral Western attack on Syria would be regarded as an act of aggression and a violation of international law. Indeed, US attacks on Syria could have ramifications beyond the Middle East; Russia might claim the same right to attack Ukrainian forces fighting the pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine.

As for Shi'ite Iran, although it supports similar terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas, it is regarded by the Sunni IS as an enemy, because IS considers Shi'ites infidels fit only to be executed. Thus, ironically, the US and Iran have a common interest in destroying IS. Real collaboration between them, however, will have to overcome serious differences in other areas.

First, IS is fighting Assad, a close ally of Iran, but a man Obama demands resign and leave Syria. Second, the US is leading the



second stage of negotiations with Iran for a permanent agreement on its nuclear program. The US badly wants a deal but has been consistently frustrated by Iranian manipulation, procrastination and lack of cooperation, especially with the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In the Iranian view, in return for collaboration on IS, the US should be more "flexible" on the nuclear agreement. The US, however, didn't invite Iran to join the anti-IS coalition and, so far, hasn't made significant concessions on the nuclear issue. For the Americans, the proposed Iranian deal is meaningless because Iran has a strong incentive of its own to fight IS – regardless of American or Western concessions on the nuclear issue.

MOREOVER, OBAMA feared that open collaboration with Iran on IS might antagonize the Arab members of the coalition, the last thing he wanted. Nevertheless, Israel remains concerned about potential US willingness to make concessions to Iran on the nuclear issue, irrespective of whether or not Iran cooperates in the war against IS.

The campaign against IS is unlikely to significantly affect the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. True, during a mid-September meeting with French President François Hollande, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas implied that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict contributed to the rise of IS terror and that resolution of the conflict would lend greater legitimacy to the campaign against it. Until recently, this type of argument would have resonated, especially in Europe. Not anymore.

For decades the US and Europe argued that

the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was the main source of instability in the Middle East, and that a peace agreement would help solve most of the region's more acute problems. This claim has never been valid. The 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, the 1990-1991 Gulf war, the rise of al-Qaida, the 9/11 attacks on America and the American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were all chief sources of instability and violence in the region and had nothing to do with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The centrality of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict argument was further undercut by the so-called "Arab Spring." Today, both Obama and major European leaders acknowledge that IS represents the primary threat to states and governments in the Middle East, and that, therefore, the campaign to destroy its leadership and military capabilities should be accorded the highest priority.

That does not mean the Israel-Palestine issue can be neglected. This summer's fighting in Gaza was the third round of hostilities initiated by Hamas in just six years. It was clearly part of a cycle of chronic violence that requires new, bold thinking to end it.

Commentators and experts both in Israel and abroad argue that the common interest Israel and the moderate Arab countries now have in containing IS and the situation in Gaza provides a rare opportunity for a comprehensive resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Some suggest a wider negotiating forum based on the 2002 "Arab Peace Initiative." This approach, however, faces several serious obstacles – not least the confrontational relationship between the PA and Hamas.

The Hamas-Fatah government of national

unity, established in April 2014, did little to help. The Hamas branch in the West Bank kidnapped and killed three Israeli teenagers, plotted to topple the Abbas government and, against the PA's wishes, initiated war with Israel. Every regional actor other than Turkey and Qatar would like to see the PA replacing Hamas as the dominant power in Gaza. Hamas, however, is unlikely to accept any such scenario. It could happen if, and only if, the long-suffering people of Gaza launch a successful popular uprising.

IS and Hamas share certain ideological and operational similarities: religious fanaticism, extreme cruelty and intense hostility to the US and the West. Like IS with regard to the West, Hamas is not a viable partner for an Israeli-Palestinian peace. Obama distinguishes between moderate Islam the US would like to cooperate with and radical Islam it must fight and destroy. Like IS, Hamas represents a radical Islam that must be defeated or at least marginalized before Palestinians and Israelis will be able to negotiate a comprehensive peace agreement.

Still, Israel needs to be proactive in its public diplomacy. It should agree to explore the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative; and it should insist on the principle of close linkage between reconstruction for Gaza and disarmament of Hamas. ■

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