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Iraq

The Tangled Imperial Web: Iraq. War. Again.

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Imperialism creates crises that it cannot solve. That's the ultimate takeaway from president Obama's September 10 speech – and the entire series of cascading catastrophes from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan and beyond. As the United States slip-slides into its next Middle East war, are there any reasons to expect this time will turn out differently?

Leaving aside the boilerplate twaddle about U.S. "leadership" in combating every global crisis from terrorism to Ebola – never mind our vanguard role in waterboarding, "extraordinary rendition," drone bombs wiping out wedding parties in Afghanistan and Yemen, F-16s and Hellfire missiles supplied to Israel for serial massacres in Gaza – president Obama at least hasn't recycled George W. Bush's lies about a quick, cost-free victory that would be paid for by Iraq's oil revenues. His address made it clear that to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the enemy will take time, money and risk.

Obama announces new U.S. deployments in Iraq, September 10, 2014.

Obama spoke of a broad coalition of allied nations, without actually naming a single one. The president's insertion of 1500 or so U.S. military "advisors and trainers" certainly has the ring of euphemism. In tactical terms, however, the limited and specific aims he outlined are probably attainable. The question of what comes afterward in Iraq, Syria and the entire region opens onto a vast strategic void.

That the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" is a totalitarian and genocidal entity is beyond any doubt. But this monstrosity didn't arise in a vacuum, or from doctrines of seventh-century Islam as some bigoted pundits would have us believe. It's more a modern hybrid of Nazism and the Mafia, although without the powerful industrial base that powered Hitler's Germany, or the honor codes that generally restrain Cosa Nostra from the mass slaughter of innocent noncombatants.

The "Islamic State in Iraq and al-Shams" (ISIS), as it was originally called, and its predecessor "al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia," arose directly from the destruction of Iraq by the 2003 U.S. invasion. Roughly analogous to the rise of the Nazis from the humiliation and economic destruction imposed on Germany following World War I, the Iraqi al-Qaeda branch grew from the brilliant decision of George W. Bush, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld to dismantle the Iraqi state and the ruling Baath party and abolish the Sunni-dominated army, replacing the institutions of the shattered state with – a vacuum.

Sectarian killing on an industrial scale ensued, mixed Sunni-Shia neighborhoods disappeared, Iraq largely melted down in civil war, and the U.S. occupation bogged down in disaster. In 2006-8, the United States paid Sunni tribal leaders to turn against al-Qaeda, with significant success. But the money dried up as the Bush and subsequently Obama administrations relied on the corrupt and sectarian al-Maliki government, and as U.S. combat troops inevitably withdrew. The prescient words of journalist Robert Fisk, in the very early days of the U.S. occupation, summed up the story: "The United States has to get out of Iraq. The United States will get out of Iraq. And the United States can't get out of Iraq."

Meanwhile, when the Arab Spring brought forth in 2011 a popular uprising in Syria and the Assad regime responded with massive military brutality, the United States found itself in a policy trap. While proclaiming "Assad must go," Washington and its regional allies were fearful of the consequences of the rebellion. As a result the leaders of the loosely organized Free Syrian Army (aka "moderate opposition") got the impression that the West would stand behind them, but actually received just about enough aid to guarantee they would lose – while Assad enjoyed all-out assistance from Iran, Russia and Lebanese Hezbollah.

Out of the Syrian tragedy arose the remnants of “al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia,” trading under the new name of ISIS, with some tactical complicity of the Assad regime (including freeing jihadist prisoners, and stealth purchase of oil from fields ISIS took over). And as Iraq reverted to chaos, ISIS erupted back into northern Iraq, seizing Mosul, executing hundreds of captured soldiers, massacring Christian and Yazidi communities, filming its atrocities as recruitment videos and pronouncing its ambition for expanded conquest as the “Islamic State.”

What next? Indeed, U.S. air power together with Kurdish forces and a partially reconstituted Iraqi army will blunt further ISIS territorial conquests. Its convoys caught in open territory can be annihilated. To the extent its weapons are warehoused, they can be destroyed. It has no weapons industry of its own. The incipient genocidal extermination of non-Sunni communities can be mostly prevented. And the flow of foreign jihadist youth will slow down when and if Turkey tightens its borders and, especially, as the “Islamic State” no longer looks like the winning side.

The Kurdistan regional government and its peshmerga armed forces, whatever their flaws, are fighting for their own freedom as well as resisting the threat of ISIS. They have the right to all the assistance they need, wherever they can get it. They are the most important “boots on the ground” in pushing back the ISIS knife from the throats of threatened populations.

All that’s more or less the easy part. What happens next is a lot harder, as intelligence analyst George Friedman points out:

The Islamic State will disperse its forces, denying conventional aircraft a target. Attempting to defeat the Islamic State by distinguishing its supporters from other Sunni groups and killing them will founder at the first step...They are now part of the fabric of the Sunni community, and only the Sunni community can root them out.

That’s particularly true, obviously, where ISIS is embedded in cities like Mosul and Fallujah in Iraq, or Raqqa in Syria and can’t be bombed out.

ISIS fighters in Mosul.

In short, if the new Iraqi government (still with key ministries still unfilled) looks like a reshuffle of the al-Maliki regime, and if the United States collaborates with the Syrian regime – whose military power, and atrocities against civilians, exceed those of the “Islamic State” by orders of magnitude – then the narrative of the Sunni jihadists will be confirmed, and their influence will persist and metastasize even if ISIS no longer looks like a conquering army.

There are plenty of lessons from recent experience for anyone who’s paying attention. President Obama’s great success in killing Osama bin Laden turned out to change nothing. If anything, creating a polio vaccination program as a CIA front in tracking down bin Laden gave the fundamentalist crazies in Pakistan a pretext for killing vaccination workers, posing a public health disaster.

Bush’s war in Afghanistan, which Obama thought was the United States’ “smart war,” is ending about as badly as could have been imagined. His claims that U.S. drones have improved things in Yemen and Somalia are flights of fantasy. And let’s be honest: President Obama’s image as a strong leader is hardly enhanced by the spectacle of Israel’s Binyamin Netanyahu kicking him in the teeth, over and over and over again

The regional political and sectarian conflicts, which seem impossible to balance, are only the beginning of the intractable contradictions facing this new intervention and U.S. imperial policy globally. They extend further: Since the cooperation of Iran is now essential in restoring the Iraqi army, what does that mean for the U.S. attempt to undercut

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Assad, or for the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program? With Europe in turmoil over the Russian occupation-by-proxies in eastern Ukraine, and facing the threat of freezing in the dark this winter if Russian natural gas supplies are curtailed, how is the Obama administration going to "provide leadership" on multiple crises at once?

All this occurs at the moment when atmospheric carbon dioxide has reached the ominous level of 396 parts per million and the impacts of climate change ravaging the planet can only be made worse by war. The global terror of imperialism generates its ugly local and regional counterparts from Taliban to the "Islamic State." The terrorist forces arising in shattered societies can't be eradicated without uprooting the global system that inevitably breeds them.