

Mission creep and the Islamic State

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Members of the Kurdish security forces stand guard against Islamic State militants, behind sandbags on the Mullah Abdullah bridge in southern Kirkuk.

By Marvin Zonis

Mission creep usually guarantees mission failure. What follows from changing the original goals of the mission is all too evident in the failed U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Now the United States has fallen into that trap with the Islamic State. The result will be a long and costly engagement and failure.

Afghanistan and Iraq are prime examples. The

original U.S. mission in Afghanistan was to overthrow the Taliban, which had provided sanctuary to al-Qaida. That was swiftly accomplished. Given the rapidity and ease of accomplishing the mission, President George W. Bush was emboldened to do the same in Iraq. While that was being done, U.S. troops pretty much lolled about Afghanistan with no particular orders. The outcome in Iraq looked very much like Afghanistan — a three-week campaign that overthrew Saddam Hussein. (Given that Iran had fought an eight-year war with Iraq — and lost — Iran was a very tempting next target for the neoconservatives running U.S. foreign policy. But that's the subject for an entirely different piece.)

"Mission accomplished," Bush said. And it was. But then the mission was changed. Instead of turning Afghanistan back to the Afghans, instead of turning Iraq back to the Iraqis, the Bush folks decided that the U.S. should run both countries.

Not only run the two countries ourselves, but far more ambitiously, remake each country into the image of the United States — democratic governments, market economies and liberal, modern cultures.

Our failure to accomplish any of those goals in either country is all too obvious. The years of death that followed, and the years that will ultimately cost the U.S. trillions of dollars, are all reminders of those failures.

But there is no greater sign of those failures than the debacle now unfolding in Iraq. The success of the Islamic State is a direct result of the failure of the U.S. to accomplish its grand-mission-creep goals for Iraq. What was created instead was a state run by and for the long-oppressed Shiites. Sunnis, the backbone of the Saddam Hussein regime, got their comeuppance. The Kurds got an autonomous Kurdistan.

In order to blunt the advance on Baghdad and Kurdistan, the U.S. made its first airstrikes against the Islamic State on Aug. 10. Very selective airstrikes stopped their attacks on Kurdistan, stopped their advance on Baghdad, allowed the Iraqi army to recapture a major dam and helped "save" many Yazidis, members of a religious minority in northern Iraq.

On Aug. 19, the Islamic State released a video showing the beheading of American journalist James Foley. On Sept. 2, the Islamic State released another video showing the beheading of another U.S. journalist, Steven Sotloff. The videos unleashed a storm of outrage across the United States. The brutal killings of the two Americans generated more American hysteria than all the murderous tragedies that have befallen Iraq.

On Sept. 10, President Barack Obama vowed to "degrade and destroy" the Islamic State.

Here is the finest example of mission creep since the

debacle producing decisions on Afghanistan and Iraq.

The problems with this instance of mission creep are many.

First, the U.S. has made a commitment to accomplish a goal without controlling all the necessary variables. The Islamic State can be destroyed only with the use of ground troops. But there is no evidence that the Iraqi army will be up to the task. Since the all-out bombing of Islamic State positions in Iraq by the U.S. and its coalition armies, the Iraqi army has yet to capture a single Islamic State position.

Worse, to weaken general Sunni attraction to the Islamic State, the government in Baghdad has to drop its Shiite commitments and become truly inclusive of its minority Sunni population. But there is as of yet no indication that the Shiites are willing to make that adjustment.

Second, by beginning a widespread air campaign meant to destroy the Islamic State, the U.S. has made a direct enemy of the extremist group. Originally, its intent was on establishing its version of an Islamic state and controlling territories in Iraq and Syria, but we have managed to get the Islamic State to focus its ire on the U.S. The terrorism alerts across the U.S. are the result.

Third, after attacking the Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front, an al-Qaida franchise in Syria, the two have

united. The groups have begun to hold joint war-planning meetings. Other jihadi groups will feel encouraged to ally with the Islamic State against their common enemy.

Fourth, the U.S. has taken the side of the Shiites in this fight. As a result, the regime of the Assads has been strengthened. So has Hezbollah. So has the Shiite regime in Baghdad. So has the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, whose overreaching in Iraq and Syria, to begin with, had so much to do with birthing the Islamic State.

All in all, the U.S. has chosen a perilous course. The mission creep from moving to contain the Islamic State to destroying it is a major step that will not be accomplished any time soon and will, as a result, likely lead to attacks within the United States and to the strengthening of Iran, which our sanctions are meant to weaken.

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