The Middle East Cauldron and United States Policy

by Edward P. Djerejian

This report suggests the contours of a more comprehensive policy for the United States in the broader Middle East, one that pursues not only important tactical approaches to counter Islamic extremism and terrorism, but also shapes the larger strategic landscape to secure and promote U.S. interests. After defining the challenge for the United States and the international community, the report provides a brief narrative on the rise of ISIS before presenting key policy recommendations for a more strategic approach.

The Challenge of Islamic Extremism

Syria, like Lebanon and Iraq, has a long and rich history of being a multiconfessional and diverse ethnic society where Sunni and Shia Arabs, Kurds, Druze, Alawites, Christians, Jews and others coexisted peacefully. When I served in Syria as the United States ambassador between 1988 and 1991, Syrians identified themselves not by sect or religion, but first and foremost as Syrian citizens. This national identity is being upended by the tragic and brutal civil war in the country and the rise of sectarianism. Even further, the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL or Daesh) is threatening to unravel Middle East borders and destabilize or topple the governments of the region.

As the remaining preeminent power in the world and to serve our own national security interests, there is a compelling need for the United States to formulate a coherent and multinational near-term and long-term strategy to address the challenge of Islamic radicalism. The near-term requires a robust, tactical counterterrorism policy. The long-term strategy requires addressing the root causes of extremism in the region. Without a coherent strategy, the United States is relegated to merely reactive policies to fast-paced events on the ground. But in crafting a comprehensive strategy, we should understand
that we alone cannot determine political outcomes in the region. The lessons learned in Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrate the limitations and hubris of externally generated “nation-building.” With an objective understanding of our national capabilities and limitations, the United States should, nevertheless, engage the international community to build and sustain regional security and prosperity.

Fundamental to the elaboration of U.S. policy toward the Middle East is the realization that the threat of Islamic radicalism is, above all, a challenge for the people and countries of the region. This is primarily their struggle. However, through effective communication and implementation of a clear strategic framework and the engagement of all the relevant actors, the United States can help influence events in the Middle East in a positive direction.

**Fundamental to the elaboration of U.S. policy toward the Middle East is the realization that the threat of Islamic radicalism is, above all, a challenge for the people and countries of the region. This is primarily their struggle.**

This is the long game in what is definitely a generational struggle. A successful effort also requires strong political will, and an understanding of the many political, social, economic, and historical forces at play in the region: The Arab Awakening; the Syrian crisis; the turmoil in Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan; the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict; the growth of Islamic radicalism and terrorism; struggling economies and high unemployment in many parts of the region; human and women’s rights issues; and seriously restrained efforts at broadening political participation and pluralism in the region. These are the dots. If any U.S. administration tries to deal with these issues piecemeal, the chances for successful outcomes will be strongly diminished, as we have witnessed.

In this context, ISIS’ success as a radical movement is both a threat and an opportunity to construct a broad-based coalition to confront the Al-Qaeda offshoot and other terrorist groups. The immediate goal of this coalition would be to deter, contain and, where possible, defeat ISIS. At the same time, such a broad group of countries—including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, and international partners in the UN Security Council, Europe, Japan, Israel, and others—could be expanded as a forum to discuss comprehensive solutions to some of the region’s long-term challenges that contribute to the rise of Islamic extremism.

Beyond the immediate task of resolving the critical crises in Syria and Iraq, the longer term goal would be to obtain understandings and agreements on countering Islamic radical movements and terrorist organizations throughout the region and beyond, diminishing Sunni-Shia rivalry, achieving a viable and sustainable agreement on Iran’s nuclear program, resuscitating Israeli-Palestinian negotiations to reach a two-state
solution, addressing the political, economic, and social development needs of the states in transition in the Arab world, and promoting energy security and the free flow of energy to world markets.

While implementing near-term and long-term coalition strategies for regional conflict resolution, the United States should avoid any position in which it becomes a party, either militarily or politically, in Shia-Sunni or ethnic conflicts. Rather, in countries like Iraq and Syria, the United States and its partners should support efforts with local actors on the ground to pursue inclusive policies, which limit violence and support political participation and compromise. Concomitantly, U.S. policy approaches do not necessarily need to involve a major commitment of American combat forces. An important caveat in any U.S. policy approach is that it is primarily the responsibility and role of the people and countries of the region to confront the challenge of Islamic extremism. It is their political destiny that is at stake.

The Rise of ISIS

It is important to note the history of ISIS, which was formed as Tawhid wal Jihad (unity and struggle) by the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in Afghanistan in the late 1990s/early 2000s. After the fall of the Taliban and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the organization became a formal affiliate Al-Qaeda in 2004 and was renamed Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The group fought U.S. forces in Iraq as part of Iraq’s Sunni insurgency, but was significantly weakened by the so-called “Sunni Awakening” in 2006 and the surge of U.S. troops in 2007. By 2010, Gen. Ray Odierno, then senior American commander in Iraq, announced that AQI had been isolated from foreign support and weakened by the killing or capture of key leaders, including al-Zarqawi, who died in a 2006 airstrike.

However, the spread of uprisings throughout Syria during the Arab Spring provided an opening for AQI to regroup and reassert itself through violent attacks under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad portrayed the young, peaceful protesters during the early days of the Syrian uprising as “terrorists.” This became a self-fulfilling prophecy when the crisis devolved into sectarian warfare, and terrorist groups such as ISIS infiltrated the country and exploited the political vacuum for their own ends. In effect, the Syrian regime’s use of lethal force against its own citizens sparked the sectarian divisions among Sunnis, Shiites, Alawites, Kurds, Christians, and others. Al-Baghdadi’s broader aspirations and expansion into Syria led to the renaming of the group in April 2013 to the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Syria has now imploded. There are an estimated 260,000 Syrians killed. Over 3 million have fled to neighboring countries and more than 6 million have been internally displaced. The conflict engulfs the entire country and is a multi-sided battle with clashes erupting between the regime and the opposition; the regime and ISIS; ISIS and the opposition; and between Kurdish fighters and ISIS. The civil war is fragmented even further when considering the deep divisions within the opposition between the Free Syrian Army and radical Islamist groups other than ISIS, such as Jabhat al-Nusra.
The Syrian civil war created the opportunity for ISIS to establish a firm foothold in Syria and Iraq. Through violence and coercion, ISIS has been able to seize territory in Syria (initially without much resistance from the regime) in the eastern provinces and in the north near the Turkish border. By controlling key border crossings with Iraq, the group can move fighters, weapons, and money freely between the two countries. The group has created a clear organizational hierarchy and is adept at spreading its message through social media. ISIS also gains critical funding through the management of financial resources from captured oil fields, ransom, and the looting and trading of antiquities. Its headquarters in the city of Raqqa has become the capital of a so-called Caliphate that now extends from Syria into Iraq.

**Recent U.S. Policy in Iraq and Syria**

Before formulating a successful strategy to defeat ISIS in the short-term and violent Islamic extremism in the longer-term, the U.S. administration should first examine how past policies have contributed indirectly to ISIS’ current strength.

U.S. policies in Iraq and Syria have been replete with unintended consequences. The invasion of Iraq by the George W. Bush administration highlighted the hubris of policymakers who believed the U.S. could direct outcomes to establish democratic governance in its own image. This belief led to a seriously flawed attempt at “nation-building” in Iraq that suffered from the “day after syndrome.” Following the decisions to dismantle the Iraqi Armed Forces and Ba’ath Party, the country was deprived of experienced security personnel, civil servants, and technocrats and, thereby, unable to re-establish law and order and to provide many basic services. As one three-star general told the Iraq Study Group in 2006 in Baghdad, the mission to “clear, hold, and build” now included responsibilities to “pick up the trash.” As a result, U.S. military personnel and civilian contractors took on missions outside of their core skills and without the necessary linguistic skills and knowledge of Arab cultures and peoples.

More recent U.S. policy in Iraq has compounded past policy failings. Despite the obstacles, we should have ensured that the Iraqi government under Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki signed the Status of Forces Agreement that would have allowed the Obama administration to leave a meaningful U.S. military force in Iraq. A continued American training and support presence could have inhibited Maliki’s sectarian designs for the military and bolstered capacity to defend against ISIS. The Iraqi army’s vaporization in the face of ISIS fighters, especially in Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, also reflects the combined mistakes of U.S. policy post-2003 to build a truly national fighting force with competent leadership and the backing of U.S. forces on the ground.

The strengthening of ISIS and its ability to feed on the chaos in Syria was a direct result of political stagnation in Baghdad and the marginalization of Sunni leaders. The domination of Shia parties and the lack of compromise and consensus of the former Maliki government were key contributors to the current crisis.
Perhaps one of the most detrimental consequences of previous U.S. policies in Iraq and Afghanistan has been the impact on American public opinion, which shows increased wariness with the concept of U.S. strategic and military engagement in the Middle East. This constrains policymakers and inhibits the ability of the U.S. government to formulate more constructive and comprehensive policies in the region.

In Syria, the U.S. administration’s policy since the uprisings began in 2011 has been characterized as rhetorical overreach and practical underperformance. President Obama’s call for Assad to step down five months after the protests began removed all possibility for engaging with the regime, which still maintained support within segments of Syrian society. In addition, we should have engaged early on with Syrian groups opposed to Bashar al-Assad’s regime, to organize and build their capabilities. Together, a more balanced, coherent approach would have produced a greater chance of success for UN efforts at a negotiated political transition. Instead, the lack of influence over either the opposition or the regime has facilitated chaotic conditions in Syria and the ability of Islamic radical forces to penetrate and assert themselves across the country.

**Toward A Coherent Strategy**

One of the major lessons of statecraft is best articulated by Dr. Henry Kissinger, who wrote “Circumstance is neutral; by itself it imprisons more frequently than it helps. A Statesman who cannot shape events will soon be engulfed by them; he will be thrown on the defensive, wrestling with tactics instead of advancing his purpose.” Recent U.S. policy in Syria and Iraq gives further credence to Kissinger’s words and any forward-looking strategy must be crafted with that lesson in mind.

The current approach of President Obama and his foreign policy team is focused around efforts to create an international coalition to fight ISIS through air strikes and trying to build Iraqi and Syrian opposition ground support capabilities. The coalition air campaign is a positive first step, although without significant U.S. forces on the ground, indigenous forces in both Iraq and Syria are needed to reverse ISIS’ territorial gains. In addition, while the coalition has taken steps to fight ISIS ideology through condemnations of the group by religious scholars, more is needed to underscore the extremist bent of its agenda and how it departs from mainstream Islam. This should be the main task of the Arab and Muslim countries themselves.

What President Obama has enunciated in his speech on September 10 and to the UN on September 24, 2014 is basically a counterterrorism strategy. This is a necessary first
step and strong action in this area is critical to stem ISIS’ advances. However, it is not a sufficient basis to address the fundamental challenge of Islamic extremism in the Muslim world. Alone, this strategy mirrors that of the so-called War on Terror, which like the War on Poverty and the War on Drugs, is more of a political rhetorical flourish than a coherent strategy. In fact, none of these “wars” have been won.

What is very important to understand is that this is an ideological struggle within the Islamic world between the forces of moderation and extremism whose outcome, in the final analysis, only Muslims can determine. It is a generational struggle that challenges Arab and Muslim states to confront groups like ISIS, especially since such forces seek to overthrow these regimes—“the near enemy”—and establish their own forms of Islamic governance and, in some instances, a Caliphate.

Second, the struggle also involves the international community—the “far enemy” as defined by Islamic extremist groups—with the United States as a major target. This facet of the conflict includes the threat posed by many groups not only to the regimes in the Middle East but also to the “world order,” broadly defined as the existing state-based system and the associated norms of international relations. Non-state actors such as ISIS are a particular challenge to confront, as they exist in many ways in the lacunae of effective state systems and fragile borders.

Given the nature of the conflict with violent Islamic extremism, an effective, coherent U.S. policy should be balanced between a robust counterterrorism policy that fights groups like ISIS in the short-term, and policies that strengthen the regional state system and address the long-term gaps in the Middle East—political representation and economic and social development. Again, here the United States cannot alone determine the outcomes, but can work on the margins according to our national capabilities to help individual countries realize the desired goals.

The substance of a comprehensive strategy should focus on the identification of the Islamic extremist threat as one common to all the parties; the need to confront, contain, and defeat it wherever possible; and the resort to diplomatic, economic, and military means to do so in a coordinated manner. It is important to note that we cannot allow ISIS to characterize this contest as mainly between it and the United States and “the West” as it has been attempting to do. The U.S. cannot and should not take sides in ethnic or sectarian disputes and should communicate this stance clearly and consistently.
While ISIS has currently united rival states in the region to confront the threat in Iraq and Syria, the greater challenge will be addressing the underlying causes of instability in the Middle East and South Asia that give extremist groups the opportunity to establish themselves in these societies. Namely, these factors are the lack of good governance in the region, systemic corruption, high rates of youth unemployment, deficient education systems, the lack of pluralism, and the failure to reach an Israeli–Palestinian settlement. The United States should not operate under the illusion that the states of the region—especially allies in Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states—will adopt significant changes on these domestic issues overnight, or even prioritize them for discussion. Rather, a long-term strategy should focus on introducing key principles and, where possible, aligning regional policies with these goals.

**Policy Recommendations**

The United States should formulate a coherent near- and long-term strategy to address the threat of Islamic extremism to our national security interests. U.S. policy should be premised on the understanding that the threat of Islamic extremism is, in the first instance, a direct and generational challenge to the people and countries of the Muslim world and that the United States cannot determine the political outcome of this struggle. This ideological war of ideas within the Muslim world between the forces of extremism and moderation is one where only Muslims can determine the future of the region. What the United States can do, given its global role, is to try to influence the outcome, according to our capabilities, in favor of the forces of moderation.

ISIS presents a threat to the political order of all the states in the Middle East, Sunni and Shia alike. It, therefore, provides an opportunity to form a broad-based regional and international coalition to contain and destroy it wherever possible. The United States can play an important role in bringing together such a coalition.

A robust and internationally coordinated counterterrorism program is required to contain and destroy ISIS, as well as Al-Qaeda affiliated groups and other terrorist organizations. Military operations involving air power and ground support have to be combined effectively so that territorial advances and political gains by ISIS and any other terrorist group can be reversed, especially in Iraq and Syria.

U.S. policy toward Iraq should focus on restoring inclusive politics and political stability in the country as a whole and working with the Iraqis to establish an appropriate federal system of government that has a chance of maintaining Iraq’s territorial integrity. If Iraq splinters into Sunni, Shia, and/or Kurdish entities, there would be destabilizing consequences for all of Iraq’s neighbors.

U.S. policy toward Syria lacks coherence. Much valuable time has been lost. Accommodating the Assad regime will not solve the ISIS problem. While confronting ISIS in Syria, a major effort should be made to provide meaningful political, economic,
and military support to the non-radical political opposition in Syria in order to level the playing field between the regime of Bashar al-Assad and the opposition forces so that a political transition process leading to a post-Assad era can have some hope of success in the longer term.

While implementing its near- and long-term policies, the United States should not become, wittingly or unwittingly, a party to Shia–Sunni or ethnic conflicts.

A primary responsibility of any American president is the security of the homeland and of American citizens at home and abroad. Accordingly, the international campaign against ISIS and other terrorist groups has to be carefully coordinated and conducted to assure that effective domestic policies are in place to prevent terrorist attacks. Specifically, the troubling manifestation of foreigners, including Americans, joining the ranks of ISIS and other groups—or being inspired by their ideology to fight on their behalf—requires not only enhanced vigilance, but sophisticated and internationally coordinated counterterrorism policies.

In the longer term and to get at the root causes of extremism, the United States should adopt policies toward the countries in the region that are carefully tailored in each case to address the systemic problems that characterize the failing state system in the Middle East and that have allowed Islamic radicals to assert themselves. This is not a formula for nation-building in the American image, but rather doing what the United States can—within its limitations—to engage in state-building and political stability in individual countries. This can be done by encouraging political dialogue and carefully focused programs aimed at the broadening of political participation and pluralism; economic, infrastructure, and social development; and private sector initiatives to create economic growth and jobs. A mix of public and private sector initiatives should be considered.

In its public diplomacy the United States should make clear that it does not view Islam as the next “ism” after fascism and communism confronting the West or threatening world peace. Rather, the “isms” we are prepared to confront are extremism and terrorism of either a religious or secular cloak.

In its public diplomacy the United States should make clear that it does not view Islam as the next “ism” after fascism and communism confronting the West or threatening world peace. Rather, the “isms” we are prepared to confront are extremism and terrorism of either a religious or secular cloak.

Also in our public diplomacy we must make clear with whom we differ. Namely, we differ from those who, whatever their religion or ethnicity or national identity, practice
terrorism, resort to violence, reject the peaceful resolution of conflicts, oppress minorities, preach intolerance, disdain political pluralism, or violate internationally accepted norms regarding human rights.

The unresolved Israeli–Palestinian conflict, left unattended, will erupt once again into violence as witnessed by the last “Gazan War” in 2014. This will only exacerbate the turmoil and instability in the region and promote radicalism and terrorism. Accordingly and despite the obstacles, the United States must be resolute in bringing the parties to the negotiating table to achieve a two-state solution.

Strategic engagement with Iran, especially on the nuclear issue, must continue to be pursued. A secure and viable agreement on Iran’s nuclear program with strong international safeguards can be a building block to address the serious issues that divide the two countries. Also, it could avoid further polarization and even military action with its unintended consequences. Such engagement should not be perceived by the Sunni countries in the Middle East as a zero sum game in favor of Shiite Iran. But in order to allay such concerns, the United States must consult much more effectively with our allies in the region and bring them into our confidence.

To pursue such recommended policies, strong leadership and political will is required. Policymakers need to be able to both meet the current crises and challenges and step back and strategize long-term coherent policies to address the root causes of the problems in the broader Middle East region. One fundamental goal is reconciliation between Sunnis and Shiites, Christians and Muslims, Arabs and Israelis. The question is where are the Nelson Mandelas who can rise to this historic task.

Also in our public diplomacy we must make clear with whom we differ. Namely, we differ from those who, whatever their religion or ethnicity or national identity, practice terrorism, resort to violence, reject the peaceful resolution of conflicts, oppress minorities, preach intolerance, disdain political pluralism, or violate internationally accepted norms regarding human rights.
