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## Three pillars of failure in US-led war on Islamic State

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10/2/2014

The current U.S.-led war on "the Islamic State (IS)," also known as "the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS/ISIL)," is based on three pillars of failure, which will prolong the global war on terror for decades to come (at a time when the war on terror already enters its second decade, with courtesy to George W. Bush), with devastating consequences to countless lives around the world.

### (1) THE FIRST PILLAR OF FAILURE -- POLITICAL

The first pillar of failure in the U.S.-led war on the IS is political, for three main reasons.

The first political reason of failure is that the U.S. does not have enough global political support. The "alliance of the willing and capable" as promised by U.S. President Barack Obama fails, because its supporters are all U.S. allies and it excludes the key countries most needed for its political success. Those countries which show political support are the U.K., Canada, Germany, Australia, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Turkey, just to cite some obvious examples. But these are all allies of the U.S.; even then, it is the U.S. which will do almost all of the air strikes, with others merely cheering on the sideline. Moreover, some countries (like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar) join the alliance only reluctantly, due to conflicting local interests (to be explained below). And those key countries (like Iran, Syria, Russia, and China) which are most needed for the war effort are not on the list. Russia under Vladimir Putin makes it clear that any U.S.-led

strikes against the IS inside Syria constitutes a violation of international law if it does not receive the formal permission of the Syrian government, which the U.S. has so far refused to ask. And China, as urged by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, asks for a U.N.-led mission, not a U.S.-led operation (with the U.S. doing almost all of the air strikes). For this very reason, the U.S. did not go to the United Nations to ask for a U.N.-led mission, because of this lack of global political support, especially under the threat of a veto by Russia and China.

The second political reason of failure is that the alliance does not have enough domestic political support either. Recent polls in the U.S. showed time and again the disapproval of Obama's foreign policy by the majority of Americans. More disturbingly, some Western nationals went to the Middle East to join the IS; in a recent article titled "Fight with ISIS Spreads across Globe" on September 15, 2014, it was reported that already more than 1,000 Frenchmen, together with a dozen women and kids, had joined the jihad. Elsewhere, the recent raid and arrest of some Australian extremists for the IS inside Australia are a warning sign of this home-grown political disagreement -- just as the shocking videos showing three Western nationals who were beheaded by some ISIL members with a British accent are a chilling reminder of this tip of the iceberg in domestic political discontent in "the alliance of the willing and capable." Worse, in many of those Arab countries joining the alliance, there are widespread anti-American (and anti-Western) sentiments among the locals in regard to Western interventions in the region (dating back to colonial times).

And the third political reason of failure has much to do with the deeply flawed U.S. war in Iraq in the past decades (first under George W. Bush and now under Barack Obama), such that the U.S. is confronting the classic dilemma of incompatible political forces which all compete for its attention and interests in the region. For instance, a major part of the current IS grew out of the political persecution of the Sunnis after the U.S. overthrew the Sunni-dominated regime of Saddam Hussein, both during the U.S. occupation and during the subsequent U.S.-supported Shiite-dominated Iraqi government (especially under the brutal leadership of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who was pressured to step down only a few weeks ago). This sectarian violence between the Sunnis and the Shias in Iraq (and also in Syria) is all the more intensified by foreign meddling from Iran and Syria, which are on the side of the Shias. But Saudi Arabia and Qatar are in support of the Sunni rebellion, because of their political rivalry with Iran and Syria. This explains why the U.S. has so far refused to ask Iran and Syria to formally join the alliance, because it does not want to benefit these adversaries, even though it needs their help. And this also explains why pro-Sunni Saudi Arabia and Qatar reluctantly join the alliance (only after intense U.S. pressure), because the war on the IS benefits Iran and Syria, which are their adversaries. Another complication is Turkey's reluctance to join the alliance, because the war on the IS benefits the Kurds, who, like the PKK, are asking for an independent state inside Turkey (and neighboring countries). As if the situation were not complicated enough, there is also the role of Israel, which asked the U.S. to exclude Iran and Syria, their arch-enemies, from the alliance. But any exclusion of Iran and Syria also alienates Russia and China, the two major supporters of the two key states in the war on the IS. In short, the U.S. is caught right in the middle of this political mess in the Middle East, as a "blowback" after the failure of the U.S. foreign policy in Iraq during the past decades (under George W. Bush then and under Barack Obama now).

## (2) THE SECOND PILLAR OF FAILURE -- MILITARY

The second pillar of failure in the U.S.-led war on the IS is military, for three main reasons.

The first military reason of failure has much to do with Obama's lack of an "exit" strategy. A competent military strategist has to ask himself the important question if he wants to go to war, "What is the exit strategy?" In the current context, how long is this war on the IS supposed to last? How high is the cost of this war, beyond which the U.S. is not willing to go and has to get out before things get worse in a quagmire? The answer by Obama is disappointing: "Indefinitively." And his National Security Adviser Susan Rice later confirmed in a CNN interview that "it will be sustained." This "no-exit" strategy is the best way to lead to quagmire. Weeks before that, Obama even admitted that he had "no strategy" at the time on how to deal with the IS.

The second military reason of failure has much to do with Obama's unwillingness to commit U.S. troops on the ground. Air strikes will no doubt cause damage to the IS. But the IS is a well-organized military force occupying a large part of Iraq and Syria, and has the stubborn extremist will to fight to the very end. Worse, a bad mistake that a military commander-in-chief (like Obama) can make is to tell his enemy, right from the start, that he will not commit ground troops, but this works to the advantage of the enemy, who rightly calculates that the U.S. is lukewarm about the war.

And the third military reason of failure has much to do with the fact that one cannot kill to victory. Making war by itself is not a political solution to the messy situation in the Middle East. Obama's refusal to include the key states like Iran, Syria, Russia, and China is already a failure, not a solution, to the war on the IS. Unfortunately, the current proxy war between the U.S. (and its European allies) and Russia in Ukraine, and the political tension between China and the U.S. in regard to the "pivot to Asia" foreign policy to counter China's rise are not helping the U.S. at all to work with these major powers in the war on the IS. As things now stand, there is the deep political distrust between the U.S. and Russia, and also between the U.S. and China - let alone the same problem with both Syria and Iran too.

## (3) THE THIRD PILLAR OF FAILURE -- SOCIOECONOMIC

And the third pillar of failure in the U.S.-led war on the IS is socioeconomic, for two main reasons.

The first socioeconomic reason of failure is that the war has already caused so much suffering among so many civilians in those countries involved, both directly and indirectly, which is a breeding ground for anti-American (and anti-Western) sentiments. The decades-long war in Iraq alone has already caused more than one million deaths (according to an estimate by the Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health and Columbia University School of Nursing some years ago) and displaced several millions of refugees fleeing to neighboring counties (e.g., Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, etc.). Some of these refugees are not welcome to neighboring countries, and a good example is Turkey, which has already received unwanted Kurds and non-Kurds fleeing the IS and others in Syria and Iraq. In fact, 49 Turkish nationals (including

diplomats and their families) were recently kidnapped and held as hostages by the IS to discourage Ankara from joining the alliance, and this explains the reluctance of Turkey to wholeheartedly be on the side of the U.S. due to conflicting interests (e.g., the hostages, the Kurds, the rivalry with Syria under Assad, etc.).

And the second socioeconomic reason of failure is that, after all these years of the endless use of force by Western powers in the region, it will take generations to repair all the damages done to the socioeconomic institutions in those countries involved, which is another breeding ground for anti-American (and anti-Western) forces. Civil wars, sectarian violence, insurgency, and foreign attacks in Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya, Gaza, Syria, and so on have destroyed the fabrics of society and thus retarded the socioeconomic development of these lands for generations to come. It is so much easier to break up and destroy a society than to rebuild it afterwards into a prosperous one, and the records so far have been dismal in the region. The U.S. and its allies have time and again been involved in these multi-faceted conflicts, siding with some groups against others, such that the friends of today for expediency can easily become the enemies of tomorrow. Do people still remember bin Laden and other fighters, who were once supported by the U.S. against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, before they turned against the U.S. later? Or do people still recall that many of the IS fighters in Syria were once supported by the U.S. and its allies in their rebellion against the Syrian regime under Assad, before they turn against the U.S. and its allies now? At the end of the day, fear, anger, and despair among many locals who suffer from all this endless violence and widespread destruction lead to accusations and finger-pointing, so this plays into the hands of anti-American (and anti-Western) forces. The Taliban, for instance, are still well and alive in Afghanistan, and they are getting stronger over time, wanting to take over, once the U.S. forces leave at the end of the year, while the country sinks into political disarray among its corrupt U.S.-backed political leaders -- just as the al-Qaida terrorist group, in spite of the death of bin Laden, has played a major role in the growth of the IS in Iraq and Syria, with a lot of support from foreign fighters too (some of whom are from Western countries; and the U.K. under David Cameron just passed a law to ban those British IS members from returning to the U.K. to cause trouble at home).

## CONCLUSION

There can be other pillars of failures, just as there can be other examples (besides those presented above), but the important point to remember here is that the disastrous temptation of the U.S., as the sole military superpower (for the time being, though, as China is fast catching up), to use force to solve problems abroad has proved time and again counter-productive in the long-run. The use of air strikes against the IS under the Obama administration is only the latest example of this die-hard temptation of the U.S. (and its allies) to solve problems by force in a way which will contribute to more problems in the decades to come. As the old saying has it, "what goes around comes around."