

THE PRESIDENT JUST DOESN'T GET IT

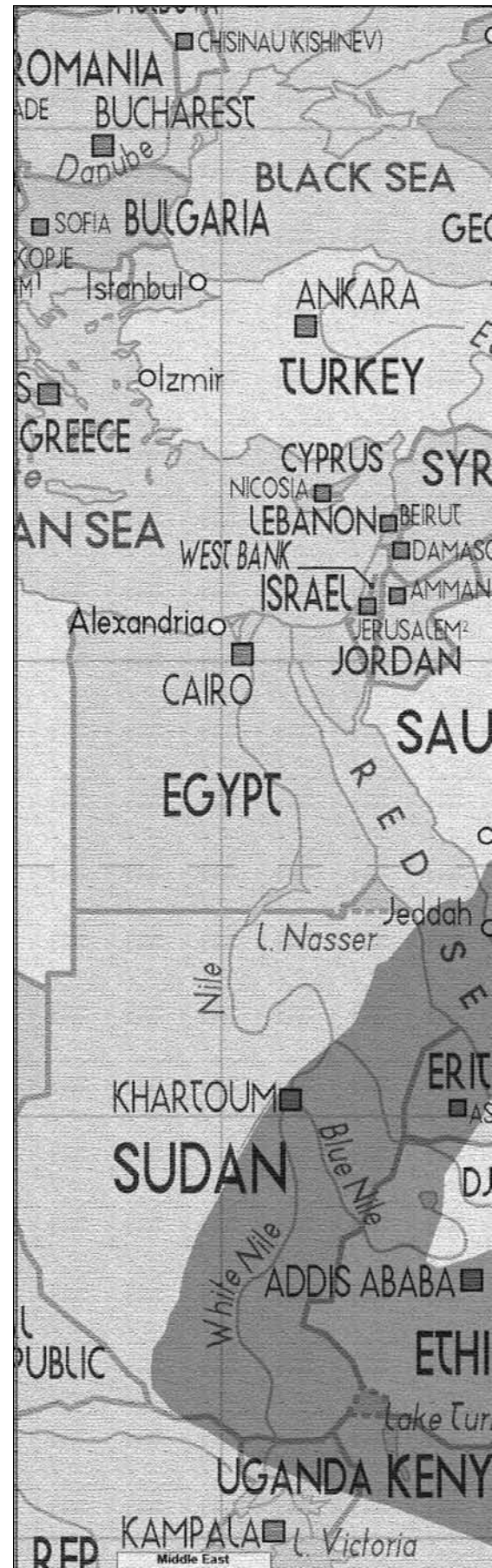
BY GERALD E. MARSH

" . . . Defeat of the Islamic State cannot be achieved solely by military means and, most especially, not by Western military actions such as air strikes—even if given the cover of a coalition containing Arab nations; nor can military operations decrease the spread of beliefs upon which radical Islam is based."

PRES. BARACK OBAMA does not have a strategy. To have a strategy one first must have a policy, and the Administration appears unable to articulate one. A policy sets out what we want to achieve; a strategy is formulated so as to implement that policy. Destroying the Islamic State (ISIS) cannot substitute for a policy. The military branches are very familiar with this hierarchical and structured approach of having the civilian authorities formulate a policy and, in response, finding an effective strategy,

defining roles and missions for the various services, and, finally, working out the tactics. However, in the absence of coherent and consistent policy guidance from the Administration, we have military commanders trying to fill the gap. As a result, it is increasingly true that "the public face of American diplomacy wears a uniform." It should not.

Consider the war in Afghanistan: the U.S. response after 9/11 was planned and executed brilliantly, and all the warnings from those who, with trepidation, remembered the Soviet





experience in Afghanistan, were wrong. Unfortunately for America, the post-war strategy was deeply flawed, not least because one cannot formulate an effective strategy in the absence of coherent, consistent, and realistic policy objectives.

The same was true in the second Iraqi war. If one believed the rhetoric of the time for both wars, the principal policy goal of the George W. Bush Administration was to create democratic states, but democracy—along with its prerequisites of civil society and the rule of law—cannot be imposed externally, and certainly not by military means. If the policy goal indeed was to create a democratic state in either of these countries, it failed miserably and resulted, at best, in what Fareed Zakaria—in *The Future of Freedom*—calls an “Illiberal Democracy.”

What then should be the essence of U.S. policy in the Middle East? Two realistic policy goals would be maintaining the flow of oil from the region at a reasonable price and curtailing the spread of intolerant Islam that creates the fertile ground for terrorism. How they are achieved—through diplomacy, war, or other means—is a matter of strategy. Because of recent advances in oil and gas production, such as horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing (or “fracking”), huge reserves of oil and gas have been made available in the U.S. so that the prevention of the spread of intolerant Islam has taken political precedence over oil.

Nonetheless, even though the U.S. would be buffered by these new sources of energy, the disruption of the international oil markets certainly would be raised as a concern, but much oil will continue to flow from the Persian Gulf even in the presence of conflict since the Gulf rulers depend on oil money for their continued existence. Even today, in the areas controlled by the Islamic State, under very adverse conditions, oil continues to flow through a decades-old oil smuggling network. According to a September report in the *Financial Times*: “This lucrative unofficial trade encompasses northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, southern Turkey, parts of Iran, and, according to Western officials and leading international experts, is where ISIS earns the bulk of its money.”

Pres. Obama has stated that his “strategy” is to “degrade and defeat” the Islamic state, but defeat of the Islamic State cannot be achieved solely by military means and, most especially, not by Western military actions such as air strikes—even if given the cover of a coalition containing Arab nations; nor can military operations decrease the spread of beliefs upon which radical Islam is based. Only moderate Muslims can stop the spread of radical Islam and the intolerant Wahhabi form upon which radical Islamic ideology is founded. For the West to attempt to do so by military means simply will exacerbate the problem and serve to create—and recruit—additional Islamists.

More importantly, the presence of Western forces alleviates the necessity that the regional

powers take responsibility for resolving what basically is a religious and ethnic war that owes its existence not only to such divisions but to poor governance. These powers have the capability of creating a new and prosperous Middle East but, to do so, they will have to confront the social and religious contradictions in their own societies. If moderate Muslims continue to shirk their responsibility to deal with these internal contradictions, the Islamic State and its ilk will cause enormous suffering and death even if, in the end, they fail in their ultimate goal of establishing a caliphate to replace existing national states.

To formulate an effective strategy to implement these basic policy goals, it first must be understood that the recent coming into being of the Islamic State, and indeed Islamic terrorism in general, has at its root the reaction of the peoples of the region to the fall of the great Muslim empires of the past, the last of which was the Ottoman Empire that was dismembered by the European colonial powers after 1918.

Ottoman blowback

Following World War I, the foreign concept of nationalism was imposed on the Ottoman territory by these powers by means of the then-secret Sykes-Picot agreement. The identities of the peoples of the region were, however, never primarily with the nation-states created in the interests of the colonial powers, but rather with their religion, sect, tribe, and family. The nation-state was born out of the unique history of Europe at a time often associated with the Treaty of Westphalia. There are no deep roots for the concept of the nation-state in the Islamic world. Indeed, the Islamic State views the act of creating the states under the Sykes-Picot agreement as blasphemous.

The strategy that will be proposed here might be characterized as a form of neo-containment. It is based on the idea first proposed by diplomat George Kennan many years ago. It has two components, one military and the other diplomatic.

The military component consists of forming an alliance of forces along the periphery of the area containing Syria and Iraq to prevent further expansion of the Islamic State. One would have to form an alliance composed of Egypt, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. The conflict with Iran over their nuclear program should be compartmentalized and must not be allowed to negate their participation.

The U.S. could use its good offices to help form the alliance and give military support of a limited nature only if requested. Egypt probably would be quite supportive given its history with the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey, which is moving towards becoming an Islamic state itself, could be more of a problem, but has no love for the Islamic State and may be willing to participate if it would ease its Kurdish dilemma.

If one looks at a map, it is clear that Iran must be involved, and Iran has every reason to participate, but the alliance structure must be crafted very carefully given the Sunni-Shi'a split in Islam. Jordan almost certainly would be willing to be a part, as would Saudi Arabia. Setting up such a group may be difficult but, given the rise of the Islamic State and the circumstances on the ground, it may be doable.

It must be understood that the religious and ethnic conflicts on the ground only can be resolved by Muslims, not the Western powers, and, for this reason, the only “boots on the ground” must be from Egypt, Syria—if that is possible given the divisions there—Jordan, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, with possibly some participation from Turkey and Iran.

The diplomatic part of this strategy will be far more difficult to implement. First, one must work to curtail the funding for radical Islamic groups and the spread of the intolerant Wahhabi form of Islam from the oil-rich Gulf region. The difficulty arises because it means forcing Saudi Arabia, in particular, to redefine the 18th-century agreement between the Saudi family and the Wahhabi clerics that even today governs the power-sharing arrangement between the Al-Saud family and the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia.

One also must address the Muslim population of the Middle East directly by the creation of a special organization based on the idea behind the Voice of America—but very different operationally and in its focus. Effective diplomacy also will require revisiting the 1945 Bitter Lake agreement between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia.

Jean-Charles Brisard, an international specialist on terrorist financing, in his 2002 report to the United Nations President of the Security Council, described the channel through which such funding travels: “Saudi Arabia opened an avenue for terrorism financing through the traditional Zakat, a legal almsgiving conceived as a way for purification by the Prophet that turned into a financial tool for terrorists . . . through a web of charities and companies acting as fronts, with the notable use of Islamic banking institutions.”

Sumeet Chugani, in his 2009 article in the *North Carolina Journal of International Law and Commercial Regulation*, writes with regard to funding for Al-Qaeda: “With lucrative oil revenues and self-survival at odds, how can a nation risk upheaval from its citizens on the basis of strictly adhering to U.S.-based policies that will place a stronghold on Muslim charities and benevolent individuals? This political reality causes the Saudi Arabian government to take a nearly bipolar position: it is forced to appear to be confronting terrorism and terrorist financing by writing laws, but must turn its cheek if these laws are broken in order to appease radical clerics, its citizenry, and Al-Qaeda. The politics seen in Saudi Arabia are echoed throughout the entire Middle East, as well as in other Muslim nations throughout the world. The thin line between

regulating religion and avoiding social upheaval forces the government to loosen its grasp on those exploiting Zakat for terror.” Thus, stopping the funding from Saudi Arabia means change in their basic social structure.

Stopping oil money from flowing to radical Islamists will be difficult and require serious financial regulatory change and strong disincentives—and diplomacy. A strong disincentive that would strengthen diplomatic efforts would be to put the Bitter Lake agreement on the table. Doing so would give the U.S. a strong foundation for diplomatic efforts to force Saudi Arabia to curtail its funding for the spread of its intolerant form of Islam and to what the West calls terrorist groups. Even then, the probability of success is slight.

Turning to the public communications problem, the most effective effort to counter the spread of radical Islamic ideas would be to create new radio and television broadcasts that would air to all of the Middle East and beyond. One might call it the Voice of Islam. The purpose would be to give those Muslims who believe in Islamic diversity a state where religion is not in control of how people live and where people should have a say in how they are governed, a platform to discuss these fundamental issues in the Arabic language within the Islamic world. It would form a counter to the now relatively sophisticated public relations efforts of the Islamic State and others that oppose these ideas.

The establishment and funding of such facilities by Europe and the U.S. should not be viewed as a propaganda effort. It is far more radical than that. The intent is to encourage Muslims to reexamine the foundations of their religion and think about how they want it to evolve if it is to become consistent with the modern world. Today, there is some discussion in the Muslim world of these issues, albeit very restricted in scope because of the nature of the current regimes and the lack of openness in the educational systems and media. Establishing a platform for anonymous discussion could lead to a true Arab awakening in the Middle East.

Articles written by Muslims who believe in a separation of mosque and state and the right of people to have a role in determining how they are governed also must be a part of this effort. They should be published in print in Arabic wherever possible and online to reach the widest possible audience. Online discussion groups, again in Arabic, also could play an important part.

This will not be easy for people to do given the intolerance to these ideas in the Muslim world. They will be risking—as was the case for outspoken writers Salman Rushdie and Ayaan Hirsi Ali—their lives, but it is crucial that writers take that risk. After all, the future of Islam is at stake. Do Muslims want to live as members of a modern society or in one from the distant past as envisioned and being brought into being by the Islamic State?

The Islamic State represents a formidable

and sophisticated enemy. By pursuing the policy of neo-containment, with its twin goals of curtailing the funding for the spread of intolerant Islam and establishing a means for moderate Muslims to discuss and spread their point of view freely, we have the best chance of preserving our own national interests while spreading the benefits of the idea of tolerance without the Western powers having to confront the Islamic State directly in a “war” they cannot win.

The Islamic State is committed to the Wahhabi form of Islam. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the self-proclaimed caliph of the Islamic State as well as others of its leaders are, according to *The New York Times*, “open and clear about their almost exclusive commitment to the Wahhabi movement of Sunni Islam. The group circulates images of Wahhabi religious textbooks from Saudi Arabia in the schools it controls. Videos from the group’s territory have shown Wahhabi texts plastered on the sides of an official missionary van. . . . Adhering to Wahhabi literalism, the Islamic State disdains other Islamists who reason by analogy to changing context—including the Muslim Brotherhood; its controversial mid [20th]-century thinker Sayed Qutb; and the contemporary militants his writing later inspired, like Ayman al-Zawahiri of Al-Qaeda. Islamic State ideologues often deem anyone who supports an elected or secular government to be an unbeliever, even Islamists, and subject to beheading.” Democracy is an impiety.

Wahhabi friction

The Wahhabi strain of Islam has, for many years, been a source of friction in the Muslim world. In the early 19th century, the Turco-Egyptian army, sent by the pasha of Egypt, defeated the Wahhabi empire of the time and confined Wahhabism to its native Nejd, the large plateau in the central portion of what presently is known as Saudi Arabia. While Wahhabism again played a political role in the mid 19th and 20th centuries, it now is flourishing as never before because of the Western dependence on Gulf oil and the heavy financial support from the Saudis. The spread of the Wahhabi form of Islam is a major factor in the worldwide spread of intolerance in the Islamic faith. The Saudis object to the term Wahhabism, believing their form of Islam to be the only true Islam. However, if Wahhabism is to be acknowledged as a distinct branch of Islamic thought, they prefer this school to be called Salafism, which refers to the beliefs and practices of the earliest followers of Islam.

Journalist Elizabeth Rubin, who wrote about the Saudi-Wahhabi agreement in 2004, put it this way: “The Saud dynasty and the Wahhabi clerics mutually reinforce each other’s authority. It’s been that way since the 18th century, when Muhammad Ibn Saud, a tribal ruler in the untamed deserts of central Arabia, struck a bargain with Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, a puritanical religious reformer. . . .

That religious-political covenant has endured and is the source of today’s Saudi system. The royal family rules over politics, security, and the economy. The clerics hold sway over things social and cultural while preaching loyalty to the ruler as one of the highest duties of the good Muslim.”

The problem the West now faces is not only intolerant Wahhabi Islam, but that Islam as a whole never has accepted the essence of the Enlightenment which, as put in the essay “The Counter-Enlightenment” by historian Isaiah Berlin, “is the proclamation of the autonomy of reason and the methods of the natural sciences, based on observation as the sole reliable method of knowledge, and the consequent rejection of the authority of revelation, sacred writings and their accepted interpreters, tradition, prescription, and every form of non-rational and transcendent source of knowledge.”

Islam does not accede to the notion that there should be a separation between religion and how people are ruled, or that the people could have a say in the laws that govern them. Islamic diversity is not accepted; the division between the Shi’a and the Sunnis—a fundamental fault line in Islam—runs very deep.

The West tries to make a clear division between radical Islamists and moderate Muslims but, rather than a clear division, there is a continuous spectrum. Simplistically identifying organizations like the Islamic State to be terrorist groups leads to poor policy formulation and ineffective strategies. What we are seeing in the chaos of the Middle East is a set of religious and ethnic wars, a battle for the heart and minds of the people. We find it horrible that the Islamic State beheads people. They are not alone; beheading is the usual form of execution in Saudi Arabia, which executed—according to the Saudi government and Amnesty International—some 26 people in 2011 and around 80 in 2012, and carried out some 345 public beheadings between 2007-10, many more people than the Islamic State. The most important difference, one that has led to much press coverage, is that beheading is being imposed on Westerners by ISIS.

Islamists find fertile ground in the current chaos to advance their goal of restoration of the caliphate and a purely Islamic way of life. They see this as the only means of returning to the greatness of the past—a past that, unlike the peoples of the West who often do not know their own history, Muslims have not forgotten.

The origin of the Bitter Lake agreement dates back to the end of World War II. Following the Yalta Conference with Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill in February 1945, Pres. Franklin Roosevelt met with King ibn Saud aboard the *USS Quincy* in the Great Bitter Lake of the Suez Canal. It is widely believed, although there is scant direct evidence, that Roosevelt and ibn Saud concluded a secret agreement—or at least an understanding—that the U.S. would guarantee the military se-

curity of Saudi Arabia in return for the secure access to oil at a reasonable price.

What evidence there is apparently comes from a lost English version of a secret account written by Col. William Eddy, who had been a translator for both parties at Bitter Lake. If copies exist in Saudi Arabia, they have not been released. Whatever the case, the agreement as stated has, in fact, been historically true since then, although it has been under threat since Saudi Arabia joined the oil embargo in 1973 when OPEC called the U.S. a “principal hostile country.”

In February 1946, Kennan, then the deputy chief of the U.S. mission in Moscow, wrote what has come to be known as the Long Tele-

gram, which was published in 1947 as the “X-article” in *Foreign Affairs*. In it, he stated that the only way to deal with Moscow was by “a policy of firm containment designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world.”

Not surprisingly, Kennan’s intention was misunderstood. He went to great lengths to disclaim the view “that containment was a matter of stationing military forces around the Soviet borders and preventing any outbreak of Soviet military aggressiveness.”

Writing in 1967, he maintained: “In the years that have passed since that time, the myth of

the ‘doctrine of containment’ has never fully lost its spell. . . . What I said in the X-article was not intended as a doctrine. I am afraid that when I think about foreign policy, I do not think in terms of doctrines. I think in terms of principles.” ★

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Indecisiveness at the Top

The President dithers while the world burns.

BY JONATHAN W. EMORD

Ask any military leader how best to defeat an enemy like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and he will recite the need for use of overwhelming force and the element of surprise. Pres. Barack Obama’s strategy on dealing with ISIS is precisely the opposite. He proceeds at a snail’s pace and telegraphs to the enemy what he will do and what he will not. As in so many instances throughout his presidency, Obama is weak, indecisive, and inconsistent.

It is in the direct interest of the U.S. to eliminate (not “degrade”) any foreign citizen, group, or government that sacrifices American lives. Failure to use maximum force and speed in accomplishing that mission reveals two things to a dedicated enemy: weakness and opportunity.

By proceeding with less than overwhelming force and tipping his hand, the President has placed Americans in general, and the U.S. military in particular, at far greater risk. By inaction and halting action, Obama has invited our opponents to engage in continuous acts of terror against Americans and to undertake countermeasures that make eradicating those opponents much more difficult.

Whenever terrorists kill even one American anywhere in the world, they are, by that act alone, at war with our nation. In each such instance, we need to be willing to do whatever it takes with alacrity, surprise, and overwhelming force. No one on the face of the Earth should doubt the U.S.’s resolve or ability to eliminate those who threaten its existence.

This country possesses the means to crush ISIS and to ferret out and eliminate every last one of its members and affiliates, but our military requires maximum flexibility to attain that objective. Commanders in the field need the assurance that Congress and the President fully and consistently are backing them and will give them whatever arms, materials, and manpower they require. Indeed, rather than have his chief of staff admit in response to questions from the media that we are in a state of war with ISIS, Pres. Obama should have appeared before Congress months ago and sought a formal declaration of war, as the Constitution designates.

Rather than depend on ISIS advances to dictate our responses, we must dominate the battle, influence the course of the struggle, and leave ISIS with no ability to discern precisely what kind of force is going to be applied, to predict whether any location provides a safe haven, and be afforded no escape from obliteration.

Pres. Obama has chosen to refrain from applying maximum force against ISIS in favor of inviting allies to assume a greater role in the struggle. That is a serious mistake. It is in the vital national interest of the U.S. to eliminate all threats to American people at home and abroad. We cannot shirk that responsibility or assign it to others. It is our irreducible duty, and it is the essential task that every commander in chief must perform.

Consequently, rather than “lead from behind,” which is not to lead at all, the President must unilaterally have American forces destroy ISIS completely, along with those who give ISIS aid and support wherever they exist in the world. No U.S. soldier or commander in the field, and no American now held by ISIS, should be left to doubt for a single minute the complete commitment of the U.S. to use everything in its power to eradicate ISIS and all who support and aid its efforts.

America’s allies need only understand the unambiguous intent of the U.S., and they may be invited to complement the mission but not define it nor detract from it. Sadly for America, Pres. Obama is not up to that task. Over his two terms in office, he has dithered away opportunity after opportunity to permit our military to achieve its objectives, and he has increased the cost and difficulty of doing so. Only force of public opinion has brought him to the present stage, where he at long last has committed to using air power to “degrade” ISIS. It is not nearly enough.

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White House photo