

The limits to fighting Islamic State The Korea Times Gareth Evans 29 September 2014

CANBERRA □ There is a long history of misconceived and over-reaching foreign military intervention in the Middle East, and it is to be hoped that U.S. President Barack Obama's decision to wage war against the Islamic State will not prove to be another. No terrorist group more richly deserves to be destroyed outright than these marauding, genocidal jihadists. But as the U.S.-led mission is currently conceived and described, it is not clear whether its objectives are achievable at acceptable costs in terms of time, money, and lives.

The basic problem is that the Islamic State's territorial gains are being approached from three completely different perspectives, demanding three different types of operational responses. There is the humanitarian mission to protect civilian populations in Iraq and Syria from mass-atrocity crimes. There is the need to protect other states' citizens from Islamic State terrorism. And there is the desire to restore states' integrity and stability in the region.

(...)

It is obvious that Western-led military operations cannot by themselves re-establish the territorial integrity of Iraq or Syria, or restore wider regional stability. Military intervention may help to hold the line against Iraq's further disintegration and the spread of the Islamic State cancer into countries like Jordan. But if 150,000 U.S. troops could not stabilize Iraq in the absence of an inclusive and competent government, the limited measures on offer now simply will not suffice. And we should know by now that any Western military intervention with overtly political, rather than clearly humanitarian, objectives runs a real risk of inflaming sectarian sentiment.

(...)

Moreover, airstrikes in Syria without the government's consent or Security Council authorization will be manifestly in breach of the [United Nations Charter](#). The prospect of Islamic State-inspired terrorist attacks in the U.S. are not remotely real or imminent enough to justify reliance on the self-defense exception. Hearts and minds matter in counterterrorism, and they become harder to win whenever the US and its supporters embark upon military action clearly in breach of international law. The slow buy-in so far of Arab states to Obama's campaign attests to the nervousness that many of them feel on all of these grounds.

By far the most defensible rationale for military action is □ and has been from the outset □ the humanitarian objective: the responsibility to protect populations at risk of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other major crimes against humanity and war crimes. I have argued that all of the conditions necessary in this context have been satisfied, and this will continue to be the case so long as the Islamic State maintains its horrifying modus operandi.

Operating within this framework, U.S. and coalition forces would clearly be entitled to disrupt, degrade, and seek to destroy the Islamic State's capability in a way that would also serve the counter-terrorist objective. But the primary objective for intervention would remain unequivocally humanitarian, and as such would be much less susceptible to anti-Western blowback than any

other mission. There may even be considerable international tolerance for some carefully defined and limited action in Syria in the event of an obvious imminent humanitarian threat.

If the campaign against the Islamic State is defined and conducted with humanitarian protection as its primary and overwhelming objective, it should succeed not only in stopping further atrocities, but also in making large inroads into curbing the wider terrorist threat at its source. If the West strays from that primary goal, the enterprise is likely to end in tears, like so many others in the Middle East.

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