



Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on August 27, 2014

Mission Creep in Iraq

There are several reasons not to intervene militarily in another country's conflict, even modestly. One is the potential for mission creep.

We already could detect the signs of mission creep in Iraq. Now, with the stepped-up U.S. airstrikes after the Islamic State's horrific execution of American reporter Jim Foley, the signs are clearer than ever.

On August 7, Barack Obama said that the U.S. airstrikes in northern Iraq were to protect Americans from the Islamic State's threat to the Kurdish city of Erbil, where the U.S. government has a consulate. He also said Americans would be protected anywhere in Iraq, including Baghdad. Finally, he said airstrikes would be part of a humanitarian mission to save "thousands — perhaps tens of thousands" — of Yazidis who were trapped and desperate on Mount Sinjar.

But in later statements Obama intimated that he had other objectives.

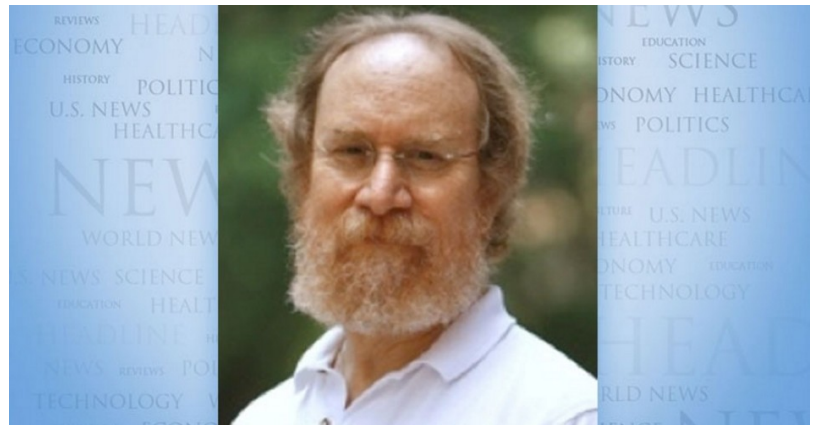
On August 9 he said, "We will continue to provide military assistance and advice to the Iraqi government and Kurdish forces as they battle these terrorists, so that the terrorists cannot establish a permanent safe haven." That is much broader than the mission first outlined. Will American ground troops be introduced next if airpower won't suffice to root out the Islamic State? Obama says no, but only a fool would take that promise to the bank.

He added, "Wherever and whenever U.S. personnel and facilities are threatened, it's my obligation, my responsibility as commander in chief, to make sure that they are protected." Of course one way to protect personnel is to remove them from the war zone. But Obama will have none of that: "And we're not moving our embassy any time soon. We're not moving our consulate any time soon. And that means that, given the challenging security environment, we're going to maintain vigilance and ensure that our people are safe."

That, I submit, could easily transform into a justification for a far broader mission.

We can see this with the American airstrikes that helped Kurdish and Iraqi forces retake the Mosul Dam, although Obama spun it differently. In a letter to Congress he wrote, "The mission is consistent with the president's directive that the U.S. military protect U.S. personnel and facilities in Iraq, since the failure of the Mosul Dam could threaten the lives of large numbers of civilians and threaten U.S. personnel and facilities — including the U.S. embassy in Baghdad."

Obama sent the letter apparently to comply with the 1973 War Powers Resolution, which requires a





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president to notify Congress within 48 hours after the U.S. military is sent into hostilities. After 60 days, Obama will need an explicit congressional authorization — except that in the past Congress never sought to enforce the resolution when a president violated it, as Obama did when he used airpower to help overthrow the government of Muammar Qadaffi in Libya in 2011. (Obama simply claimed that the American pilots flying warplanes and bombing government installations were not involved in hostilities.)

In another sign of mission creep, Reuters reports that “the governor of Iraq’s Anbar province in the Sunni heartland said he has asked for and secured U.S. support in the battle against Islamic State militants because opponents of the group may not have the stamina for a long fight.” Anbar province was the location of some of the toughest resistance to the American occupation and the scene of two U.S. attacks on Fallujah in April and November 2004. As Reuters put it, “The United States mounted its biggest offensive of the occupation against a staggering variety of Islamist militants in the city of Fallujah in Anbar [in November 2004], with its soldiers experiencing some of the fiercest combat since the Vietnam War.” U.S. forces were reported to have used cluster bombs and white phosphorus artillery shells, while other war crimes were alleged against American troops.

The safe bet is that the mission in Iraq will continue to grow. Few people believe that airpower alone will defeat the justly abhorred Islamic State or that the Iraqi military can get the job done on the ground. So Obama could be tempted to up the ante in order to prevent any touted gains from being squandered.

Mission creep is only one reason why intervention in foreign wars is never a good idea.

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