



Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on September 28, 2014

Will American Ground Troops Be Sent to Fight ISIS?

With the United States dropping bombs on  yet another Muslim country, we might benefit from a close look at President Obama's anti-Islamic State strategy.

Obama and his spokespeople are always quick to make two points: first, that no American ground forces will be sent into combat against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and second, that the United States will merely be part, albeit a leading part, of a broad coalition of Arab and NATO countries.

The Obama administration's emphasis on these points strongly suggests that Americans would not support a war against ISIS fought solely by the United States with American ground troops as part of the effort.

In his speech at MacDill Air Force base on September 17, Obama [said](#),

As your Commander-in-Chief, I will not commit you and the rest of our Armed Forces to fighting another ground war in Iraq. After a decade of massive ground deployments, it is more effective to use our unique capabilities in support of partners on the ground so they can secure their own countries' futures. And that's the only solution that will succeed over the long term.

Although Obama was at an air force base, he was probably talking more to the general public than to the assembled troops, many members of which may be disappointed in Obama's pledge because combat experience is a valued résumé item.

He went on:

We'll use our air power. We will train and equip our partners. We will advise them and we will assist them. We will lead a broad coalition of countries who have a stake in this fight. Because this is not simply America versus [ISIS] — this is the people of the region fighting against [ISIS].

Obama keeps saying that this is not just an American fight and that ground troops will not be necessary. Yet he also insists that ISIS threatens Americans in the United States. That naturally raises this question: what if the local ground troops that Obama counts on — the Iraqi and Kurdish armies and the alleged moderate Syrian rebels — aren't up to the job? Many pro-war commentators think they are not, and no one thinks air power alone can defeat ISIS.

The typical administration response is that they will be up to the job, so that event need not be planned for. When Joint Chiefs Chairman Martin Dempsey told the Senate that in such an event he would recommend the dispatch of American ground troops, all hell broke loose because he had departed from the script.

The administration's evasion of this important question is ominous. Even a confused policy embodies a logic. If Obama (despite the evidence) declares ISIS a significant domestic threat, and if the Iraqi, Kurdish, and Syrian forces fail, won't he be pushed by the logic of his policy to send in American ground forces? After scaring Americans about ISIS and investing so much political capital, who can imagine him calling off the airstrikes and withdrawing?

As for Obama's emphasis on coalition building, let's not be fooled. This is a U.S.-led operation, and that is how the inhabitants of the bombed territories will see it. ISIS recruitment will soar.



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But even if other coalition members shouldered most of the burden, why should Americans feel any better about the operation? The objection to a new U.S. war in the Middle East should not be that America would go it alone. Rather, it's that America cannot police the world without doing a variety of harms. Bringing a posse of nations along doesn't change that.

Obama tips his hand about who will bear the burden when he rhapsodizes about American exceptionalism. At MacDill he said,

[I]t is America that has the unique capability to mobilize against an organization like [ISIS]....

[W]hen the world is threatened, when the world needs help, it calls on America....

[T]here just aren't a lot of other folks who can perform in the same ways—in fact, there are none. And there are some things only we can do. There are some capabilities only we have.

In declaring war against the ISIS insurgency (with no congressional declaration), Obama has set the country on a course of intervention in two Muslim civil wars. It can't turn out well.

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