The U.S. Dilemma in Iraq

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In a further escalation of their activities in the Middle East the insurgent group Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIS or ISIL for short), a spin-off from al-Qaeda, but much more extreme, took over with little resistance Mosul, the second largest city of the country, then Tikrit, and now it is on its way to Baghdad, leaving behind countless atrocities.

Its aim is to consolidate its power in Iraq in order to establish a caliphate in the region, based on the use of strict Islamic laws. In this conflict a gathering of deep and irreconcilable differences are being played: the lifestyle and power of the West and its allies against Islamic fundamentalism, but also the permanent struggle between the Shiite Islam that dominates Iraq and the Sunni minority, which this group represents.

ISIS was born in 2004, the early days of the Iraq war from the seed of several insurgent groups and claimed their alliance with al-Qaeda. It was responsible for much of the violence during the
The U.S. presence in the country and after Americans troops went away in 2011. Its first leader, the Jordanian militant Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed during an air strike in 2006.

The group became strong in Syria, where it fights against Bashar al-Assad and it shows the highest levels in terms of organization and territorial expansion, along with the al-Nusra Front. Under its current leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the group tried to merge and control al-Nusra in 2013, but the move failed because al-Qaeda did not endorse it. Finally ISIS cut relations with al-Qaeda in February 2014.

On its way to the capital of Iraq, ISIS is getting the support of former Saddam Hussein’s Sunni followers and troops. Clearly the current resources of the Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki are very short to contain the situation and therefore it is very likely the intervention, direct or indirect, of other extra-national actors.

The crisis has questioned the way the pro-Shiite al-Maliki government has managed the country since the end of the transitional government in 2006, and especially the way their actions rather than moderate them, have deepened the differences between the Shiites - who represent about 65 percent of the population and the minority of Sunnis, Kurds and others. Indeed, during the al-Maliki administration there have been abuses toward such minorities that have sparked strong resentment.
The U.S. government, which still maintains a significant number of personnel deployed in the Middle East (around 35,000), is closely monitoring the situation. It has expressed the intention to support the government of Iraq, once that government can offer a plan of action which is still missing.

However, the possibility of a new American intervention in Iraq poses big dilemmas. Firstly, the United States would help thwart those who have long supported in Syria, in the struggle against al-Assad.

Secondly, the U.S. participation could further deepen the sectarian strife in the country if it is perceived as validating the abuses against minorities carried out by the al-Maliki government. On the opposite side, a wish to defend what was so costly for the U.S. in terms of casualties, wounded, distress and economic burden could also influence the U.S. government's decisions.

Despite these contradictions, the current mood of the internal fronts —in the United States and its ally states— tend to be against sending troops to the field after the disappointing results of the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. It makes it unlikely a new direct incursion in these terms. This posture was recently confirmed by President Obama, even though several hundreds of marines have been sent to protect American diplomatic facilities in Baghdad.

Nevertheless, it is still doubtful that any support to the Iraqi government “from outside”, even including air raids, could be sufficient to resume the control of the country. This opens other different possibilities for direct action on the ground.

Iran, with 90 percent of population belonging to the Shi’a branch of Islam, may bring into play its military power including its elite forces, along with allies such as Hezbollah. Although the government of Hassan Rouhani has declared at a press conference that “this time” will not take direct action, it stated that Iran will respond positively to any request for assistance from the government of al-Maliki. However, there are unofficial versions giving account that Iran would have sent several units of the Revolutionary Guard to missions beyond the mere protection of its borders from a potential ISIS breakthrough.

Noticeably, the conflict in Iraq, which has caused more than one million displaced according to the United Nations, has put the United States and Iran on the same side, while they still maintain divergent positions concerning other critical affairs, such as Syria and the Iran’s nuclear program.

In this sense, the U.S. has promoted with determination a variety of sanctions on the Islamic Republic. In addition, they are meeting from this Monday 16 in Vienna for a new round of nuclear diplomatic negotiations with Russia, France, China, UK and Germany (the P5 +1).

This complex situation opens up new opportunities for the consolidation of the Iran’s regional leadership. The big question here is if the United States, its allies and Iran will be in condition to cooperatively work to control the expansion of the most extreme and bloody Islamic groups throughout Middle East. It would be desirable, at least in this case.

From the Western point of view, such option should be carefully evaluated, including its many short and long range consequences, in multiple dimensions. It should be done, not only by the U.S. and its allies, but also by other powers which could exercise their influence among the contenders.

On the other hand such powers should learn from sad experiences, to prevent that their strategies, covert or not, in no circumstances and for no reason could include support or endorsement of any group or contestant action based on intolerance, terror and suffering of citizens in any part of the world.

What is said above should be seen as pragmatism rather than idealism, since the results of these practices in the past have been with no exception, highly counterproductive.