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## **Events in Iraq, Syria and Russia further stoke debate about Obama's worldview**

*di Zachary A. Goldfarb*

The week began with the breaking of the siege of Mount Sinjar in Iraq, thanks to U.S. bombing runs, and ended with the public beheading of American journalist James Foley in Syria and renewed Russian aggression in Ukraine.

The juxtaposition of military success and public human failure has caused a sense of whiplash around President Obama's foreign policy and further stoked the debate about his worldview.

Obama's detractors revived criticism that his foreign policy is based on retreat from the world, typified by the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq three years ago, a lack of direct action in Syria and an economics-first approach to driving Russia's military back from Ukraine.

His supporters argue that his approach has been consistent with his strategy of returning the United States — after post-Sept. 11 wars — to a foreign policy built around economic engagement rather than military intervention. The question, though, is whether he is contradicting the pledge embraced in his 2009 Nobel Prize lecture: “to face the world as it is,” not as he would like it to be.

“He thought he could change the tenor more easily than he could, and I think he thought the world would be more responsive to his desires than the world has proven to be,” said Jon B. Alterman, senior vice president at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. “Now he faces the criticism that, whereas the Bush administration embarked on a war of choice in Iraq, he embarks on a series of skirmishes that are reactive and not of his choosing.”

Obama wanted to close the book on 9/11 America, pledging to end the nation's “permanent war” footing. That has meant not only taking on the legacy of the attacks but also convincing worried allies in Europe and the Middle East that the country is not in retreat after more than a decade of war.

In place of the large military deployments, Obama has relied on smaller operations to manage, rather than resolve, many of the conflicts that have arisen during his time in office. The attempted rescue of Foley earlier this year from a camp deep inside Syria stands as the most recent example of that approach.

But smaller has not translated into peace or greater American influence.

After pulling troops from Iraq on the eve of his reelection year, Obama is now overseeing a military operation to protect Iraqi civilians threatened by the Islamic State, secure U.S. personnel in Kurdish Iraq, and advise the country's U.S.-trained army.

Leaving behind an Iraq dominated by an organization al-Qaeda once disavowed as too extreme would cloud his legacy as the president who ended that war — and would bequeath his successor a difficult national security.

The Islamic State emerged from the pit of Syria's civil war, overrunning the blurry border with Iraq and leading U.S. civilian and military policymakers to consider the two conflicts as one.

Obama called for the end of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government years ago, yet his primary goal has been to eliminate a chemical weapons cache that could be used against U.S. targets or allies if extremist groups take control of them.

The question of how best to roll back the Islamic State's territorial gains — short of a boots-on-the-ground deployment Obama has ruled out — is one that he and the Pentagon must deal with.

“Containing the threat is the great challenge of the final 21 / 2 years of the Obama presidency,” said Rep. Adam Smith (Wash.), the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee.

Senior administration officials say that as they confront the challenges in Syria and Iraq, however, they are unwilling to sacrifice either of Obama's guiding principles.

“Iraq and Syria are very much within the goal preventing the threat of terrorism from emanating from outside the United States,” Ben Rhodes, deputy national security adviser, said last week. “That's a core interest.”

At the same time, he said, Obama is not reconsidering his view that Iraq — and Afghanistan — must be primarily responsible for their own security.

“The basic premise still holds that we're transitioning from wars in which the United States was on the ground in big numbers fighting to secure Afghanistan and Iraq to Afghans and Iraqis fighting on the ground to secure their own countries,” Rhodes said.

While Obama and his advisers see consistency in his actions, analysts and some supporters see more of a patchwork.

“This president has ignored the threat for a long period of time, and now we're paying the price,” Sen. John McCain (R) told his home-town newspaper, the Arizona Republic. “The more [Obama] delays and the more he acts incrementally, the more [the Islamic State] adjusts and the more difficult they will become.”

Obama has contributed to the confusion, occasionally turning to vague phrasing and metaphors to explain his foreign policy.

Even former secretary of state Hillary Rodham Clinton said recently that “Don’t do stupid stuff” — the president’s latest foreign policy credo — is not an “organizing principle.”

Obama recently told New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman that he learned an important lesson from the U.S.-led intervention in Libya when, after the death of Moammar Gaddafi, the United States and allies didn’t do more to rebuild the North African country, which is engulfed in an extremist uprising.

Now when he considers intervention, he always asks, “Do we have an answer [for] the day after?” he said.

At the same time, Obama said he did not regret the intervention in Libya, raising questions about why that was worth direct U.S. military action and Syria is not.

“Obama made the decision not to intervene [in Syria] and not to provide the support that the moderate opposition was asking for,” said David J. Kramer, a senior State Department official in the George W. Bush administration and president of Freedom House.

“The problem for Obama is he often sets up these false choices between essentially doing nothing and sending in the 82nd battalion,” Kramer said. “And there are gradations about what one can do, including providing military support to forces that we should be supporting.”

Aaron David Miller, a longtime Middle East expert at the Wilson Center, said the Libya experience was low risk for Obama, with support for the multinational operation from the U.N. Security Council and the Arab League.

“This was a humanitarian disaster reduced to a scale that Barack Obama could get his arms around,” Miller said. “He could actually preempt, prevent and rescue a large number of people.”

Adding to Obama’s challenges has been the crisis in Ukraine, which has deeply wounded U.S. relations with Russia, and the conflict in Gaza, which has dashed the administration’s hopes of securing peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Administration officials say Obama has put a lot on the line in both places, sanctioning Russian leaders and sending his secretary of state, John F. Kerry, to invest tremendous amounts of time trying to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement.

But current and former administration officials see a big difference between what’s happening in Iraq and Syria and what’s happening in Ukraine and Gaza. Iraq and Syria fit into a framework of potentially threatening Americans. Solving the crises in Ukraine and Gaza appeals to U.S. principles of democracy and diplomacy, but they do not pose direct threats.

“Nations don’t have permanent friends and enemies anymore,” said Lawrence Korb, a national security analyst. “They have permanent interests, and that’s why it’s hard to get a principled one-word container to put everything in.”

In the end, Obama's legacy might be defined by an issue that has lost attention as new crises have emerged: preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.