

November 23, 2015

Our last post covered the president and some of his foreign policy failures. We were looking for other subjects, but events intrude. Of course our favorites have found fault, but today's post is bookended by Ron Fournier of the National Journal and David Remnick of The New Yorker. Two more reliably left/liberal types could hardly be found. So we post again on the empty suit in the White House.

Fournier is first with his essay titled - Leaderless.

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In July 2013, six months into his second term, I wrote a column that questioned whether Obama would fulfill his enormous potential, whether he even cared anymore about his promises to change Washington, whether he could write the modern rules of the presidency and build a new bully pulpit. I asked, "What if Obama can't lead?"

I now have my answer.

Next we have the weekly USA Today column by **Glenn Reynolds** who is a law professor in Tennessee and blogs at Instapundit.

When President Obama spoke in Washington about the terrorist attacks in Paris, he was curiously unable to raise much passion. The passion came out only later in Turkey when he started attacking Republicans. Those attacks continued throughout that week, with charges that people who oppose resettling Syrian refugees in America are somehow xenophobic haters who are not in touch with American values.

There are two problems with this line of attack for President Obama. The first is that it isn't true: The opponents of refugee resettlement aren't xenophobic haters, but ordinary Americans —

and, in fact, include roughly a fourth of the House Democratic Caucus, who voted with Republicans to limit refugee resettlement.

The second problem is that Obama himself is the source of the Syrian refugee crisis. But don't take it from me. Listen to foreign-affairs expert Walter Russell Mead, an original Obama supporter himself: "To see the full cynicism of the Obama approach to the refugee issue," Mead wrote in *The American Interest*, "one has only to ask President Obama's least favorite question: Why is there a Syrian refugee crisis in the first place?"

Mead continued, "Obama's own policy decisions — allowing Assad to convert peaceful demonstrations into an increasingly ugly civil war, refusing to declare safe havens and no fly zones — were instrumental in creating the Syrian refugee crisis. This crisis is in large part the direct consequence of President Obama's decision to stand aside and watch Syria burn. For him to try and use a derisory and symbolic program to allow 10,000 refugees into the United States in order to posture as more caring than those evil Jacksonian rednecks out in the benighted sticks is one of the most cynical, cold-blooded, and nastily divisive moves an American president has made in a long time." ...

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The holiday is over now, and the bills are due. The next president will find undoing this damage a tough job.

And David Goldman in his Spengler guise at Asia Times essays on Vladimir Putin - the Leader of the Free World.

... In 2008 I endorsed Putin for the American presidency, in jest, of course. Now he is leading America's president by the nose and directing the anti-terror efforts of France and Germany. No one could have anticipated Putin's sudden ascent to global leadership during the past several weeks. Russia is in the position of a vulture fund, buying the distressed assets of the Western alliance for pennies on the dollar. Faced with an American president who will not fight, and his European allies whose military capacity has shrunk to near insignificance, the Russian Federation seized the helm with the deployment of a mere three dozen war planes and an expeditionary force of 5,000 men. One searches in vain through diplomatic history to find another case where so much was done with so little. As an American, I feel a deep humiliation at this turn of events, assuaged only slightly by Schadenfreude at the even deeper humiliation of America's foreign policy establishment.

The world runs by different rules than it did just a few weeks ago. Putin has answered the question I asked in September ("Vladimir Putin: Spoiler or Statesman?"). President Obama declared at the Nov. 17 Antalya summit, "From the start, I've also welcomed Moscow going after ISIL... We're going to wait to see whether, in fact, Russia does end up devoting attention to targets that are ISIL targets, and if it does so, then that's something we welcome." After this week's Russian and French airstrikes on ISIS' stronghold in Raqqa, that is a moot point. It seems like another epoch when Mitt Romney declared that Russia was America's greatest geopolitical threat. Russia, on the contrary, is pulling America's chestnuts out of the fire. Obama

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More from [David Greenfield](#) in his Sultan Knish blog.

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Obama knows that Americans won't accept "war just doesn't work" as an answer to Islamic terrorism. So he demonstrates to them that wars don't work by fighting wars that are meant to fail.

In Afghanistan, he bled American soldiers as hard as possible with vicious rules of engagement that favored the Taliban to destroy support for a war that most of the country had formerly backed. By blowing the war, Obama was not only sabotaging the specific implementation of a policy he opposed, but the general idea behind it. His failed wars are meant to teach Americans that war doesn't work.

The unspoken idea that informs his strategy is that American power is the root cause of the problems in the region. Destroying ISIS would solve nothing. Containing American power is the real answer.

Obama does not have a strategy for defeating ISIS. He has a strategy for defeating America. ...

... Obama responded to ISIS by denying it's a threat. Once that stopped being a viable strategy, he began to stall for time. And he's still stalling for time, not to beat ISIS, but to wait until ISIS falls out of the headlines. That has been his approach to all his scandals from ObamaCare to the IRS to the VA.

Lie like crazy and wait for people to forget about it and turn their attention to something else.

This is a containment strategy, but not for ISIS. It's a containment strategy for America. Obama isn't trying to bottle up ISIS except as a means of bottling up America. He doesn't see the Caliph of the Islamic State as the real threat, but the average American who watches the latest beheading on the news and wonders why his government doesn't do something about it. To the left it isn't the Caliph of ISIS who starts the wars we ought to worry about, but Joe in Tennessee, Bill in California or Pete in Minnesota.

That is why Obama sounds bored when talking about beating ISIS, but heats up when the conversation turns to fighting Republicans. It's why Hillary Clinton named Republicans, not ISIS, as her enemy. ...

Today the New Yorker published [David Remnick's](#) report on a group of Syrian refugees who are fighting ISIS. This nugget was in the report. And if the president was a Republican, you can bet this would have far more detailed and elaborate. ... *The members of R.B.S.S. are utterly frustrated with the efforts of the West to defeat both Assad, who has fended off the opposition so far, and ISIS, which has suffered recent losses in Iraq and Syria, but which has proved capable of exacting suffering from Sinai to Beirut to Paris.*

"The problem the Syrian people have with the United States is that we are suffering for five years with barrel bombs," one R.B.S.S. journalist said. "Assad has killed so many innocents, and many people have lost hope. After Assad's chemical attack, when he crossed the so-called 'red line,' the U.S. just took the weapons. It made America look like a liar and weak. ...

The cartoons are good too.

National Journal [Leaderless](#)

I once asked, "What if Obama can't lead?" The answer after Paris is painful.

by Ron Fournier

In his [memoir](#), Leon Panetta argued that for all of Barack Obama's strengths, he is missing an essential ingredient of leadership. He lacks "fire," wrote Obama's former CIA director and Pentagon chief. "The president relies on the logic of a law professor rather than the passion of a leader."

Obama has proved Panetta right again and again during his presidency, but never more dangerously so than with his shoulder-shrug approach to ISIS. Obama called it a "[J.V. team](#)" before it started beheading Americans. He said it was "[contained](#)" before it attacked Paris. Now he's calling it "[a bunch of killers with good social media.](#)"

That's how you describe a street gang—a *bunch of killers with good social media*. The Islamic State is no street gang.

Objective observers from across the political spectrum took exception to Obama's tone. [This](#) from Frank Bruni, a liberal-minded *New York Times* columnist:

"He was at his worst just after the [Paris attacks](#), when he communicated as much irritation with the second-guessing of his stewardship as he did outrage over Paris and determination to destroy the Islamic State, or ISIS.

He owed us something different, something more. He'd just said, the day before Paris, that ISIS was contained and that it was weakening, so there was an onus on him to make abundantly clear that he grasped the magnitude of the threat and was intensely focused on it.

From Obama we needed fire. Instead we got embers, along with the un-presidential portrayal of Republicans as sniveling wimps whose fears about refugees were akin to their complaints about tough debate questions."

There it is again—"from Obama we needed *fire*."

The man who so aptly diagnosed Obama's tonal weakness, Leon Panetta, appeared on *Meet the Press* on Sunday to demand more leadership against ISIS. This time, he stuck to substance—and was no less devastating.

"I think the U.S. has to lead in this effort because what we've learned a long time ago is that if the United States does not lead, nobody else will," Panetta said. He blamed Obama for underserving his promise to disrupt and defeat ISIS. "I think that the resources applied to that mission, frankly, have not been sufficient to confront that."

Panetta is not alone among Democrats worried about Obama's approach. Leading Democratic Senator Dianne Feinstein told *Face the Nation* that the United States is not doing enough to fight the Islamic State.

"We need to be aggressive," she said. "Now."

Personally, I'm no hawk. I'm not convinced the United States needs more ground troops in the Middle East, certainly not without a radical rethinking of how the war against ISIS would require [shared sacrifice](#). I am sympathetic to the fact that Obama [faces no easy options](#) after inheriting President Bush's ill-conceived war in Iraq. And I've got absolutely no patience for the GOP presidential field's hyperbolic, dishonest, and bigoted [rhetoric](#).

But there is only one commander-in-chief, and ours is stubbornly clinging to a strategy against ISIS that lacks clarity, creativity, and urgency. There is only one president, and ours doesn't seem to know how to rally us to a common cause.

Look at [this](#) Twitter feed from Ron Klain, a leading Democratic consultant who served as Obama's Ebola czar. He recalls the irrational, politically charged calls to close U.S. borders to people from nations stricken by the disease—a panic not unlike the one over Syrian refugees today. "Ebola experience offers three lessons for managing fears," Klain writes.

1. Acknowledge and address the public's fear. Don't dismiss it as illegitimate. "That only exacerbates fears and fuels doubts about leaders' candor."
2. Explain the dangers of "giving into fears." Inaction is riskier than action.
3. "Show that government has a plan to manage the risk—not ignoring the risk, but taking active, serious steps to reduce it."

Klain didn't say this but I will: On ISIS, Obama breaks every rule. He minimizes the threat and dismisses our fears, which raises doubts about his candor and capability. An overwhelming majority of Americans disapprove of his handling of ISIS, a [new poll](#) shows, and 81 percent think ISIS will strike the United States.

In July 2013, six months into his second term, I wrote [a column](#) that questioned whether Obama would fulfill his enormous potential, whether he even cared anymore about his promises to

change Washington, whether he could write the modern rules of the presidency and build a new bully pulpit. I asked, "[What if Obama can't lead?](#)"

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USA Today

[Obama's Syrian refugee debacle](#)

Characterizing Republicans as xenophobes won't hide fact that president's foreign policy failures created refugee crisis.

by Glenn Harlan Reynolds

When President Obama spoke in Washington about the terrorist attacks in Paris, he was curiously unable to raise much [passion](#). The passion came out only later in Turkey [when he started attacking](#) Republicans. Those attacks continued throughout that week, with charges that people who oppose resettling Syrian refugees in America are somehow [xenophobic haters](#) who are not in touch with American values.

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Mead continued, "Obama's own policy decisions — allowing Assad to convert peaceful demonstrations into an increasingly ugly civil war, refusing to declare safe havens and no fly zones — were instrumental in creating the Syrian refugee crisis. This crisis is in large part the direct consequence of President Obama's decision to stand aside and watch Syria burn. For him to try and use a derisory and symbolic program to allow 10,000 refugees into the United States in order to posture as more caring than those evil Jacksonian rednecks out in the benighted sticks is one of the most cynical, cold-blooded, and nastily divisive moves an American president has made in a long time."

"To think that conspicuous moral posturing and holy posing over a symbolic refugee quota could turn President Obama from the goat to the hero of the Syrian crisis is absurd," Mead argued. "Wringing your hands while Syria turns into a hell on earth, and then taking a token number of refugees, can be called many things, but decent and wise are not among them. You don't have to be a xenophobe or a racist or even a Republican to reject this president's leadership on Syria policy. All you need for that is common sense and a moral compass."

And Democrats kind of sense this, too, as [David Brooks noted](#) on NPR: "For Democrats, I think there's a sense of responsibility here. You know, President Obama waxed self-righteous about the Republican bill and the Republican behavior, but he's made a series of cold and, to me,

amoral decisions over the past five years to allow this genocide. And maybe they were the right decisions, but they were not moral decisions.”

Now that those decisions — along with the war on [Libya](#), which toppled strongman Moammar Gadhafi and unleashed chaos in Libya and [still more refugees](#) on Europe — are bearing unfortunate fruit, Obama wants to talk about what big meanies the Republicans are.

But reality remains, no matter what you say about it, the same. And the reality is that Obama’s record in the Middle East has been one of [unparalleled debacles](#), of which Syria and Islamic State are perhaps the worst. (How bad? So bad that Jimmy Carter is [calling Obama feckless](#), noting that Obama “waited too long” to address ISIS and commenting that “I noticed that two of his secretaries of defense, after they got out of office, were very critical of the lack of positive action on the part of the president.” Indeed.)

The truth is, Barack Obama has seemed more interested in “[fundamentally transforming](#)” the United States than in looking after our position in the world. As Mead comments, “[The flood of refugees is shaking the European Union](#) to its core, and Obama’s policy has cemented perceptions among many around the world that the United States is no longer the kind of useful ally that it once was. France didn’t even bother to invoke NATO’s Article 5 after the Paris attacks; nobody really thinks of President Obama as the man you want at your side when the chips are down.”

Nope. And that damage will persist long after Obama enters his post-presidential retirement. In 2008, a substantial chunk of American voters chose to take a holiday from history and go with “hope and change.” In 2012, they chose to ignore Mitt Romney — whose warnings about everything from [Russian adventurism](#) to [terrorism in Mali](#) have borne fruit — in order to continue that holiday.

The holiday is over now, and the bills are due. The next president will find undoing this damage a tough job.

Glenn Harlan Reynolds, a [University of Tennessee](#) law professor, is the author of [The New School](#): How the Information Age Will Save American Education from Itself, and a member of USA TODAY’s [Board of Contributors](#).

Asia Times

[Vladimir Putin, Leader of the Free World](#)

by David Goldman

If Mikhail Bulgakov had come back to life and written a Levantine sequel to *The Master and Margarita*, he could not have devised a scenario more lurid than what we now observe in Syria. Russian President Vladimir Putin is now the leader of the Free World against Islamist terrorism, directing the efforts of France and Germany and setting terms for American involvement. Reeling from last week’s massacre in Paris, France lacks both the backbone and the brute force to avenge itself against ISIS, but in alliance with Russia it will make a more than symbolic contribution.

In 2008 I [endorsed Putin](#) for the American presidency, in jest, of course. Now he is leading America's president by the nose and directing the anti-terror efforts of France and Germany. No one could have anticipated Putin's sudden ascent to global leadership during the past several weeks. Russia is in the position of a vulture fund, buying the distressed assets of the Western alliance for pennies on the dollar. Faced with an American president who will not fight, and his European allies whose military capacity has shrunk to near insignificance, the Russian Federation seized the helm with the deployment of a mere three dozen war planes and an expeditionary force of 5,000 men. One searches in vain through diplomatic history to find another case where so much was done with so little. As an American, I feel a deep humiliation at this turn of events, assuaged only slightly by *Schadenfreude* at the even deeper humiliation of America's foreign policy establishment.

The world runs by different rules than it did just a few weeks ago. Putin has answered the question I asked in September ("[Vladimir Putin: Spoiler or Statesman?](#)"). President Obama declared at the Nov. 17 Antalya summit, "From the start, I've also welcomed Moscow going after ISIL... We're going to wait to see whether, in fact, Russia does end up devoting attention to targets that are ISIL targets, and if it does so, then that's something we welcome." After this week's Russian and French airstrikes on ISIS' stronghold in Raqqa, that is a moot point. It seems like another epoch when Mitt Romney declared that Russia was America's greatest geopolitical threat. Russia, on the contrary, is pulling America's chestnuts out of the fire. Obama is utterly feckless; by the time the next American president is sworn in, the world will be a different place. Ukraine? Never heard of it.

Obama wants to [follow, not lead](#), as he told reporters at Antalya: "What I'm not interested in doing is posing or pursuing some notion of American leadership or America winning or whatever other slogans they come up with that has no relationship to what is actually going to work to protect the American people and to protect the people in the region who are getting killed and to protect our allies and people like France.. I'm too busy for that." Russia is happy to give him the opportunity to follow. Obama's reluctance to put American forces on the ground took America out of contention, along with aerial rules of engagement so risk-averse that only [one in four American sorties](#) against ISIS released its bombs. The Russians are not squeamish about collateral damage and likely to be far more effective.

Putin meanwhile [told his commanders](#), "A French naval battle group led by an aircraft carrier will arrive in your theatre of action soon. You must establish direct contact with the French and work with them as with allies." Just what sort of alliance this will be is clear from raw numbers. The Russian air force has 67 squadrons flying modern fighters (against France's 11), including 15 bomber squadrons (the French retired their Mirage VI bomber in 1996) and 14 assault squadrons. 25 squadrons fly ground-attack aircraft a bit lighter than America's A-10 "Warthog," namely the SU-24 and SU-25. Even allowing for poor Russian servicing, which leaves many planes unable to fly, Russia has vastly more air power than its French ally.

To make more than symbolic contribution to the Syria campaign, France will have to remove fighter aircraft now supporting its more than 5,000 military personnel in Africa. Germany's air force, I am told, will assist by picking up the slack in Africa so that French aircraft can redeploy to the Levant. Although Germany is not officially part of the Syria campaign, Berlin appears to be coordinating closely with Russia and France, although its own military air fleet is in notoriously [poor condition](#).

Russia's willingness and ability to use force in Syria gives Putin considerable diplomatic flexibility. Australia's Prime Minister [Malcolm Turnbull](#) suggested today that Russia might throw Syrian President Bashar Assad under the bus and agree to a power-sharing agreement along

ethnic and confessional lines on the Lebanese model. As the leader of a military coalition to reduce ISIS, Putin can afford to let Assad go, provided that the West agrees to preserve its naval station at Tartus. In the broader diplomatic context, Putin would expect the quiet expiration of economic sanctions against Russia directed at its seizure of Crimea as part of the overall bargain.

A very different sort of Middle East might emerge. Russia and China in the past have allied themselves with Iran against the Sunnis, largely because their own restive Muslim populations are entirely Sunni. If the Russian-led coalition succeeds in humiliating ISIS, the two Asian powers will have less use for their obstreperous Shi'ite allies of convenience. Although Russia and Iran are allied against ISIS, they have quite different objectives, according to [Saheb Sadeghi](#), the editor of the Iranian foreign policy journal *Diplomat*. Writing in *Al-Monitor*, Sadeghi explains:

Russia is thus pursuing the revival of the Syrian military as its leverage in the country, with the belief that the only way to influence the future of Syria is through restoring the Syrian military to its condition before the eruption of the civil war in 2011 — in other words, a secular army that can easily be controlled.

Iran, on the other hand, has chosen a completely different path. When Iran saw that the Syrian army was near collapse, it sought to strengthen irregular forces made up of volunteers. The Islamic Republic thus established a massive force composed of Alawites. The latter has now become the main force combating the different armed opposition groups and is more powerful than the Syrian army on the battlefield. These volunteer forces, which number about 200,000 men, take orders from Iran rather than the Syrian government. According to some reports, about 20,000 Shiites from Iraq, Lebanon and Afghanistan have also joined them. These forces may very well come to play an important role in the future of Syria. Moreover, the Islamic Republic hopes to use them as a viable alternative to the Assad government.

The Iranian-backed irregulars have been singularly ineffective in taking territory back from ISIS, however, compared for example to the Kurds, by far the most effective fighting force on the ground. Russia and its allies probably will solve the problem by sending in ground forces. ISIS cannot stand up to the combination of a modern ground army with close air support. That will devalue Iran's contribution to the military effort and its ability to influence a future political outcome. Russia wants to win the war on the ground and control the terms of the peace without interference from the apocalyptic adventurers in Iran.

It is noteworthy that Russian officials and news media kept mum about [Israel's reported air strikes](#) against a Hezbollah weapons depot at the Damascus airport last week. As usual, Israel's defense ministry neither confirmed nor denied the reports in the Syrian media, but the working Israeli press reports reflect off-the-record confirmation. Israeli sources tell me that the attacks did indeed occur, and under the nose of the Russian air force. [BBC's Russian](#) service notes that previous Israeli strikes drew official condemnation from Moscow. Russia's silence on this occasion suggests that Moscow sanctioned the strikes. If so, Moscow will have sent a message to Hezbollah that it should avoid a fight with Israel and stick to killing Sunnis in Syria.

There have been reports in fringe media that China has gotten involved in the Syrian conflict, repeated by the hapless US presidential candidate Ben Carson. That is surely wrong; not only does China lack the intelligence and diplomatic resources to involve itself in the Syrian tangle, but its air force does not currently possess a single ground attack fighter like the American A-10 or Russian SU-24. The People's Liberation Army is not equipped for foreign intervention, and

China has neither the intent nor ability to intervene. Beijing is happy to stay in the background and quietly support Russia's role in the region.

Beijing has enormous economic influence over Iran, though, and could use it to dissuade Tehran from stirring up trouble in the region. I speculated two years ago that China might preside over a "[Pax Sinica](#)" in the Middle East. Former Reagan National Security Advisor [Bud McFarlane and Ilan Berman](#) argue in the Nov. 18 Wall Street Journal that "pressing Beijing to exert its extensive influence over Tehran to force it to steer a more moderate course can and should be a top American priority."

China has a great deal to worry about from its Sunni Muslim population, especially the 15 million Uyghurs in its westernmost province of Xinjiang. Hundreds of Uyghur separatists are fighting for ISIS in Syria, and the Chinese accuse Turkey of providing passports and safe passage for separatists leaving China for Turkey through Southeast Asia. A Chinese official told me that Turkish embassies in Southeast Asia have stockpiled 100,000 blank passports for the use of Uyghurs. Wealthy Saudis are funding Wahhabi madrassahs in China, and a large part of China's Muslim population has become radicalized.

For all these reasons, China has a deep interest in the defeat of ISIS. It has as much reason to fear the metastasis of Sunni jihad as does Russia, as well as the quiet support for the jihadists coming from Istanbul and some elements in Saudi Arabia. A humiliation of the self-styled Islamist Caliphate would crush the morale of its emulators in China as well as Russia, and Beijing will find ways of supporting Putin's efforts without any direct or visible commitment of military resources.

As for France: several days ago I wrote that France [will do nothing](#) in response to the Paris massacre. I may have been wrong. Russia will do a great deal, and in consequence, France will do more than round up the usual suspects.

Sultan Knish

[Obama Wants to Defeat America, Not ISIS](#)

by Daniel Greenfield

Last year at a NATO summit, Obama explicitly disavowed the idea of containing ISIS. "You can't contain an organization that is running roughshod through that much territory, causing that much havoc, displacing that many people, killing that many innocents, enslaving that many women," he said.

Instead he argued, "The goal has to be to dismantle them."

Just before the Paris massacre, Obama shifted back to containment. "From the start, our goal has been first to contain them, and we have contained them," he said.

Pay no attention to what he said last year. There's a new message now. Last year Obama was vowing to destroy ISIS. Now he had settled for containing them. And he couldn't even manage that.

ISIS has expanded into Libya and Yemen. It struck deep into the heart of Europe as one of its

refugee suicide bombers appeared to have targeted the President of France and the Foreign Minister of Germany. That's the opposite of a terrorist organization that had been successfully contained.

Obama has been playing tactical word games over ISIS all along. He would "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS. Or perhaps dismantle the Islamic State. Or maybe just contain it.

Containment is closest to the truth. Obama has no plan for defeating ISIS. Nor is he planning to get one any time soon. There will be talk of multilateral coalitions. Drone strikes will take out key figures. And then when this impressive war theater has died down, ISIS will suddenly pull off another attack.

And everyone will be baffled at how the "defeated" terrorist group is still on the march.

The White House version of reality says that ISIS attacked Paris because it's losing. Obama also claimed that Putin's growing strength in Syria is a sign of weakness. Never mind that Putin has all but succeeded in getting countries that were determined to overthrow Assad to agree to let him stay.

Weakness is strength. Strength is weakness.

Obama's failed wars occupy a space of unreality that most Americans associate with Baghdad Bob bellowing that there are no American soldiers in Iraq. (There are, according to the White House, still no American ground forces in Iraq. Only American forces in firefights on the ground in Iraq.)

There's nothing new about any of this. Obama doesn't win wars. He lies about them.

The botched campaign against ISIS is a replay of the disaster in Afghanistan complete with ridiculous rules of engagement, blatant administration lies and no plan for victory. But there can't be a plan for victory because when Obama gets past the buzzwords, he begins talking about addressing root causes.

And you don't win wars by addressing root causes. That's just a euphemism for appeasement.

Addressing root causes means blaming Islamic terrorism on everything from colonialism to global warming. It doesn't mean defeating it, but finding new ways to blame it on the West.

Obama and his political allies believe that crime can't be fought with cops and wars can't be won with soldiers. The only answer lies in addressing the root causes which, after all the prattling about climate change and colonialism, really come down to the Marxist explanation of inequality.

When reporters ask Obama how he plans to win the war, he smirks tiredly at them and launches into another condescending explanation about how the situation is far too complicated for anything as simple as bombs to work. Underneath that explanation is the belief that wars are unwinnable.

Obama knows that Americans won't accept "war just doesn't work" as an answer to Islamic terrorism. So he demonstrates to them that wars don't work by fighting wars that are meant to fail.

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that favored the Taliban to destroy support for a war that most of the country had formerly backed. By blowing the war, Obama was not only sabotaging the specific implementation of a policy he opposed, but the general idea behind it. His failed wars are meant to teach Americans that war doesn't work.

The unspoken idea that informs his strategy is that American power is the root cause of the problems in the region. Destroying ISIS would solve nothing. Containing American power is the real answer.

Obama does not have a strategy for defeating ISIS. He has a strategy for defeating America.

Whatever rhetoric he tosses out, his actual strategy is to respond to public pressure by doing the least he can possibly do. He will carry out drone strikes, not because they're effective, but because they inflict the fewest casualties on the enemy.

He may try to contain the enemy, not because he cares about ISIS, but because he wants to prevent Americans from "overreacting" and demanding harsher measures against the Islamic State. Instead of fighting to win wars, he seeks to deescalate them. If public pressure forces him to go beyond drones, he will authorize the fewest air strikes possible. If he is forced to send in ground troops, he will see to it that they have the least protection and the greatest vulnerability to ISIS attacks.

Just like in Afghanistan.

Obama would like ISIS to go away. Not because they engage in the ethnic cleansing, mass murder and mass rape of non-Muslims, but because they wake the sleeping giant of the United States.

And so his idea of war is fighting an informational conflict against Americans. When Muslim terrorists commit an atrocity so horrifying that public pressure forces him to respond, he lies to Americans. Each time his Baghdad Bob act is shattered by another Islamic terrorist attack, he piles on even more lies.

Any strategy that Obama offers against ISIS will consist of more of the same lies and word games. His apologists will now debate the meaning of "containment" and whether he succeeded in defining it so narrowly on his own terms that he can claim to have accomplished it. But it really doesn't matter what his meaning of "containment" or "is" is. Failure by any other name smells just as terrible.

Obama responded to ISIS by denying it's a threat. Once that stopped being a viable strategy, he began to stall for time. And he's still stalling for time, not to beat ISIS, but to wait until ISIS falls out of the headlines. That has been his approach to all his scandals from ObamaCare to the IRS to the VA.

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That is why Obama sounds bored when talking about beating ISIS, but heats up when the conversation turns to fighting Republicans. It's why Hillary Clinton named Republicans, not ISIS, as her enemy.

The left is not interested in making war on ISIS. It is too busy making war on America.

New Yorker

Telling the Truth About ISIS and Raqqa

The group Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently (RBSS) faces unceasing peril from ISIS as its members smuggle out information about what's happening in their city.

by David Remnick

On Saturday night, five young Syrians slouched into a dive bar in New York and ordered drinks. When the bartender asked if off-brand vodka was O.K., they had to smile. They were all exiles from Raqqa, the provincial city in northern Syria that [ISIS](#) has made its operational center and the de-facto capital of the Islamic State. No one needed the good stuff. Just a drink would do.

Everyone in the group works for [Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently \(R.B.S.S.\)](#), a kind of underground journalistic-activist enterprise that, under the threat of grisly execution, smuggles images and reports on ISIS from Raqqa to its allies abroad. The group's comrades, in turn, post them on [social media](#) and its [Web site](#). ISIS has controlled Raqqa for nearly two years and much of the foreign press looks to R.B.S.S. for first-hand reports about the daily life—and depredations—in Raqqa. And because they have dared to post reports of crucifixions, beheadings, sexual abuse, and other crimes, members of R.B.S.S., both inside the city and abroad, have been [murdered by ISIS](#) for their work.

Abdel Aziz al-Hamza, a slender man of twenty-four, acts as spokesperson. As recently as a few years ago, he was a biology student at Raqqa University who dreamed of studying pharmacology in Jordan or Turkey and returning home to start his career and a family.

"I was a normal guy," he said, after taking a first sip of his vodka-and-Sprite. "I hung out with friends at cafés and bars. None of us were political. In Syria, before the revolution, it was a crime to be political in any way." Raqqa was a relatively prosperous city with energy resources and an agricultural base. Major dams in the area are an important source of power in Syria.

When anti-regime demonstrations broke out in March, 2011, in Dara'a, a city in the south, and reports spread throughout Syria that Bashar al-Assad's security forces were firing on civilians, Hamza and many others joined in protests, in Raqqa. "We wanted to be free," he said. "It seemed simple."

As the uprising against Assad spread throughout Syria and the casualty counts rose, tens of thousands of people left Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, and other embattled cities and towns and arrived in Raqqa, which is on the northern bank of the Euphrates River. The city swelled and became known for a while as "the hotel of the revolution."

By March, 2013, Free Syrian Army (F.S.A.) troops, as well as Islamist rebel forces, including al-Nusra, controlled the city and tore down a statue of Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, to celebrate. "Raqqa was the first liberated city in Syria," Hamza said.

But at around the same time, members of ISIS, or the Islamic State, bearing black flags, began accumulating in the nearby town of Slouk. “At first, there were only around fifteen people,” Hamza said. “None of us knew about it” until fighters from al-Nusra began switching over to ISIS, which had its origin in Iraq. “Over time, around ninety per cent of the Nusra fighters in the area became ISIS, and only ten per cent of them refused,” Hamza said.

In May, 2013, ISIS fighters started making kidnapping runs and attacking F.S.A. leaders, and, by late summer, there were full-scale battles with F.S.A. troops. As the F.S.A. began to suffer defeats, car bombings, kidnappings, and executions, one of the journalists at the table said, some F.S.A. soldiers “out of complete fear” also joined ISIS. People in Raqqa could see that ISIS was growing stronger, as they brought in heavy weapons from Iraq and seasoned soldiers who had fought in the Iraqi Army under Saddam Hussein. By the beginning of 2014, ISIS had absolute control of the city. They now overran the mosques, drove out Christians from the city, and turned major municipal buildings into their various headquarters. The propaganda campaign that ISIS mustered following the capture of Raqqa brought on a wave of foreigners.

“No one thought about the caliphate until 2014 when they declared Raqqa the capital of the caliphate and then these guys started coming in from all around the world,” one of the R.B.S.S. journalists told me. “It was like New York! A second New York! People from Australia! From Belgium! From Germany! From France! A global tide!”

“Maybe the next World Cup will be in Raqqa!” another of the journalists said, sarcastically.

The young foreign fighters were, and remain, privileged characters in the city. There are thousands of them in Raqqa, one of the R.B.S.S. journalists said: “When you are on the street you see them everywhere. They love fast-food places and Internet cafés. They love Nutella and they’ve got cans of Red Bull. Chocolates! Cheesecake! People are poor and see these expensive things! But ISIS wants to keep these Western recruits happy.”

The first crucifixion came early that spring—a horrific event to recall even now. Everyone at the table remembered the shock of it. Then came more: two people, shot in the head by ISIS executioners, crucified, and left for days for all to witness in the city’s main traffic roundabout.

“This was something new that we had never seen, this kind of violence,” Hamza said. “They started cutting heads off, crucifixions. They spread panic everywhere.” There were edicts against drinking and smoking. Enforced by an all-female morality police called the Khansaa Brigade, women were made to wear the veil and, eventually, black shoes only. They are beaten if their niqab is somehow too revealing, a veil too flimsy, or if they are caught walking on the street alone.

“I can say that women are the people suffering the most under ISIS,” one R.B.S.S. member said. “They can’t show their faces. ISIS bothers them a lot. They take sticks and slash them on the street if the veil shows the eyes. They say, ‘Hey, hey, do you want to marry me?’ People have become so poor, the families so weak, that some give up their daughters to ISIS. They accept it. Sometimes ISIS forces them to do this. The [Yazidis](#)—ISIS says these people believe in Satan. And because of that their women are just traded from man to man in ISIS, sold, raped, abandoned.”

Schools were closed down. ISIS’s imams dominated the mosques. Many children were sent off to ISIS’s religious institutions, where they were taught the most fanatical form of the faith, and then to military camps, the R.B.S.S. activists said.

“Not everyone who joined ISIS did it because they believe the ideology,” Hamza said. “I have a friend who is with ISIS but doesn’t like ISIS at all. ... I called him and said, ‘Why did you join? You hate them!’ He said, ‘I am a doctor and they did not let me work. They told me, ‘If you wanted to work, you have to join us.’ I couldn’t live otherwise. I have children...’ ”

In their recruiting, ISIS targets the local youth, according to members of R.B.S.S. With schools closed down, kids play aimlessly in the street. ISIS members befriend them, give them gifts, sometimes candy, sometimes a mobile phone. They ask the kids to join ISIS, one R.B.S.S. member said, “But they say, ‘Don’t tell your parents.’ I know about one child who went missing for months. His parents looked and looked. Thirteen years old, a boy. Finally, the father said to an ISIS leader, ‘Where is my son, I’ll give you money.’ Turns out the child was in a training camp for ISIS. They kidnap these children. They are sent to a mosque for education, so they are brainwashed with an extremist form of Islam. After this, they are sent to army camp to teach them how to fight, how to make and carry bombs. At their graduation, they have orders to execute someone—sometimes a beheading, sometimes they just cut off the head of a sheep.”

There is no easy way to check every assertion made by R.B.S.S., but the accounts of extreme cruelty that they provided consistently square with the reporting done by such journalists as [Rukmini Callimachi](#) and [Azadeh Moaveni](#), in the *Times*, [Ben Taub in *The New Yorker*](#), and many others who have extensively interviewed ISIS members and victims in Iraq, in Europe, and along the Turkish-Syrian border.

The most powerful instrument of indoctrination for ISIS is the Internet. ISIS glorifies both the sanctity of its moral, historical, and political goals and its acts of vengeance against all whom it brands infidels. And it advertises it all without shame. “If you Googled ‘Raqqqa’ in those early days you got their material first and only,” one of the R.B.S.S. members told me. “So that was one reason why a lot of foreign fighters emigrated. And this is why we began.”

In mid-April, 2014, just a month after the first crucifixions in the city, a group of six like-minded young people started to talk to each other on Facebook. The group expanded only a little before ISIS discovered it. Within two or three weeks a local imam declared that anyone who worked with R.B.S.S. would be tracked down and executed. Some civilians were arrested simply because they “liked” a post on social media.

Undaunted, R.B.S.S. activists posted on social-media sites photographs and reports of daily life in Raqqqa; the whole idea was to fight ISIS propaganda on the digital battlefield.

In May, 2014, R.B.S.S. suffered its first casualty. One of the men at the bar told me: “One of our reporters was stopped at a checkpoint and his equipment was confiscated and searched.” He was held for three weeks, then executed in a public square in Raqqqa.

“In the beginning we didn’t think it was that dangerous,” Hamza said. “We didn’t think they would execute us. All of us had been arrested by the Assad regime more than once during the revolution. But after this execution we met and started to talk that we don’t want to lose anyone more and we started to think about whether we should stop. But in the end we decided that our lives were not more important than the life of our friend who had been killed.”

Some of the R.B.S.S. activists devised what they hoped would be a safer, less traceable means of communication. Some left the city, and Syria itself, to help “from the other side.” Hamza, for one, took a bus out of Raqqqa and headed for Turkey; he now lives, as do most of the others at the table, in Europe. Others left after the first execution of their comrade. They remained active,

receiving photographs, video, and reports from their undercover comrades in Raqqa that they post on social media.

The members of R.B.S.S. are utterly frustrated with the efforts of the West to defeat both Assad, who has fended off the opposition so far, and ISIS, which has suffered recent losses in Iraq and Syria, but which has proved capable of [exacting suffering from Sinai to Beirut to Paris](#).

“The problem the Syrian people have with the United States is that we are suffering for five years with barrel bombs,” one R.B.S.S. journalist said. “Assad has killed so many innocents, and many people have lost hope. After Assad’s chemical attack, when he crossed the [so-called ‘red line,’](#) the U.S. just took the weapons. It made America look like a liar and weak.

“When you say ‘Raqqa,’ the first thing people think of is ISIS,” he continued. “They forget hundreds of thousands of civilians, normal people like us. I am not a terrorist. There are so many people, normal people, who want to live in a free, democratic Syria. We want to rebuild Syria, and the only way we can do it is through our civil-society group and others like it. If the United States government and other governments want to fight ISIS on social media, their Twitter accounts are seen as propaganda. But when real life is shown through us, and you see what life is like, normal people believe it.”

Talking over the jukebox din and the raucous Saturday night conversations at the bar, Hamza asked that Americans try to imagine a city in which “the 9/11s keep happening month after month, year after year.”

“Daily life is twenty-four-seven warplanes over your head,” another member said. “People now feel more afraid about the idea that all over the world they want to bomb this small city. People are afraid. The city of Kubani is completely destroyed. The people of Raqqa don’t want that. We love our city. The West says, ‘Let’s get the people out and bomb ISIS.’ They can’t. It’s a big prison. Women under forty-five can’t leave without special permission. It’s a tribal area, and females can’t leave without men. ISIS uses the people of Raqqa as a human shield.”

The R.B.S.S. members said the American fighter planes have dropped most of their bombs on targets on the outskirts of the city or they use drones to target leaders of ISIS. They claim that Russian planes, however, have hit a hospital, two critical bridges, and a university. “The problem we have with the air strikes,” one said, “is that their planes are very stupid. They’re not smart bombs.”

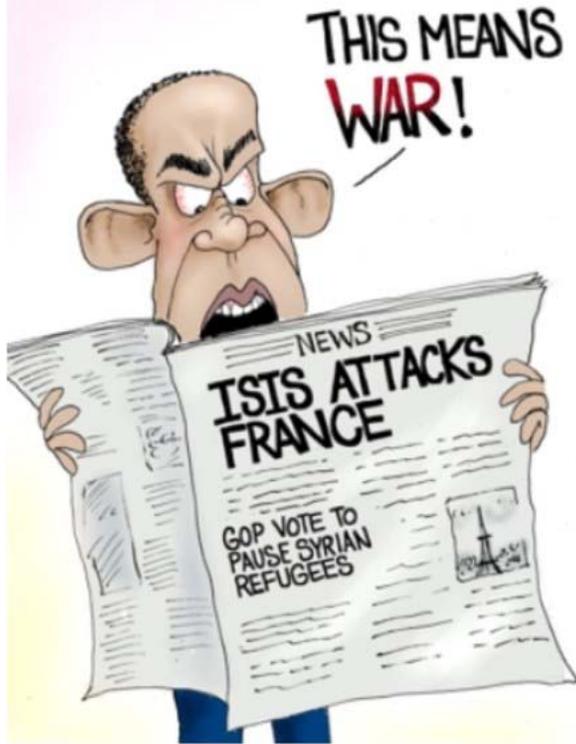
The peril for the group is unceasing. When ISIS arrests or executes a member of R.B.S.S.—or someone that they believe might be sympathetic to the group—they make a show of it on social media. One video, a member told me, showed “two friends of ours accused of working for us. And they don’t. ISIS tied them to a tree and shot them. A second video shows the execution of another friend of ours accused of working for us. They strung them up in a tree in an abandoned place and shot them in the head; they made the video to say they died ‘silently.’ They are sending us messages like this all the time.”

Hamza will soon accept an award from the Committee to Protect Journalists in the name of his comrades, living and dead. (I’m on the board of C.P.J., which arranged our meeting.) He will dedicate the award “to our martyrs,” to the “anonymous heroes” of the campaign, and to the people of Raqqa.

“All of us get several threats daily,” Hamza said, finishing his drink. “The last threat against me was from someone in Germany. He said I would be the next one killed. But when I think about

our reporters inside Raqqa, and I am outside ... I live a normal life, doing normal things. Somehow, I don't care what will happen to me. Compared to them, I am doing nothing."





Obama appoints new
chief screener for
incoming
Syrian refugees



