US President Barack Obama has laid out a detailed strategy for how his administration plans to
combat the Islamic State, which controls a substantial portion of Syria and Iraq. Though I have
been harshly critical of Obama’s policy toward Syria for two and a half years, his new strategy
reflects a mature and coherent foreign policy – albeit one that does not fully live up to his
proclaimed values. That omission may yet defeat his plan.

Obama’s approach is praiseworthy for three reasons. First, it combines force and diplomacy.
Second, it attaches careful conditions to the type and scope of American military action. Third, it
ties the fate of these efforts to the existence and effectiveness of a broad Middle East coalition,
making clear that though the United States is prepared to lead, it cannot and will not assume the
role of global policeman.

In the Middle East game of thrones, Obama is playing his hand as well as he can. He knows that
a US-led military effort can significantly weaken the Islamic State, but that only a combined
military-political effort can defeat it. He created political leverage for himself by drawing a clear
line, announcing that the US would “expand our efforts beyond protecting our own people and
humanitarian missions” only together with the newly-formed Iraqi government. If that
government makes good on its promises of political inclusion, the US will help it get its country
back; if not, not.

Equally important, but less evident, is the leverage that this position provides with respect to
Iran. Obama never mentioned Iran during his speech; but commentators have speculated about
whether his strategy gives Iran greater leverage over the US, on the theory that Iranian-backed
fighters are critical to the success on the ground in the fight against the Islamic State. But Iraq’s
Shia government is one of Iran’s major strategic anchors in the region; before the US began
airstrikes against the Islamic State, it was far from certain that the Iraqi government would
survive. Iran needs US airpower at least as much as the US needs Iranian-backed ground troops.

The US emphasis on a regional coalition to fight the Islamic State is also deft diplomacy.
Secretary of State John Kerry has made it clear that for now Iran is not a welcome member. Iran,
without which the coalition essentially becomes a Sunni front, can have a place at the table – and
play a large and overt role in resolving the Syrian civil war – but only if it is willing to reach a
deal to rein in its nuclear program. There has never been a better time to do so.

Where Obama’s strategy is weakest is in reaching ordinary people: the networked web of human
relationships that transmits rage, hatred, and despair or hope, trust, and loyalty. His doctrine that
the US will use force to defend its “core interests,” but will mobilize others “to address broader
challenges to international order,” is sound logic and good politics in a war-weary US. But, as a
Syrian tweeted to me, what the world hears Obama saying is that the US will use force to avenge
the deaths of two American journalists, but will stand by while 200,000 Syrians are slaughtered.
Unless US military action is seen as actually protecting the lives and property of the Iraqi and Syrian people, the US will quickly lose the propaganda war to the Islamic state. As many experts warn, the first time a drone strike kills a woman or child, a video of the scene and the funeral will be posted for the Muslim world to see.

Even if that video does not actually increase support for the Islamic State, it will convince millions of Muslims that the US is up to its old military tricks: bombing for oil, or for Israel, or simply to crush all Muslims. Those anti-American attitudes, newly hardened once again, will make it much more difficult to get the necessary intelligence against the Islamic State on the ground and to deprive them of the support of other Sunni militias.

That will not just hurt the US in Syria and Iraq. It will shape popular views in other Arab states, limiting their governments’ ability to work with the US. Most damaging of all, a purely strategic justification for military action – in defense of core US interests – leaves no room to do what actually needs to be done in Syria.

The only way to bring Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to the negotiating table is to weaken him and the Islamic State simultaneously. And the only legal or moral justification for striking his air force, ammunition dumps, or heavy weaponry is the international responsibility to protect his people from him – just as the US helped to protect the Yezidis from the Islamic State.

For, contrary to Obama’s claim, the brutality of the Islamic State is not “unique.” Assad has killed more than 200,000 people, mostly civilians, in a conflict that started with his government’s torture of children.

Simply talking about the responsibility to protect, as Obama once did, accompanied by even limited strikes – perhaps as punishment for Assad’s reported recent use of chlorine gas against civilians – would change the game quickly. Iran would understand that America’s restraint in Syria is not indefinite; Sunni governments could be shamed in the eyes of their own people for not doing more; and the Islamic State’s narrative of brutality would collide with a narrative of humanity.

The fate of peasants has a direct and important impact on that of kings. Obama’s policy wavers between geopolitical calculations based on national interest and the rhetoric of universal values, of standing for “our common security and common humanity.” Making that rhetoric real would buy him the room for maneuver that is needed to pursue his policy’s geopolitical goals.