

Articles & Op-Eds

The Islamic State's Triple Threat

[Michael Singh](#)

Foreign Policy

September 5, 2014

To defeat the jihadist group and address the instability it has caused, the United States will need to follow up on its good first steps in Iraq and get serious about Syria.

Public debate in Washington is heavily focused at the moment on the threat posed by the self-styled Islamic State (IS) terrorist militia operating in Iraq and Syria. But IS in fact poses not one but three distinct threats, each of which demands its own strategy.

First, and perhaps most immediately, it has destabilized a broad swath of the Middle East, threatening not just Syria and Iraq but also Lebanon, Jordan, and others. Second, the Islamic State has served as a magnet for perhaps 12,000 foreign fighters so far, including many from the West who may one day return home to plot self-directed attacks. Finally, IS has restored the American public's attention to the alarming possibility of a large-scale, organized attack on Americans and U.S. facilities overseas, or even the United States proper.

When it comes to an attack on the homeland by IS, the intelligence community cautions that it lacks credible evidence of any active such plot for now. This could of course change, and IS's evident capabilities, resources, and aspirations -- it is challenging al Qaeda for dominance of the global jihadist community, and is interested in retaliation for U.S. airstrikes -- counsel vigilance.

But as National Counterterrorism Center Director Matthew Olsen recently observed, it is important to recognize that whether or not IS is plotting attacks against the West, it is just one part of a global jihadist community populated by other organizations which certainly are engaged in such plotting. For all the talk of having al Qaeda and its ilk on the run, the threat of terrorism is likely to be a persistent one that will require a long-term strategy to identify and thwart threats, wherever they emanate from, while protecting the civil liberties that Americans cherish.

The threat of foreign fighters is not new -- young men traveled to Afghanistan in the 1980s, Iraq in the 2000s, and other smaller conflicts in between to wage war. But it appears to have become more acute with IS's rise due to the group's battlefield successes, media savvy, and wealth. The foreign fighters who flock to fight with IS or seek safe haven in the territories it controls will one day disperse, perhaps destabilizing other countries in the region. The Western passport-holders among them, along with "homegrown" extremists merely inspired by IS, may seek to carry out attacks at home which are inspired but not necessarily directed by the group.

This threat is one that we unfortunately have long experience in addressing. It calls for a multifaceted strategy of challenging extremist ideology and countering the radicalization of young men -- which takes place not only in person but also online -- targeting financiers and other facilitators, and disrupting the actual flow of fighters to and from conflict zones in cooperation with the countries that border them.

The threat IS poses to our interests in the Middle East is perhaps the most immediate and challenging presented by the group. But the Islamic State is not 10 feet tall -- it is a challenge we can surmount. It has benefited from the weakness and disorganization of its adversaries, has thrived in the ungoverned hinterlands created by Syria's civil war, and has been the direct beneficiary of international inattention to Iraq and Baghdad's parochial misrule. It has also had years to shape the battlefield, operating actively for the past three years out of the headlines.

As the Washington Institute's Michael Knights [has written](#), IS also has military weaknesses -- it depends on mobility, is ill-suited to the defensive, and the same terror it uses to cow opponents leaves it largely bereft of allies. With the right approach, IS can be defeated. But just as addressing the multifaceted threat posed by IS requires more than simply smashing its paramilitary units, stabilizing Iraq and Syria will need to go beyond defeating ISIL.

In Iraq, President Obama appears to have finally arrived at a strategy. Initially, he withheld the use of force to incentivize politicians in Baghdad to end their squabbling, but underestimated the depth of their divisions and the speed of IS's advance. When the United States finally decided to wield diplomacy and force together, however, things started to move -- former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stepped aside, IS's advance was stanching, and allies began to join U.S. efforts.

While there is a long way to go in Iraq and more force may ultimately be required, these are good first steps. But both defeating IS and addressing instability in the region will require the United States also to finally get serious about Syria, an enormous problem that we have failed to adequately address for the past three and a half years. If we do not, Syria will not only offer IS strategic depth, but offer safe haven to terrorists and bleed instability across regional borders.

The president is right when he says he needs a strategy for Syria -- not just for rolling back IS there, but for changing the dynamics that drive the conflict and creating conditions for the country's stabilization. The puzzle, however, is not in devising such a strategy -- many analysts and officials have offered their proposals over the past three years -- but in why the administration did not long ago settle upon one and begin carrying it out.

Such a strategy will require not only airstrikes on IS, but support for the responsible Syrian opposition, including Syrian Kurds, increased pressure on the Assad regime -- which has killed far more than IS using tactics no less brutal, even if it is less eager to publicize them -- and outreach and assurances to Syria's minorities, many of whom have supported Assad and who understandably fear sectarian vengeance should his regime fall. These steps would be aimed at stabilizing areas of Syria under the opposition's control and putting the Syrian conflict on a path toward resolution.

Each of these steps has been advocated at one point or another by President Obama's own advisors, and together they constitute an approach toward our strategic and humanitarian imperatives that the president should embrace. And while he should insist that allies shoulder their share of the burden, he cannot draw their support until he has articulated a plan for them to rally behind and is able to present them with concrete requests for contributions.

Because of the way that IS marries at least three significant threats to U.S. interests, defeating it is a sound objective and urgent priority. But it is those threats, not just the organization, on which we must be focused. And while they may be mitigated, and IS defeated, with the help of air strikes, such strikes alone will not end the threat of terrorism, or the instability plaguing Iraq and Syria. That will require us to wield a range of policy tools in complementary fashion and, most of all, sustained attention and commitment to a region that is tempting to turn away from -- given the seemingly intractable challenges it presents -- but which remains vital to our global interests.

Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute.