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DEFEATING ISIS

A Strategy for a Resilient Adversary and an Intractable Conflict

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PRESIDENT Barack Obama’s decision to launch a campaign to “degrade and eventually destroy” the radical “caliphate” established in the heart of the Middle East by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) marks a major turning point in U.S. policy toward the region. It is a decision that may well come to define his presidency.

But the campaign to defeat ISIS—which renamed itself the Islamic State (IS) earlier this year—faces major challenges: (1) Its results are almost certain to fall short of expectations, due to ISIS’s resiliency and the complexity of the Middle East operational environment, which limits the prospects for success. (2) While ISIS has tremendous vulnerabilities, the U.S. ability to exploit these is limited by the weaknesses of its partners on the ground and the region’s zero-sum politics, which will complicate the campaign’s political-diplomatic component. (3) The United States has allocated insufficient resources in pursuit of unrealistic objectives. President Obama’s reluctance to adequately resource the overall effort and to commit ground troops to the fight (a sentiment backed by public opinion—though that may be changing)¹ will limit U.S. options and further reduce prospects for near-term success.

Despite these challenges, American interests require that the United States succeed in its campaign to

destroy ISIS—however one defines these criteria. And the United States will need to adequately resource the effort, while finding ways to work through the contradictions inherent in its current approach.²

Defining Down Success

The declared goal of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIS has created expectations among many Americans that are unlikely to be met. There are a number of reasons for this:

ISIS’s resilience. ISIS is the second incarnation of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which was defeated by several hundred thousand U.S. and Iraqi troops and tribal allies between 2006 and 2011, but which was never completely eradicated. It is a highly resilient organization due to ideological and organizational factors, and the nature of the environment it operates in:

- *Ideology:* The *takfiri* jihadist ideology of ISIS has roots reaching back to the early days of Islam.³

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Accordingly, the enduring appeal of this ideology to some Muslims will likely prove difficult, if not impossible, to expunge—at least in the short term. Furthermore, ISIS’s supporters reject the authority of establishment religious scholars, making the movement difficult to delegitimize on religious grounds. ISIS’s adherents simply do not care what traditional clerics think, and thrive on rejecting establishment views.⁴ Finally, the reach of social media and the Internet enables ISIS to mobilize supporters from around the world, and to continuously replenish its ranks with fresh volunteers.

- *Organization:* ISIS functioned for years as an underground insurgent network before transforming itself, in the past two or three years, into an “army with a state” that now dominates large swaths of eastern Syria and northern Iraq. This transformation, however, creates vulnerabilities: clandestine networks are much more difficult to identify and eliminate than conventional military formations, which can be destroyed by conventional military means, though ISIS might revert to operating as a clandestine network if placed under sufficient military pressure. And foreign fighters who identify with the group are a strategic reserve often operating under the anti-ISIS coalition’s radar or beyond its reach.
- *Operational environment:* The popular uprisings, insurgencies, and sectarian violence wracking the region will likely define, for years to come, the emerging Middle East conflict system now spanning North Africa to the Persian Gulf. So even if ISIS is defeated militarily, its remnants will likely find ungoverned spaces or safe havens where they can reorganize, or they will continue the fight after fleeing to neighboring states. And some foreign fighters will return to the region to resume the struggle if the opportunity presents itself.

Furthermore, the Obama administration’s approach of targeting ISIS and other jihadist groups—but not the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad—plays into the jihadist narrative that the United States kills only Sunnis, thereby fueling the sense of grievance that sustains ISIS.

For all these reasons, ISIS is likely to survive the U.S. campaign against it, albeit with greatly diminished capabilities and perhaps in a different guise, much as AQI eventually morphed into ISIS.

Elusive victory. Wars always entail the potential for unintended consequences and uncertain outcomes. This tendency is amplified in the Middle East and its periphery by an operational environment that has frequently confounded foreign military intervention, and that is likely to complicate efforts to defeat ISIS.

This is because identities and politics in large parts of this region have been shaped by past struggles against colonial and foreign interventions, and by a belief system—Islam—that deems the defense of the community of believers and their territorial domain a religious obligation. Moreover, the propensity of local actors to intervene in the region’s numerous conflicts and wars, whether as arms suppliers or as participants, tends to exacerbate and prolong these struggles, and hamper efforts to end them.

Thus, the outcomes of America’s military interventions in the region have often been overturned within a few years by the very social and political forces that the wars unleashed. These wars have often yielded unintended consequences as vexing as the problems they were meant to solve. And they have frequently failed to resolve the underlying conflicts that brought them about, paving the way for yet another round of fighting. For instance:

- *Iraq 1991.* The expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait by a U.S.-led coalition, which marked the high point of U.S. prestige and influence in the region, led within a few short years to an anti-American backlash, in response to continuing sanctions on Iraq, that complicated U.S. policy in the region. The U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, a key component of the policy of containing Iraq, would likewise generate tensions with the Saudis and eventually lead to the rise of al-Qaeda, and thus the September 11 attacks and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003.
- *Afghanistan 2001.* The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan led to the overthrow of the Taliban government, but the Taliban continues to wage a low-level

insurgency in parts of the country, including the capital, while al-Qaeda, which was pushed into Pakistan, remains the target of a decade-long counterterrorism campaign that has destabilized that country. Neither struggle shows any sign of abating, and nearly ten thousand U.S. military advisors are expected to remain in Afghanistan for years to come.

- *Iraq 2003.* The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and overthrow of President Saddam Hussein ended the threat the latter posed to the region, but the mishandled occupation undermined America's standing, created a new front in the war against al-Qaeda, led to the emergence of a Shiite-led government that often proved responsive to Iranian concerns, and helped foment a sectarian proxy war in the region that continues to this day.

These patterns also hold for regional conflicts,⁵ strengthening the impression that they are rooted, at least in part, in the politics of the Middle East and its periphery. This would further suggest that the campaign against ISIS is likely to face many of the challenges of prior campaigns in the region, with the potential for inconclusive outcomes, unintended consequences, and new phases in the “long war” against jihadist groups in the Middle East and beyond.

Success depends on others. The campaign against ISIS cannot be won by airpower alone. And because the Obama administration has ruled out the use of U.S. ground combat forces against ISIS—though it is not clear that this prohibition would extend to Army Special Forces personnel or Air Force combat controllers—success in Iraq and Syria will ultimately depend on the effectiveness of local partners on the ground.

In Iraq, the new government of Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi will have to partner with the country's alienated Sunni population and take steps, once again, toward building a nonsectarian, professional military, while sidelining the country's Shiite militias in areas where their combat participation could be politically problematic. And although the Kurdish peshmerga have achieved some successes against ISIS, they lack the ability or inclination to operate far beyond areas traditionally claimed by the Kurds;

they are not the solution for liberating northern Iraq from ISIS.

In Syria, success will depend on building up the moderate opposition into an effective fighting force to counter ISIS and the Syrian army, and to put sufficient pressure on the Assad regime to convince it to accept a diplomatic solution to the conflict, or face a ruinous, open-ended stalemate.⁶

Given regional politicians' tendency to see relations with adversaries in zero-sum (versus win-win) terms, and to renege on deals reached under duress once pressure is removed, one should not assume that the requisite political deals in Iraq and Syria will occur, or that they will last once concluded.⁷

If the anti-ISIS campaign is stymied by these factors, the United States may well be consigned indefinitely to playing whack-a-mole with ISIS, and with terrorist groups in Syria or Iraq planning attacks on the United States or its allies. In that case, the U.S. campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria may come to resemble the open-ended U.S. counterterrorism campaigns of the past decade against al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Somalia, Yemen, and the western border regions of Pakistan.

For these reasons, the United States needs to define down success in its campaign against ISIS, while allocating greater resources to the effort. The declared goal should be to reduce the ISIS problem to manageable dimensions. In practical terms, this means discrediting and marginalizing ISIS by reducing its base of support inside and outside the region, destroying its military formations and the administrative machinery of its “Islamic state,” and forcing ISIS to once again become an underground organization capable of little more than occasional acts of terror. This could take years to accomplish.

Indeed, in comments several days prior to his September 10 speech, in which he vowed to “degrade and eventually destroy” ISIS, the president said as much: “We can continue to shrink ISIL's sphere of influence, its effectiveness, its financing, its military capabilities to the point where it is a manageable problem. [But a]s we've seen with al Qaeda, there are always going to be remnants that can cause havoc...You get a few individuals, and they may be able to carry out a terrorist act.”⁸

It is critical that the president adhere to this more modest definition of success for the campaign, even if he is condemned by his critics for doing so. Should the American public eventually conclude that the bar currently set by the administration is too high, there is a risk that popular support for the campaign will flag.

ISIS—Strengths and Weaknesses

ISIS's ability to capture and hold large swaths of northern Iraq in just a few days this past June was a remarkable achievement that can be attributed to its strengths—as well as the weaknesses of its enemies. These strengths include:

- *Leadership and organization.* ISIS has a charismatic leader in Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and skilled and capable military field commanders—though its ability to effectively administer the areas it controls over the long term remains in question, due to a model of governance that favors implementation of sharia over the delivery of services.⁹
- *Resonant cause.* ISIS has a cause that resonates with at least some Sunni Muslims: that of reestablishing the caliphate, restoring Islam to its former glory, and combating the enemies of “true” Islam—first and foremost, the Shiites and Iran. And it offers alienated and aggrieved Sunnis a religious justification for their will to power and their desire to dominate others. While supporters of ISIS are a small minority in many Sunni communities,¹⁰ they are enough to provide a critical mass for an effective military organization. And ISIS has shown an ability to use social media and the Internet to mobilize its far-flung followers.
- *Powerful propaganda.* ISIS disposes a highly effective propaganda machine that churns out chilling videos of beheadings and mass killings to terrorize its enemies and energize its support base. The manipulation of fear and the “management of savagery” through media campaigns is perhaps its most potent tool.
- *Aura of invincibility.* Until recently, ISIS could boast of an impressive string of military successes, though recent U.S. airstrikes have thwarted—at least thus far—additional Mosul-style coups de

main in Iraq and Syria. ISIS's military prowess is perhaps its most potent recruiting tool for young Sunni men who want to fight on a winning team and to make history. Thus, the fall of the town of Kobani in Syria, or Anbar province in Iraq, would be a major boost for ISIS and a disastrous setback for the United States.

- *Well-equipped forces.* ISIS is also well equipped, having captured large quantities of arms of all types from the Syrian and Iraqi armies, though its army still consists largely of armed pickup trucks and light armored vehicles. It is not clear, however, that it can maintain, repair, or effectively employ some of the more advanced arms it may have taken—such as Iraqi M1 tanks and Syrian Scud missiles.¹¹ Moreover, the only way for ISIS to significantly augment its arms inventories is through battlefield recovery (capture), whereas several of its adversaries can now count on resupply from abroad.
- *Adaptability.* ISIS has successfully morphed from an insurgent group that relied largely on terrorist methods to a hybrid organization that engages in an array of violent activities, including conventional military operations, insurgency, and terrorism. And it has responded to U.S. airstrikes by dispersing its forces, ceasing its reliance on large armed convoys, and moving and communicating in less conspicuous ways, while continuing to engage in offensive action in Iraq and Syria.
- *Interior lines of communication.* ISIS has centralized command and control and enjoys the benefits of interior lines of communication, enabling it to rapidly redeploy ground forces within a theater and between Syria and Iraq in response to military exigencies. By contrast, its enemies are located along the periphery of ISIS's territories in Syria and Iraq, and have not yet demonstrated an ability to coordinate actions to pressure ISIS simultaneously on multiple fronts.

But ISIS also has a number of critical weaknesses and vulnerabilities that, if effectively exploited, could help bring about its defeat and the collapse of its “Islamic state”:

- *Overstretched forces.* ISIS is spread thin throughout northern Iraq¹²—though its ranks have been filled out recently by Syrian jihadist groups that pledged fealty to it¹³ and by foreign fighters who rallied to its side. These additions may have mitigated this problem somewhat, though ISIS still appears to lack sufficient manpower to hold on to its gains everywhere. And these gains could unravel should its future dim, with groups that had rallied to its side for opportunistic reasons abandoning it for opportunistic reasons. At that point, its overstretched forces would be vulnerable to internal uprisings and external attack.
- *Propensity to overreach politically.* If it is to hold its territorial gains, ISIS will have to curb its propensity to alienate the very Sunni constituency it claims to fight for through its brutal tactics and the harsh application of Islamic law, and it will need to improve its delivery of services and the economy in areas it controls. (These are not traditional concerns for ISIS—whose idea of good governance focuses on the stringent application of Islamic law rather than meeting the population’s temporal needs.) However, the pall of fear it has created is likely to deter unrest in many areas it controls—unless shattered by coalition military action.
- *Potentially fractious coalition.* ISIS will have to hold together the loose military coalition that it leads, which includes tribal militias, Iraqi insurgent groups that do not share its worldview or interests such as the neo-Baathist Jaish al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandia (JRTN), Syrian jihadist groups that only recently pledged fealty to it, and foreign fighters who flocked to fight with ISIS when it was a rising force. Indeed, ISIS may have eliminated some of these elements since declaring its state. Keeping together the remaining coalition won’t be easy, as the latent divisions within it could eventually create opportunities for the United States and its local partners.
- *Military vulnerabilities.* By creating a “state,” ISIS must now defend terrain. And its “army,” consisting of highly mobile formations of armed pickup trucks and light and heavy armored vehicles, has

proven vulnerable to U.S. airpower whenever the former have massed to attack—at least when the United States has had sufficient reconnaissance and strike assets on hand to counter them.

- *Insufficient finances.* ISIS is said to be the wealthiest jihadist movement in the world, earning \$1–2 million a day from oil sales, and perhaps another million a day more from smuggling, shakedown rackets, and “taxes.” Its war chest is said to total several billion dollars. But ISIS is probably poor by state standards. For instance, the recent annual budget of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which governs a similar number of people, is \$12 billion. And ISIS may not have the resources needed to effectively run its “Islamic state” for long—at least in accordance with the standards that many of the people it now rules have come to expect.
- *Isolated and landlocked.* Finally, the ISIS state is landlocked and surrounded by enemies; reliant on a small number of extended and vulnerable lines of communication to connect its bases of operation in Iraq and Syria; and has long, exposed flanks.¹⁴

All of these factors make ISIS susceptible to pressure or military actions by the United States, and by its neighbors—if the latter can get their act together. The key challenge for the United States will be to exploit the group’s vulnerabilities through unilateral and multilateral action and, by targeting these vulnerabilities in a systematic and sustained manner, to defeat ISIS’s conventional forces and destroy its “Islamic state.”

Bridging the Gap Between Means and Ends

President Obama has characterized the approach to fighting ISIS as a “counterterrorism strategy”—reflecting the degree to which he conceives of the campaign against ISIS in much the same light as his administration’s counterterrorism campaigns in Somalia, Yemen, and Pakistan, which rely on drone strikes and the limited use of special forces as advisors to local counterterrorism forces, albeit with no “boots on the ground” (i.e., U.S. ground forces deliberately engaged in combat). Indeed, the president has made

such a direct comparison, declaring that “this counterterrorism campaign will be waged through a steady, relentless effort to take out [ISIS] wherever they exist, using our air power and our support for partner forces on the ground. This strategy of taking out terrorists who threaten us, while supporting partners on the front lines, is one that we have successfully pursued in Yemen and Somalia for years.”¹⁵

ISIS, however, is a hybrid threat that requires a hybrid response, including conventional operations targeting its conventional military formations, unconventional warfare operations to foment uprisings against ISIS rule, and counterterrorism operations to disrupt ISIS terrorist attacks in the region and overseas. Enabling activities include coalition efforts to disrupt ISIS recruitment, counter ISIS financing, and discredit ISIS information activities—the last arguably being the most important line of operation in the campaign against ISIS. Moreover, U.S. diplomatic efforts to broker political deals between Baghdad and Sunnis in Iraq and acceptable regime elements in Damascus (excluding Assad) and moderate Sunni opposition groups in Syria will be key to defeating ISIS and destroying its “Islamic state.” If Sunnis in Iraq and Syria see a hopeful future, the fight against ISIS may be a “long war,” but at least it will not be a “forever war.”

A deliberate, paced air campaign. The air campaign is the most prominent element of the U.S. strategy, but airpower alone won’t defeat ISIS. Its principal importance will be as an enabler for other, potentially more decisive components of the strategy. Airpower can prevent ISIS victories, break its momentum, degrade its capabilities, and contain the group militarily, providing a flexible and quick-acting reserve to counter its mobile strike forces. Airpower can also isolate ISIS’s forces in Iraq and Syria and prevent them from reinforcing one another, and buy time and space to organize and grow America’s partners on the ground in Iraq (the Iraqi security forces, peshmerga, and tribal militias) and Syria (moderate opposition groups and perhaps tribal militias).

Balancing means and ends, however, has already proven to be a major challenge for the U.S.-led coalition, which is employing limited resources to wage an

air campaign over a vast area involving multiple target sets. If the campaign is to succeed, more reconnaissance and strike assets than are currently dedicated to the task will be needed.

Ideally, the air campaign would be a careful, deliberate, paced effort that could be ramped up or down and sustained for years on end, if need be. This is because many of America’s partners on the ground in Iraq and Syria will need time to organize and prepare, while in many places, conditions may not be ripe for the local uprisings and “awakenings” that will presumably be the key to defeating ISIS. Moreover, the United States needs to avoid inflicting civilian casualties, which could undermine support for the campaign in the region and at home. And neighboring states may need time to strengthen border and internal security capabilities to deal with potential blowback. Finally, since the campaign is unlikely to yield a decisive outcome, the United States will need to husband its resources and pace itself so that it can sustain the effort over the long haul, while remaining prepared for contingencies elsewhere in the region or the world.

This argues for an “anaconda strategy” that slowly, methodically squeezes ISIS from all directions, in both Iraq and Syria, and along multiple lines of operation, rather than the kind of rapid, decisive operations the United States aspired to in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003. (A key lesson from Afghanistan and Iraq is that decisive operations that lead to the enemy’s rapid collapse but not its defeat in detail often create more problems than they solve. In particular, such operations may cause enemy fighters to go to ground—only to return as insurgents, or to destabilize neighboring states where they have taken refuge. More force does not necessarily yield better military results.)

Coalition airstrikes during the first two months of the campaign have produced mixed results: at the very least, they helped break the siege of minority communities in Sinjar and Amerli and blunted the momentum of an ISIS offensive against Erbil, creating breathing space for U.S. coalition partners; but ISIS has continued to register incremental gains on the ground in Anbar province in Iraq, and it continues to hold on in the town of Kobani in Syria. If the campaign is to succeed, ISIS’s progress must be halted

and the coalition must begin to retake lost ground and publicize its victories. The failure to deliver quick initial results could cause the American people and U.S. allies to question the efficacy of the U.S. campaign plan and enable ISIS to claim that it is not working.

This means diverting intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets now in Afghanistan, even if it means accepting greater risk there. It also justifies putting Army Special Forces personnel and Air Force combat controllers on the ground in Iraq and Syria, as the inability to either locate or positively identify targets seems to be a major bottleneck in coalition operations. Finally, it means ramping up air operations in Iraq and Syria to halt ISIS's progress and to retake lost ground.¹⁶ (In this regard, it is instructive that in the first sixty days of the campaign against ISIS, the coalition launched a total of some 400 ground-attack sorties. By comparison, during the 1991 war in Iraq, coalition forces averaged 800 to 1,000 ground-attack sorties *per day*.¹⁷)

Though the air campaign should be designed to be sustained for months or years, the United States must also be capable of undertaking sudden surges to prevent local ISIS victories, act against time-sensitive or high-value targets, and prevent mass killings as nearly occurred at Sinjar and Amerli. Indeed, the case of Amerli suggests that prompt U.S. support may sometimes prevent situations where bad actors, such as Iran-supported militias, can gain a foothold in areas where they were formerly absent. And the United States needs to enhance its ability to rapidly reallocate air-support assets from one front to another, as targets emerge and ISIS shifts its mobile forces from one theater to another.

The 'defeat mechanism.' If ISIS is to be defeated and its "Islamic state" destroyed, the United States will need to exploit ISIS vulnerabilities and sharpen the contradictions inherent in its rule. This will require actions along military, economic, and psychological lines of operation to create synergies capable of producing decisive results:

- *Military.* Military operations should degrade ISIS's combat power, hit symbolic and substantive targets associated with its rule (e.g., key leaders), and pressure ISIS simultaneously in Iraq and

Syria—prioritizing neither, while employing different means in each—in order to overextend ISIS and render it vulnerable to internal uprisings and external attack.

- *Economic.* The United States should likewise continue to disrupt ISIS's oil production and smuggling activities to choke off its revenue stream and resources available for public services, governance, and economic activities. This will hopefully stir discontent and unrest in areas it controls. Disrupting the criminal activities that have traditionally been its main source of income will, however, be much harder.
- *Psychological.* The United States should strive to transform the psychological environment in Iraq and Syria by creating the perception, mainly through military means, that ISIS's days are numbered. Such an effort may induce allies to defect or turn on the group; deter prospective foreign fighters from joining it; and embolden subject populations to rise up against its overstretched forces.

Efforts to transform the psychological environment should likewise include attempts to convince Syrians of a viable third way between the regime and ISIS, and to convince Iraqi Sunnis that the new government of Prime Minister Abadi offers a better future than does ISIS. Offers by the Iraqi government of administrative and security federalism to the largely Sunni provinces of Iraq will be key.¹⁸

Linking information activities and military action to achieve psychological effects. Information activities are critical to ISIS's success and are, in many ways, its decisive line of operation. Accordingly, information activities must be a central element of the coalition response. And because so much of ISIS's appeal derives from its aura of military invincibility, information activities linked to military action may be the decisive line of operation in the anti-ISIS campaign, and the key to altering the psychological environment in the region. Accordingly, the United States will not succeed against ISIS unless it discredits its brand and punctures its aura of invincibility.

To this end, the United States must show that like the parties and movements that in the past embraced

pan-Arabism and the more extreme variants of political Islam, ISIS is the embodiment of yet another failed ideology that will bring only ruin to those who embrace it. Through military victories, the United States can demonstrate that the tide is turning against ISIS and that its days are numbered. In this sense, the nonlethal effects of coalition military action may be even more important than its lethal effects.

Information activities also have a key role to play in efforts to build up America's partners and address Syrian opposition concerns about U.S. objectives. As the United States conducts airstrikes to degrade ISIS and ramps up efforts to train and equip the moderate opposition in Syria, it should help the latter undertake a small number of well-planned attacks on Syrian government military targets—such as attacks on convoys and antiaircraft ambushes—that should be captured on video and disseminated via social media. The buzz created by these early symbolic victories, as well as the infusion of cash and arms funneled to the moderate opposition, will hopefully help recruiting and eventually win defections to these groups. Only later, once these groups are ready, should they attempt to seize and hold territory or actively take on ISIS.

Here, quality is more important than quantity, and image more important than reality. U.S. policymakers should not focus exclusively on the numbers of oppositionists who can be trained annually, though numbers do count, but also on creating the perception that moderate groups are once again key actors in the opposition. This way, these groups may be able to attract experienced fighters who previously left them for better-resourced opposition formations, enabling them to further augment their numbers.

Such proof that Washington is helping the armed opposition fight the Assad regime will hopefully assuage Syrian oppositionists concerned that the United States is only interested in fighting ISIS, and mitigate the public relations setbacks created by America's initial airstrikes in Syria against ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda affiliate. Failing to deal with these issues could doom the U.S. campaign in Syria to failure.¹⁹

Efforts to delegitimize ISIS on religious grounds by demonstrating how its words and actions contradict the tenets of Islam may influence some potential recruits, and are therefore a necessary part of the

coalition's information campaign. But such efforts are unlikely to have an impact on the overwhelming majority of its followers, who reject the legitimacy and authority of establishment clerics.²⁰ Accordingly, efforts to delegitimize ISIS on religious grounds should not be the centerpiece of coalition information activities. Rather, the coalition should seek to discredit ISIS in the eyes of its followers by thwarting its worldly ambitions. The failure of ISIS's political project and the dismantling of its "Islamic state" will have a much greater impact on its flock.

Finally, no one should labor under the illusion that the defeat of ISIS will mark an end to the jihadist ideology it embodies. While the United States may succeed in discrediting the ISIS brand, the jihadist ideology from which it draws inspiration will live on. Remnants of ISIS and groups animated by some variant of the jihadist ideology that drives ISIS or al-Qaeda—such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria—will be around for many years to come.

Indeed, expunging the violent jihadist strain in contemporary Islam goes beyond defeating ISIS, or achieving good governance in countries where Muslims reside²¹—as violent extremism is a problem in Muslim communities located even in well-ordered societies. Rather, it is a "sociology of ideas" problem: what accounts for the rise and fall of extreme political and religious ideologies?

As for a solution, clearly part of it lies in the military defeat of the groups or states that embody these extremist ideologies. Just as the defeat of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany discredited fascism (but did not eliminate all fascists), and the economic collapse of the Soviet bloc discredited communism (but did not eliminate all communists), the military defeat—or at least military and political marginalization—of jihadist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda represents the most important step in countering their ideology, even if jihadists will still exist even after these organizations' demise. These groups are all about wielding power and achieving worldly success—whatever their theological claims—and militarily thwarting their political aims is the most effective way to counter them.

And such an endeavor is critical to U.S. interests. What happens in the Middle East increasingly has consequences beyond the region. Foreign fighters

returning to their countries of origin have already conducted acts of violence, while ideological currents among Middle Eastern jihadists have a major impact on radical Muslims around the world. If ISIS continues to chalk up successes, it will inspire and radicalize Muslims everywhere. Indeed, the war in Syria has already spurred an unprecedented international jihadist mobilization of an estimated 15,000 foreign fighters from more than eighty nations.²² ISIS's defeat would discredit its brand and might cause at least some Muslims to reconsider their embrace of jihadist ideology.

The Way Ahead

The United States will face numerous challenges implementing its anti-ISIS campaign plan. Its ability to pressure the group on several fronts will depend on its willingness to dedicate additional military resources to the effort, and to transform its partners on the ground into capable fighting forces. Politics, however, could confound these efforts.

While some of Iraq's tribes have started fighting back against ISIS,²³ others might not come around so quickly, having previously been used and abandoned, and then targeted by both government forces and al-Qaeda. And what if Prime Minister Abadi's new plan to create a National Guard to mobilize armed Sunnis against ISIS does not gain support among Shiite and Kurdish politicians in Baghdad? Conversely, if outreach by Baghdad to the Sunni community fails, what does the United States do then? Does it bypass the central government and directly arm new "awakening" groups it can work with? How might this affect its relationship with Baghdad, and the Kurds in particular—who are likely to object to the arming of Sunni tribes and other elements located near the KRG boundaries?

In Syria, recent U.S. strikes against elements of Jabhat al-Nusra believed to be planning terrorist attacks in Europe or the United States engendered a political backlash by the many Syrians who support that group. Members of the moderate opposition subsequently demanded that the United States target the Assad regime as well as ISIS, lest the coalition air campaign redound to the regime's benefit. Given suspicions of Washington by the moderate opposition, U.S. failure to signal its resolve to replace Assad

could greatly reduce the prospect for future cooperation between the two. One way to counter the claim that the United States is only interested in growing the opposition to fight ISIS and not Assad is to help vetted moderate opposition units conduct a number of high-profile attacks on Syrian government forces using U.S. equipment, for videotaping and dissemination on social media.

Likewise, the United States should not emphasize that it is pursuing a policy in which Iraq is the "main effort."²⁴ This leaves Syrians believing they have been abandoned by the United States and complicates efforts to work with the opposition there. Rather, the United States should emphasize that it is moving forward simultaneously in both Iraq and Syria, even if the means at its disposal in each country are very different.

Syria is a complex problem that will inevitably pose difficult policy challenges.²⁵ The way forward, however, starts with a moderate opposition capable of taking on regime forces as well as ISIS, and of effectively governing areas under its control.²⁶ This would be a first step toward a negotiated transition in Syria that could produce a transitional government that would incorporate acceptable members of the former regime and the moderate opposition. Or, if such an end proves unattainable and the opposition proves capable, it could be the first step toward the overthrow of the Assad regime.²⁷

If politics do not permit the United States to work effectively with its local partners on the ground, or if their own organizational and political dysfunctions prevent them from growing effective fighting forces, then the United States will likely be consigned to playing whack-a-mole with ISIS in Iraq and Syria, as it has done with al-Qaeda affiliates in Somalia, Yemen, and western Pakistan for much of the past decade. The prospects for achieving a modicum of success against ISIS will thus be even further diminished. Unfortunately, this is not an implausible outcome.

Finally, tensions with Iran over the evolving U.S. role in Iraq and faltering nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, the United States, and Germany) could greatly complicate the U.S. campaign against ISIS. Recent threats against U.S. military personnel by Iran-supported special groups could potentially limit the scope or nature of the U.S. advisory effort in

Iraq and spark a crisis between the United States and Iran should these threats be carried out.

The United States needs to find a way to reduce the threat posed by ISIS to manageable proportions without a major investment of American blood and treasure in a region that has an insatiable appetite for both. And it will need to avoid focusing so intensely on ISIS that it jeopardizes America's ability to manage other crises and threats in the region and beyond. This does not mean *no* boots on the ground—it may soon be necessary to dispatch Special Forces and combat controllers to call in airstrikes, combat search-and-rescue assets to recover downed pilots, additional attack helicopters to augment coalition air operations, and small conventional ground elements to serve as quick-reaction forces for U.S. partners. It does mean, however, that the United States should limit its ground presence to the minimum needed to ensure that ISIS is allowed no more victories, and that the air campaign against it continues to make gains.

The demands of fighting this war will run counter to deeply ingrained U.S. attitudes and habits. Americans tend to believe that every problem has a solution, are uncomfortable with seemingly intractable conflicts, and prefer short wars that produce clear-cut results. If the nature of a conflict precludes such an outcome, public opinion will often turn against it. And while the American public may tolerate “long wars” on the periphery of the Middle East in places where the media rarely ventures, like Somalia, Yemen, and western Pakistan, it may not be politically possible to wage a long war in the heart of the Middle East, under intense international media scrutiny. Yet neither can the United States tolerate a radical “caliphate” in the heart of the Middle East that threatens its vital interests and allies, and that has inspired the largest

jihadi mobilization yet seen from Muslim communities around the world.

The campaign against ISIS, then, will test severely the patience of the American public, whose unrealistic expectations and short attention span could be the Achilles' heel of the effort, unless these tendencies are managed and the attendant risks mitigated. This is all the more reason for the president to explain the facts of the war against ISIS to the American people and to continue to temper expectations of a quick, decisive victory.

More broadly, in terms of U.S. policy toward a Middle East undergoing convulsive change, the best that the United States and its allies can hope for at this time is to influence developments and mitigate threats emanating from the region. Washington should abandon hopes of “stabilizing” the Middle East, “solving” its problems, or achieving stable “end states,” never mind imposing grand designs or elaborate strategies for that part of the world—at least for the foreseeable future.

In taking on ISIS, then, the United States has entered a new phase of a struggle that predates 9/11 and from which there is no near-term exit. And even if the United States succeeds in defeating ISIS, as it did AQI before it, ISIS's progeny and other jihadist groups are likely to remain part of the Middle East landscape and to threaten U.S. interests and allies there for years to come. Until the United States and its Muslim-majority allies and partners can figure out how to dampen the appeal of the jihadist ideology that animates ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other such groups, there will be no quick “end game” or “exit strategy” for this struggle. The United States will need to remain militarily engaged in the region, one way or another, for years to come. For as the Obama administration, like prior administrations, has learned the hard way, “if you don't visit the Middle East, it will visit you.”

Notes

1. David Stout, “More Americans Say Boots Are Needed on the Ground to Fight ISIS,” *Time*, October 15, 2014, <http://time.com/3509160/isis-americans-poll-combat-troops-iraq-syria/>.
2. For the policy rationale for the U.S. campaign against ISIS, see Michael Eisenstadt, “Managing the Crisis in Iraq,” testimony submitted to the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade and Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, July 15, 2014, <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA18/20140715/102481/HHRG-113-FA18-Wstate-EisenstadtM-20140715.pdf>.
3. Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

4. Nelly Lahoud, “The Strengths and Weaknesses of Jihadist Ideology,” Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, October 1, 2010, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-strengths-and-weaknesses-of-jihadist-ideology>.
5. Thus, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war produced a decisive Israeli victory, but was soon followed by the War of Attrition with a rearmed Egypt (1968–1970) and another war launched by Egypt and Syria (1973) to undo its consequences. The 1967 war also gave a dramatic boost to the Palestinian fedayin, adding a new element of complexity to the conflict and indirectly leading to civil wars in Jordan (1970) and Lebanon (1975–1990). Nearly fifty years on, the region is still dealing with the repercussions of the 1967 war. The 1973 Arab-Israeli war seemed to have portended a fundamental shift in the Arab-Israeli military balance, with the restoration of Arab confidence, the emergence of the oil weapon and the quadrupling of oil prices, and the use of this windfall to underwrite huge arms purchases. Paradoxically, however, the war led both to a separate peace between Egypt and Israel (1979) and a petrodollar-fueled Iraqi military buildup that made possible the latter’s invasion of Iran and the enormously costly eight-year war that followed. Although the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) ended in a draw, and Iraq proclaimed victory, the war’s conclusion led to an economic crisis caused by the demobilization of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi conscripts who could not be absorbed into the civilian economy, and by Iraq’s \$85 billion in war debts. By invading Kuwait in 1990, Iraq attempted to address the disastrous legacy of one war by embarking on another, putting itself on a collision course with the United States that would eventually lead, a decade later, to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and Iraq’s later descent into civil war.
6. For more on one such group, see Jeffrey White, “Rebels Worth Supporting: Syria’s Harakat Hazm,” *PolicyWatch* 2244 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, April 28, 2014), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/rebels-worth-supporting-syrias-harakat-hazm>.
7. For instance, in order to garner international support during the Iran-Iraq War, Saddam Hussein said he would accept any peace agreement concluded by the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel, but afterward Iraq resumed its former rejectionist stance toward Israel. Likewise, after the 1991 Gulf War, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat agreed to forswear violence and to negotiate with Israel (the Oslo process) in order to extricate himself from his postwar isolation, but upon gaining a foothold in the West Bank and Gaza, he resumed the use of violence in order to strengthen his bargaining position. Similarly, during the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki agreed to incorporate Sunni Sons of Iraq tribal militiamen into the Iraqi security forces, but once it became clear the United States was leaving, he turned on the militiamen and had many arrested or killed. And when the United States threatened Syria with military action in September 2013 in response to its use of chemical weapons, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad agreed to destroy his country’s declared chemical arsenal. But Syria continued to use improvised chemical weapons, and it is believed to retain undeclared chemical weapons stocks.
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