

The Next President's Choices on ISIS

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From continuing the status quo to deploying limited ground brigades, the next administration will inherit a range of feasible options, but only some would serve U.S. interests, and all of them come with formidable postwar questions.

Despite some recent successes against ISIS, including military strikes against top leaders such as Hajji Imam and the Russian-backed Syrian victory against its forces in Palmyra, the group's core control of a Britain-sized swath of Syria and Iraq is still solid. Meanwhile, Iraq remains under military, terrorist and financial pressure with hundreds of thousands of troops mobilized to fight ISIS and 3 million people displaced by ISIS to care for. At the same time, ISIS continues to take hold in areas throughout the Middle East from Afghanistan to Nigeria, and can strike targets in Europe and possibly the U.S. With the Presidential elections only months away, there is little chance that the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS will 'defeat' the ISIS 'state' and 'army' before a new President is elected.

Under those circumstances the incoming President must focus on the reality of an as-yet unsuccessful policy against a dangerous foe at the center of the Middle East's dysfunctionalities. So far the candidates have avoided serious commentary: Republicans serve up vague 'bomb 'em' slogans, and Secretary Clinton, challenged from the left and reluctant to break with Obama, has not provided specifics on how she would carry out her rhetorical 'leadership' against ISIS.

But this will change with the national presidential campaign and even more after the election. Broadly, there are three strategies to choose from and two contingencies to prepare for.

Choice One would be to continue the current Administration's program against ISIS. This was laid out in an eight-page response to Congress in mid-March. The Administration's goal is to "degrade and ultimately defeat" ISIS in its 'state' in Syria and Iraq. This is a reasonable approach, but the execution has moved far too slowly -- U.S. troops

were first sent back to Iraq in June 2014 -- for it to be considered successful. Moreover, President Obama, as revealed in a recent interview in *The Atlantic*, is unlikely to opt for a more robust effort. Despite recent successes in Ramadi, around Mosul, and in strikes against ISIS leaders, this approach has not answered the question -- where will the ground forces that are capable of advancing against dug-in ISIS units in their cities come from? There is no guarantee the current approach will work either in this Administration or in the next.

Choice Two would be "Obama Plus." Under this scenario, the U.S. maintains its ban on American ground troops, but greatly increases its air and advisory support effort to local forces, similar to what Putin has recently done with the Syrian army (minus the high civilian casualties). This would involve an extensive use of U.S. artillery, U.S. advisory and forward air controller teams at the front, as well as American attack helicopters and a much more intense tempo of air strikes and special forces raids, with more liberal rules of engagement. Ironically, Obama has deployed bits and pieces of all of this against ISIS (and currently more vigorously against the Taliban in Afghanistan), but in a desultory way. This approach could provide more progress, but does not answer 'whose ground troops?'

Choice Three would be limited contingents of U.S. combat troops, probably two brigades each of 3-4,000 combat personnel, reinforced with other NATO countries' elite forces, to spearhead drives that would still rely heavily on local forces for subsidiary operations. This would answer the 'ground troops' question, as elite forces of 6,000 or less have repeatedly scored victories over ISIS, whose ability to move its 20,000 or so forces around its perimeter is limited. But this is politically sensitive, given the distaste in the U.S. for American ground forces in combat. But in fact a recent CNN/ORC poll documents the public is split 49 percent/49 percent on using U.S. ground troops. With a more resolute American President, and/or more terrorist attacks, this choice could become feasible, as it has by far the best chance of quickly succeeding.

Two contingencies weigh on any decision. The first is 'the day after.' With or without use of U.S. troops, any U.S. Administration will have to play a lead political, economic and perhaps security role in stabilizing territories after ISIS is defeated. The Administration is vague here, citing an Iraqi-led process in Iraq, and any solution in Syria based on drawn-out negotiations between the Syrian government and the armed opposition. But the U.S. needs to do much more planning, if it does not want to have a second, larger Libya.

Finally, as the recent victory against ISIS in Palmyra demonstrates, there is a possibility that a Russian-Syrian-Iranian offensive could make real gains against ISIS in Syria. This is not an unalloyed benefit. The Russians' motives in the region, as CENTCOM commander Austin spelled out March 8, is to "enhance their regional influence to counter the U.S." Fighting ISIS is less an objective-in-itself than a new way for Putin to squeeze the U.S. If the U.S. does rapidly start taking down ISIS, a 'victory' against ISIS by Russia and its allies could be as threatening as ISIS now is.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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