

Beyond the Oval Office: Filling in the Blanks of U.S. Strategy Against the Islamic State

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

Dec 11, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/kharj-hdwd-albyt-alabyd-ml-fraghat-alastratyjyt-alamrykyt-tjah-tnzym-aldwlt\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](#)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Articles & Testimony

In the president's usage, the term "ground forces" conjures up massive numbers of troops obviously superfluous to the task of defeating the ill-trained, ill-equipped militias of the Islamic State.

For a no-drama presidency, there was drama wrapped in urgency inside spectacle when President Obama delivered an Oval Office address to the nation -- only his third in seven years -- to confirm that the San Bernardino mass murders were, in fact, a terrorist act linked, if only by inspiration and allegiance, to the Islamic State.

The President came before the nation to provide resolve at a time of challenge, solace at a time of carnage, clarity of mission at a time of uncertainty. To that end, he delivered valuable comments about the importance of Muslim communities combatting extremist ideologies and of not tarring Muslim Americans with the broad brush of sympathy for radicalism and violence. Most of all, he made a powerful declaration -- especially welcome in its simplicity and clarity -- of his commitment to destroy the enemy. In so doing, he dropped what used to be the loosely defined interim step of "degrading" the enemy's capabilities as a precursor to its ultimate destruction.

But the president never actually said who the enemy is. Instead, he consistently employed a U.S. government acronym -- ISIL -- that sounds more like one of James Bond's sinister adversaries than a potent military and terrorist organization-cum-state. For the uninitiated, ISIL stands for "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant." I believe a salutary public education function would be served if U.S. officials, from the president on down, used the full name at least once in every public statement on the subject. Only then will the American people begin to truly appreciate who and what the enemy is.

More importantly, for all his resolve and determination, the president offered what CNN commentator David Gergen

called in his post-speech analysis a "stay the course" address in terms of the fight against the Islamic State. In other words, he outlined no new tactics, no new military deployments, no innovative ways to speed the enemy's destruction. While the president made several suggestions on the domestic front -- such as ensuring that suspected terrorists on the Federal Aviation Administration's no-fly list are banned from purchasing guns -- his only statement about military strategy was to affirm his commitment not to deploy ground troops lest the United States again find itself in the swamp of foreign occupation.

This, in my view, is a mistake.

First, this is, in part, a semantics game. The United States already has about 4,000 troops on the ground in Iraq and Syria; we just call them advisors, trainers, spotters and Special Operators, rather than "ground forces." In the president's usage, the term "ground forces" conjures up massive numbers of troops -- like the 500,000 U.S. troops sent to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991 or even the 150,000 needed to depose Saddam in 2003 -- that are obviously superfluous to the task of defeating the ill-trained, ill-equipped militias of the Islamic State. Between today's 4,000 and yesterday's half-million, there is considerable room for discussion. (For example, could the administration shoehorn 8,000, 12,000 or 20,000 troops under the heading "Special Operators"?)

Second, the rationale usually cited for rejecting troop deployments is the necessity of avoiding another "foreign occupation." The answer to that, it seems to me, is to avoid another "foreign occupation." Doing so requires political acumen in dealing with the other local actors, especially the governments of Iraq and Turkey, Sunni tribes and Kurdish militias, but there is no obvious *prima facie* reason why this problem should rule out the deployment of larger numbers of U.S. forces if such forces will more quickly and effectively complete the mission.

Third, the commonly held refrain is that Muslim -- preferably Arab -- troops should lead the fight against the Islamic State. This is certainly true; the problem is that so far none seems willing to take the fight directly to the heart of the Islamic State. Of Muslim forces, Kurdish troops have acquitted themselves the best on the battlefield but their objective is principally to defend Kurdish territory. And no neighboring Muslim or Arab state -- Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan -- has signaled its willingness to dispatch ground forces to retake Mosul or Raqqa. So simply stating a preference for Arab or Muslim forces to do the job won't make it happen.

Fourth, another frequently cited reason not to dispatch larger numbers of American or Western troops is that this is precisely what the Islamic State wants. On a certain level, this may be true. The imagery of fighting the infidel on Muslim soil might indeed be a useful recruiting tool, for a while. And on a cosmic level, Islamic State ideologues have written of an end-of-days battle in which "crusader" and Muslim armies meet in the small Syrian village of Dabiq for a battle that is the precursor to Muslim global domination.

But it is odd, to say the least, to refrain from deploying sufficient force to achieve victory because enemy ideologues allegedly relish the idea of fighting such a force. And one can imagine the appeal of recruitment significantly dented by video of Islamic State fighters fleeing in disarray, utterly powerless against the superior force that has handed them a convincing defeat. In the current circumstance, applying Patton's wisdom -- namely, that victory is won by making the enemy die for his country -- may be in order.

The sad and numbing reality is that defeating the Islamic State is necessary but not sufficient. It is the most recent incarnation of a terrible, dark force -- radical Sunni extremism -- that is a fact of our times. We defeated it when it appeared as al-Qaeda, we will defeat it in its current form and, regrettably, we may need to fight to defeat it again in the future, a cycle that will be repeated until Sunni governments, societies and communities effectively snuff out the mindset and circumstances that allow such extremism to take root.

But that's not all. We -- America, our allies, interests and values -- are facing long-term challenges of radical Islamic extremism of both Sunni and Shiite varieties. The Islamic State is today's most urgent menace, but it may not be the

most important danger. Today, through proxies (such as Hezbollah and Iraq's radical Shiite militias) and partners (such as Bashar al-Assad), Iran's influence stretches from Beirut to the Indian Ocean, and -- unlike the Islamic State -- the Islamic Republic is a real state, with all the powers, prerogatives and attributes that statehood affords, including a substantial nuclear infrastructure. Iran is not in today's headlines but it may provide tomorrow's most potent threat.

Viewed in its enormity, the task ahead is daunting, but it is neither impossible nor undoable. It requires effective action to address today's problem today, while preparing today for tomorrow's problems, too.

In terms of the Islamic State, that almost certainly translates into bringing sufficient force to bear to the goal of imposing military defeat on the enemy. This may not require large numbers of U.S. troops, but it may very well need larger numbers than are currently deployed to trigger additional contributions from local actors, much the same way that substantial U.S. deployments in the 1991 Gulf War were necessary to elicit contributions of Arab troops. The "day after" problem -- how to fill the political void after victory -- is real, but it should not intimidate us from pursuing the first-order objective of victory. And none of this should blind our eyes to longer-term challenges of preventing the spread of successor Sunni jihadist movements, working with local actors to build up effective, responsible, accountable Sunni governments and countering the growing regional influence of Iran.

This is too tall an order for the final year of an Obama administration -- or for any eighth-year president. But, as the ethical admonition teaches, "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." Matching military capabilities to political intentions is a good place to start.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

The Caravan

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)

Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)