

The War Against ISIL: In Search of a Viable Strategy

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Articles & Testimony

Washington has several options beyond a major ground commitment, including more drones and special forces in Iraq, a true effort to arm and organize the Syrian opposition, and a willingness to recognize longer-term regional threats posed by al-Qaeda affiliates and Iran.

Recent gains by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria mark major setbacks in the nearly year-old campaign against the group. These developments undermine Obama administration claims of progress in the war, and highlight fundamental flaws in the administration's strategy that need to be rectified if the United States and its coalition of 60-plus states are to succeed. President Obama was only partially right last week when he said that America lacks a "complete strategy" for dealing with ISIL because of Iraq's lack of commitment. In fact, much of the dysfunction in U.S. strategy derives from American policy, the policies of its partners in the counter-ISIL campaign, as well as those of the Iraqi government.

For starters, the United States needs to address the means-ends mismatch in its strategy. It has devoted inadequate resources in pursuit of a goal -- to "degrade and eventually destroy" ISIL -- whose ultimate objective is likely to remain unattainable for a very long time. This is due to ISIL's resilience, the weakness of America's regional partners, and the incoherence of current U.S. strategy.

A RESILIENT ORGANIZATION

ISIL's predecessor organization, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), was defeated by 2011 before returning in its current guise. Its ability to rebound from this blow is rooted in a number of factors.

For its supporters, ISIL's ideology embodies "true" Islam, unsullied by the demands of political competition or undue concern for the opinion of unbelievers. They are likewise unbothered by the criticism of establishment Muslim clerics, whom they regard as servants of an illegitimate state system. For this reason, it is difficult to delegitimize

ISIL on religious grounds. Administration efforts to use critical statements by mainstream clerics to do so are likely to only succeed on the margins.

ISIL had previously survived as an underground terrorist network and could do so again if it were run to ground, drawing on skills honed during its years in the shadows. It can, moreover, draw on financial and manpower reserves from around the world (though the coalition is trying to stem the flow of both), and it has recently started taking on the attributes of a decentralized network, with jihadist groups around the region pledging fealty (bay'ah) to it. This will likely ensure the survival of the ISIL brand in some shape or form, even if its flagship operation in Iraq and Syria is defeated.

The regional environment is likewise conducive to ISIL's continued survival. Since the popular uprisings of 2011, the region has been increasingly characterized by weak and failing states which lack the capacity to root out terrorist networks or defeat insurgent groups, and the emergence of ungoverned spaces which serve as safe havens for such organizations (such as eastern Syria). The zero-sum politics that prevails in the region helped bring about this state of affairs and will ensure the survival of groups like ISIL, which feed on the grievances and aspirations of the region's Sunni population.

While ISIL enjoys a number of strengths in the realm of military leadership, organization, and tactical virtuosity, it is also bedeviled by numerous vulnerabilities: overextended forces; a propensity to alienate its support base; internal divisions between Iraqis, Arabs, and non-Arabs; unreliable finance streams; and its landlocked position -- though it has proven particularly adept at exploiting its porous border with Turkey. Yet, the weakness of the Arab state system has prevented America's regional partners from capitalizing on these vulnerabilities.

Thus, while the United States and its partners can potentially degrade ISIL, they will not be able to destroy it -- at least anytime soon. Long-term, without addressing those factors that contribute to the appeal of groups like ISIL and al-Qaeda, the best the United States can hope for is to destroy its overt military formations, to dismantle the administrative machinery of its state, and to push it underground -- at least in Iraq. But as recent events have shown, its efforts to date have borne only mixed results. While U.S. military operations may be attriting ISIL forces and its partners have retaken ground previously lost to the group, the coalition has not degraded the overall capabilities of an organization that has demonstrated impressive regenerative powers, and which remains on the offensive on a number of important fronts.

Yet, the solution is not another major U.S. ground commitment to the region. The American people would not support such a deployment, and even if they did -- and if the United States were to put 50,000 service-members on the ground, were to defeat ISIL military forces, and were to dismantle its state without a change in the nature of Iraqi politics (and those of other troubled states in the region) -- U.S. forces would almost certainly have to return 3-5 years hence to once again deal with this problem. The Middle East has an insatiable appetite for American blood and treasure that the latter should not indulge; Washington would do better to avoid this vicious cycle.

Walking away is not an option either. The Obama administration's experience of the past six years shows that "if you don't visit the Middle East, it will visit you." The United States and its coalition partners need to adjust their light footprint strategy to ensure that the coalition can gradually roll back ISIL while avoiding additional major setbacks, and addressing the factors that contribute to its appeal.

DISJOINTED STRATEGY

The United States and its partners have often pursued policies that have strengthened salafi-jihadist groups such as ISIL, thereby undermining the U.S.-led campaign. Doubling down on the current approach in Iraq and Syria -- as promised two weeks ago in Paris by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken -- without altering policies that work at cross-purposes to the coalition military effort will only serve to compound this error.

First, Washington needs to acknowledge that its policies contributed to the rise of groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL in Syria, and the return of ISIL to Iraq. American inaction in the face of the Syrian civil war and the Maliki government's exclusionary politics in Iraq, the widespread perception in the region that the United States is tacitly aligned with Iran, and the fact that America's first military strikes in Iraq were to save Yazidis, Turkmen, and Kurds - anybody but Sunni Arabs -- were a recruiting boon for jihadists.

Second, America's Syria policy has been hostage to its Iran policy. The administration has not done more to militarily assist the Syrian opposition at least in part to avoid jeopardizing a nuclear deal with Iran. Yet the prospect of a deal has not constrained the Islamic Republic in Syria. The United States must pursue its own interests in Syria, which means increasing support for what remains of the "moderate" opposition there, even while pursuing a nuclear deal with Iran. Otherwise, fighters will continue to flock to extremist groups to fight the Assad regime and their Iranian allies.

Third, the United States insists that it is training and equipping the "moderate" Syrian opposition to fight ISIL, while the opposition, as well as America's partners in this effort -- Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar -- insist that it fight the Assad regime. The U.S. stance is likely to stymie efforts to recruit Syrian opposition fighters, while the divergence between Washington and its partners on this matter is a formula for disaster not too far down the road.

Fourth, the success of America's counter-ISIL strategy is hostage to the politics and policies of its regional partners. Several have provided or permitted their citizens to provide financial and military support to jihadist groups, and some still do. Some of this aid has made its way to ISIL, while members of these groups have sometimes defected en masse to ISIL. Foreign support for jihadists ultimately redounds to the benefit of ISIL, when it is perceived as the most successful jihadist brand. Meanwhile, Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi has not done much to change the zero-sum politics in Iraq that created the conditions for the return of AQI in the guise of ISIL; efforts at Sunni outreach by Baghdad remain stillborn.

Finally, the United States will not succeed in its fight against ISIL in Iraq if it does not succeed in its fight against ISIL in Syria. Eastern Syria served in the past as a safe haven for ISIL and continues to serve as a support base for its operations in Iraq. If ISIL is not expelled from eastern Syria, it will continue to destabilize Iraq from there. For this reason, America needs to replace its Iraq-first strategy with one that pursues a simultaneous two-front fight against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. This will convince Syrians that Washington is serious about their fate, and improve prospects for the train and equip effort for the moderate Syrian opposition.

It is not too late to correct course. The fires in Iraq and Syria will, tragically, continue to burn for years to come, and the outcome of these struggles is far from assured. The United States can make a difference if it remains politically and militarily engaged, creating opportunities, and exploiting those that arise.

THE RIGHT FIGHT AGAINST ISIL

So what would a prudent and effective course-adjustment involve? In Iraq, this would mean more reconnaissance drones (most are now supporting operations in Afghanistan), more joint terminal attack controllers and special forces -- with rules of engagement that enable them to accompany Iraqi units into combat, more airpower, and more personnel devoted to the train and equip effort for the Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish peshmerga. It would also entail more pressure on the Iraqi government to permit the arming and training of Sunni Arab tribesmen as militiamen -- to gain Sunni buy-in and create a force that can (hopefully) emulate the achievements of other successful Middle Eastern militias. Most important it would entail avoiding additional reverses as occurred in Ramadi. The perception that momentum has shifted against ISIL is key to success in Iraq (and Syria). New victories for ISIL -- even if ephemeral -- will be fatal to efforts to rebuild American credibility and to convince Sunni Arabs sitting on the fence to join the coalition against ISIL.

In Syria, the United States should likewise beef up its effort to train and equip "moderate" opposition groups, while dropping its prior insistence that these groups fight only ISIL. These groups have been decimated in the past 1-2 years (due in part to a lack of American support), and while this most recent effort has gotten off to a slow start, money and weapons have a way of generating their own demand. Moreover, the United States should not, for now, fixate on numbers. Quality is more important than quantity, as the Syrian battlespace is highly fragmented, and the challenge is to create organizations that can seize and hold ground, hold their own in local fights, and effectively govern small, defensible enclaves. And perhaps the most important task is to demonstrate that the United States is finally serious about supporting the opposition, in order to attract new recruits and win back defectors who opportunistically migrated from the Free Syrian Army to better resourced (and frequently more extreme) groups.

To deal with the Assad regime barrel-bomb threat, the United States should work to create a serious anti-aircraft artillery capability in the opposition groups it supports, while avoiding the provision of MANPADS in large numbers due to proliferation fears. Though low-tech, flak is highly lethal; even when it does not succeed in shooting down aircraft, it forces enemy pilots to deliver their unguided ordnance from higher altitudes, thereby degrading their accuracy. And it is useful in ground combat.

In addition to receiving military training, U.S.-supported opposition groups should be trained in governance and administration, to enable them to create secure enclaves for local residents and internally displaced persons. Making this the principal criteria by which opposition groups are assessed may be one way for the United States and its partners to reconcile their divergent views regarding the role of the opposition vis-a-vis the Assad regime and ISIL -- at least for now.

In sum, if the United States is to succeed in Iraq and Syria, it needs to alter its own policies -- and those of its partners -- that have greatly complicated the counter-ISIL campaign. Should it prove unwilling or unable to do so, the prospects for success against ISIL will become vanishingly small.

UNDERMINING ISIL'S APPEAL

The main purpose of ISIL's prodigious and sophisticated media efforts is to enhance its appeal, burnish its ideological credentials, and build up its brand. Because so much of ISIL's appeal derives from its aura of military invincibility, its defeat would show that ISIL was just another failed ideological movement that brought only ruin to those who embrace it. Moreover, its defeat would mean no caliphate, no Islamic utopia, no glory and adventure, no opportunity to dominate others, no spoils of war, and no sex slaves -- the things that have drawn so many to embrace its cause. Through military victories, the United States can defeat ISIL's media effort by demonstrating that the tide is turning against it and that its days are numbered. The defeat of ISIL is thus key to undermining its appeal, discrediting its ideology, and demolishing its brand. And this, ultimately, is the most important goal of the counter-ISIL military campaign. But the administration's current light footprint approach permits ISIL to continue to accrue victories that undercut this effort.

Finally, the United States needs to figure out how al-Qaeda and its affiliates as well as Iran fit into all of this. For if the coalition enfeebles or defeats ISIL only to clear the way for the primacy of Jabhat al-Nusrah in Syria and the expansion of Iranian influence in Mesopotamia and the Levant, the United States will have only succeeded in adding fuel to the region's raging sectarian and geopolitical conflicts. The sooner Washington realizes this, the sooner it can work to avert an even greater disaster down the road that it may be inadvertently abetting.

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute. ♦

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