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Congressional Testimony

Assessing the Strategic Threat from ISIS

by [James Jeffrey](#)

Feb 12, 2015

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A serious alliance against ISIS built on Sunni Arab states and Turkey cannot hold together over the long term without a more forceful U.S. policy toward the Syrian regime.

The following is prepared testimony submitted for the hearing "The Growing Strategic Threat of ISIS"; [watch video of the full hearing](#).

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Engel, it is a privilege to be here again before this committee, particularly to discuss a subject of such great importance to American interests and security as the strategic threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

The president's goal to degrade and eventually destroy ISIS is the correct mission. The campaign that the United States and a coalition of some sixty countries is implementing is basically sound, with direct military action, training and equipping local forces, building up political capacity with our partners in Iraq and Syria, cutting the flow of foreign fighters and funds to ISIS, combating the violent extremist ideology that fuels ISIS, and managing the human costs of the conflict. This campaign has had considerable success of late, from the pushback of ISIS in some areas, and its containment in others, to the redoubled commitment of our partners following the terrible ISIS execution of the Jordanian pilot.

Nevertheless, for reasons I will describe below, ISIS is a resilient and uniquely dangerous foe. Our campaign will be placed under stress when the coalition begins major ground-offensive operations. Military questions related to Syria,

and political questions including "the day after" scenarios in both Syria and Iraq, are as yet unanswered, and the campaign runs some risk of settling into a containment mission that would eventually crater the coalition and lead to new ISIS threats. I therefore urge the administration to move faster, take more risks, apply more resources, and not assume "time is on our side." In the Middle East -- and world -- of today, it is not.

THE NATURE OF THE ISIS THREAT

ISIS is so dangerous because of its unique characteristics and its reflection of longer-term trends and dangers in the broader Middle East, from Pakistan to the Atlantic. Starting with the latter, we see a state system, as Henry Kissinger recently described, under extraordinary stress, with its legitimacy questioned by the region's populations. Their loyalty to any given state competes with both particularistic local and tribal ties, and pan-regional Islamic and, in the case of the Arab population, nationalistic impulses. ISIS, as the latest of a long series of pan-regional Islamic movements that espouse violence, like al-Qaeda and to some degree political Islamic movements such as the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood, is embedded in various ways in the fabric of Middle Eastern society. It will require time and great effort by the governments and peoples of the region to free themselves of ISIS and its radical appeal, which can manifest itself in ever new ways, just as ISIS arose as a spinoff of the al-Qaeda movement.

But ISIS is not simply another manifestation of violent Islamic extremism. Its appeal to Muslims around the world, nihilist worship of violence, control over much territory and six or more million people, conventional as well as nonconventional military capabilities, and appeal as a caliphate all render it unique, and very difficult to combat. Its specific nature not only gives it significant resilience, but also an inevitable drive to inflict harm on the United States and other Western nations, either directly or by inspiring local jihadists.

Given its nature, the weaknesses of the Middle East state system which we are pushing to the forefront to deal with ISIS, and other threats to international security that the United States must simultaneously confront, I do not think a campaign of "strategic patience" is appropriate. ISIS may not have been successful in splitting the coalition with its horrific execution of the Jordanian officer, but it will continue its asymmetrical operations against the coalition, seek to expand its support among a small minority of Muslims, and exploit the Sunni-Shiite divide as the so-called champion of the Sunni side.

Under these circumstances, we should take more risks to accelerate offensive operations against ISIS. It is important, when these operations commence, that they succeed, to maintain the momentum of victory against ISIS begun at Mosul Dam and seen elsewhere, from Baiji refinery to Haditha Dam and Kobani. But we should accept more risk in terms of our own involvement to ensure our allies win on the ground in Mosul and elsewhere. The administration has, to its credit, done much since June to respond to and now contain ISIS. But it appears often to be applying the "strategic patience" doctrine to this conflict, limiting or closely monitoring military resources we are committing, and in particular treating the avoidance of any U.S. casualties as a strategic priority.

No one, including me, a former infantry officer, wants to see any American casualties. But while there are risks in a more robust policy, there are extraordinary risks in this campaign going forward at a simmer. Certain steps, if deemed wise by our military commanders, could make this campaign move forward faster and more effectively. It's their, not my, job to know which make sense in the specific situation, but the administration should not limit the use of those steps our commanders think useful. These could include a higher tempo of airstrikes, the deployment of Joint Terminal Attack Coordination teams, as well as advisory teams, down to the battalion level of units going on the offensive, using other weapons systems, such as U.S. army artillery and attack helicopter fires, given their role directly supporting ground operations, and providing heavier weapons to the Kurds.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

Just as the long-term response to the messages of ISIS and other Islamic extremist movements will depend primarily on political developments throughout the broader Middle East, so will the defeat of ISIS depend on political developments in Iraq and Syria.

In Iraq, the reconquest of Sunni Arab areas cannot be primarily the job of Kurdish Peshmerga units and certainly not Shiite militias. That effort has to combine local Sunni Arab levees, similar to the "awakening" movement of 2006-2008, and disciplined Iraqi regular army forces free of sectarian impulses, complemented by political outreach by Baghdad's largely Shiite Arab government to the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds. With much behind-the-scenes U.S. support, Iraqi prime minister Haider al-Abadi has made progress, sealing an oil deal with the Kurds, appointing and having confirmed a defense and interior minister, passing a budget for 2015 that incorporates the Kurdish oil deal, and gaining cabinet approval of new de-Baathification legislation and a national guard package, both requiring parliamentary approval but aimed at political reconciliation with Sunni Arabs. These efforts, while commendable, are not sufficient. Abadi faces threats from the Shiite political ranks, pressure from Iran, and the impact of dramatically falling oil revenues. Sunni Arab states must redouble the significant steps they have already taken to embrace this regime and work with their friends in the Iraqi Sunni community to win their support.

Over the longer term, reconciling all Iraq's religious and ethnic communities sufficiently to defeat, and keep Iraq permanently free of, ISIS and likely follow-on movements will require: first, decentralization including in the financial and security sectors, analogous to the conditions the Kurdistan Regional Government now enjoys, in Sunni and probably Shiite provinces; second, credible U.S. commitments of long-term engagement, including at least a limited number of American troops for training and airpower as we had planned in 2011; third, clarity with Iran that any effort by Tehran to dominate Iraq and drive the United States completely out will generate the next version of ISIS and eventually the breakup of the country, and a possible Shiite-Sunni conflagration. Iran cannot hold Iraq together, but it can drive it apart, and its policies of 2012-2014 almost did so.

In Syria, the administration's plans are just getting under way for a local defense force, seemingly to fight ISIS, not the Bashar al-Assad government. The administration is correct in prioritizing the "Iraq fight" over the Syria one, but the Syrian situation must eventually be dealt with if we are serious about defeating ISIS. Even a victory within Iraq will not last if ISIS retains a sanctuary next door, as we saw in the Korean and Vietnam wars, and in Iraq and Afghanistan. Furthermore, a serious alliance against ISIS built on Sunni Arab states and Turkey cannot hold together over the long term without a more forceful U.S. policy toward the Assad regime.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute and former ambassador to Iraq and Turkey. ❖

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