

Defeating ISIS: From Strategy to Implementation

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Brief Analysis

A veteran French official, a former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, and a seasoned military expert discuss how and where to hit ISIS, and what victory against the group would mean.

On September 22, 2014, Jean-Pierre Filiu, James Jeffrey, and Michael Eisenstadt addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Filiu is a professor of Middle East studies at the Paris Institute of Political Studies. Jeffrey is the Institute's Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow and former U.S. ambassador to Iraq and Turkey. Eisenstadt directs the Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

JEAN-PIERRE FILIU

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) is a major jihadist threat, controlling substantial financial resources and answering to no external organizations or authorities. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the caliph of the so-called "Islamic State," has established Iraq as his base of operations and created an entrenched position there with effective lines of communication, command, and control. The insurgency in Iraq will continue as long as Sunnis do not control any major government ministries in Baghdad; realistically, then, ISIS can only be defeated in Syria, the center of the group's efforts to expand its global outreach.

Much of the top ISIS leadership is currently operating out of Raqqa, Syria. The group continues to secure oil revenues via the territory it controls in that country and can stand on its own financially without external support. It also

continues to recruit local and foreign fighters through effective social media outreach based on anti-Western ideology.

To date, ISIS has been defeated, contained, and rolled back in only one area: by rebel groups operating out of Aleppo, Syria, whose goal was to defend their territory from ISIS and the Assad regime. These fighters understand the tactical situation in Syria, can gather effective intelligence, and seek to liberate more occupied territory from regime forces and ISIS. A functional opposition administration now exists in Aleppo, run by politically minded actors rather than ethnically minded actors. The United States should provide air support to these groups, in addition to the recently announced expanded train-and-equip efforts.

Timing is a critical factor in the fight against ISIS, and time is running out. The group and its affiliates are already formulating terrorist plans that can be carried out rapidly and covertly. To inflict a decisive defeat on ISIS, the United States must recognize that the group is not a tribal entity, and exert leadership in the international effort against it.

JAMES JEFFREY

The U.S. goal of "degrading and destroying" ISIS requires some clarification. To destroy ISIS would mean to eliminate the group entirely, demonstrating U.S. resolve and reassuring allies of America's commitment to regional security. Yet this goal is nearly impossible because ISIS is a transnational ideological movement rooted in a specific interpretation of Islam, and it exploits the weak nation-state system in the Middle East through sectarian conflict. Therefore, efforts to destroy it will look more like defeat than destruction.

In military terms, ISIS has shown high capability thus far, adeptly using armor and artillery against Kurdish and Iraqi forces. It has the capacity to threaten other U.S. regional partners as well, including Turkey and Jordan. As a territorial power, the more ISIS grows, the more offensive capability it will gain. It is also increasing its status as a nation-state alternative, establishing roots and belief systems within the communities it occupies.

The effort to defeat ISIS necessarily begins in Iraq due to the stronger U.S. presence there than in Syria. Washington and its coalition partners need to halt the group's offensive momentum, roll its forces back by taking territory away from them, and undercut its appeal to extremist elements in the Muslim world. Accomplishing these goals would force ISIS into making mistakes and demonstrate to the international community that the group is on a trajectory toward failure.

Truly destroying ISIS would require a ground offensive with large military formations. This could not happen without putting U.S. troops on the ground, and no such campaign could be launched until at least six months from now, when local partners are organized and ready. Alternatively, the United States can limit its ground-level involvement to "muscular" advisory roles, with American personnel mobilizing and supporting local forces by mentoring, spotting targets, gathering intelligence, and occasionally participating in operations.

As for seeking other potential partners in the fight, Turkey may not allow airstrikes from its territory, but it will play a key role in buffering against ISIS through border security and external pressure. Partnering with Iran would be counterproductive, however, since its leaders believe in an interpretation of Islam not unlike that of ISIS and would attempt to destabilize the situation in order to advance their interests.

In the best-case scenario, ISIS will follow the trajectory of al-Qaeda in Iraq -- namely, reduction from a major insurgent force with high military capability to a collection of terrorist cells with limited political or military impact. Yet just as al-Qaeda has been impossible to eliminate outright, so too is ISIS.

MICHAEL EISENSTADT

The challenges the United States faces in its campaign against ISIS are twofold: (1) the results of the campaign are almost certain to fall short of expectations, and (2) Washington's ability to exploit the group's significant

vulnerabilities is limited by the weaknesses of U.S. partners on the ground.

Given the resilience of ISIS, there will likely be a significant gap between President Obama's proposed actions and their outcomes. The group's *takfiri* ideology has roots reaching back to the origins of Islam that will prove difficult to eliminate. Its supporters reject establishment religious authorities, so it will be hard to delegitimize ISIS on religious grounds. Meanwhile, the reach of social media and the wider Internet enable ISIS to mobilize individuals on a global basis. The group functioned for years as an underground terrorist network, so it would likely adapt well if forced underground again, and its foreign fighters are a strategic reserve that lies partly beyond the coalition's reach. Moreover, the volatile operational environment of the Middle East makes it likely that ISIS will find safe havens in which to reorganize if it is defeated militarily.

U.S. strategy toward the group also depends on the Iraqi government reaching an accommodation with local Sunnis, and the moderate Syrian opposition putting sufficient pressure on the Assad regime to enable a diplomatic settlement there. It is not clear that the region's zero-sum approach to politics will permit either to occur.

At the same time, ISIS has major vulnerabilities to exploit. It is spread thinly across northern Iraq and eastern Syria. It still has a propensity to alienate the constituency for which it claims to fight. It must hold together the loose coalition it leads. By creating a "state," it must now defend terrain, creating targets for airstrikes. And while it is rich by terrorist standards, it is poor by state standards. Moreover, the group is dependent on long, vulnerable lines of communications and is landlocked and surrounded by enemies.

Because Washington's local partners are not yet organized, the air campaign against the group should be deliberate, paced, and sustained, except when surges are required to prevent ISIS victories. U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan shows that quick, decisive victories do not always produce long-term success. A protracted air campaign could break the group's momentum while buying time and space for local forces to organize and conduct the ground operations that will be key to success. The U.S. goal should be to reduce ISIS to a manageable problem, while discrediting its "brand" by undermining its aura of success and dismantling the "Islamic State."

Absent a substantial U.S. ground presence, a favorable outcome will require working with local partners to reap the benefits of U.S. airstrikes. In Iraq, these partners include a reorganized Iraqi military and the Kurdish peshmerga. In Syria, the United States should train and equip the moderate opposition, working with it to achieve small, symbolic victories against Assad regime forces and advertising these wins via social-media videos. This is the best way to demonstrate that momentum is shifting toward the moderate opposition, thereby altering the psychological climate in Syria and helping the moderates gain new recruits at the expense of jihadist groups.

This summary was prepared by Ian Duff. ❖

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