

Defeat ISIS Without Abetting Evildoers

by [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



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Hesitance among U.S. regional allies and short-term expediency are no excuse to align with the regimes in Iran and Syria.

The gruesome beheadings of two American journalists obliged a reluctant Obama administration to shift its policy from containing to defeating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. We'll hopefully get the details of the U.S. strategy from the President on Wednesday night.

Rolling back ISIS will be complicated. Intelligence on the areas it controls is spotty, and targeting militias embedded in civilian areas can be difficult and costly. And while President Obama has not been shy about deploying drones and air power to kill terrorists, with the exception of the Osama Bin Laden operation, the administration has been loath to authorize boots on the ground.

As a result, the key to defeating ISIS will be U.S. coalition-building. We must be exceedingly careful about the allies we make.

In the week since Steven Sotloff, the second American journalist, was beheaded, the administration has dispatched several senior officials to the region to get commitments to participate in the campaign against ISIS. Officials have traveled to Riyadh, Amman and Ankara, seeking partners who are ostensibly willing to deploy troops to Iraq and perhaps Syria.

Historically, with the notable exception of the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War, Arab states have proven averse to doing so. The administration's diminished regional credibility will undoubtedly make it even more difficult to cajole allies to commit.

According to Turkish sources, Ankara already has some troops on the ground in Iraq, bolstering Kurdish peshmerga forces vis-a-vis ISIS. But Turkey has reportedly demurred at U.S. requests to broaden the deployment.

Perhaps Turkey -- a NATO member and one of the few Muslim-majority Middle Eastern states with a serious army --

will relent, and increase its commitments. President Recep Erdogan is likely concerned that more direct Turkish involvement would jeopardize the lives of the dozens of Turks currently being held by ISIS forces. At best, Turkey might allow coalition warplanes to utilize Incirlik Air Base in southern Turkey to target ISIS.

It's also unclear whether Jordan can help. King Abdullah was extremely forthcoming in providing assistance to the coalition during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, but Jordanian parliamentarians are already agitating against participation, and the kingdom's military and security services are overtaxed by Syrian refugees and defending against threats on the borders.

Absent critical assistance and commitments from Washington's longstanding friends in the region, the Obama administration may be tempted to seek assistance from Iran and Syria. Both states are ruled by Shiites, and both regard Sunni Muslim ISIS to be a threat.

The President must resist the temptation to make friends with the enemies of our enemies. This tack would align the U.S. with Shiites against Sunnis, in the process undermining relations with America's traditional regional allies -- and driving Sunnis into the arms of ISIS.

That's not all. Iran and Syria are, according to the State Department, state sponsors of terrorism. In addition to its history of supporting terrorist groups that kill Americans, since 2011 Syria's Bashar Assad regime has slaughtered nearly 200,000, most of them Sunni Muslims. ISIS has become what it is today in large part due to the massacre of Sunnis in Syria. And prior to Sept. 11, 2001, Iranian-backed terrorists killed more Americans than any other terrorist group.

Instead, when Obama lays out his ISIS policy Wednesday night, he would be well-advised to articulate a strategy that targets both ISIS and the brutal Assad regime -- perhaps by hitting Syrian air defenses and initiating a robust program to train and equip vetted moderate opposition forces. The alternative to ISIS isn't the murderous dictator in Damascus or the theocracy in Tehran. Thirteen years after 9/11, short-term expediency shouldn't necessitate aligning with terrorists to defeat terrorists.

David Schenker is the Aufzien Fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. ❖

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