



A Strategy for Beating the Islamic State

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Since containment is no longer a viable option, Washington must build a regional coalition of the willing to roll back the terrorist group.

"We don't have a strategy yet." With those words, President Obama seems to have encapsulated everything that his critics have been alleging for months: that he's improvising, halting and altogether slow to react to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, the brutal terrorist group that has seized much of Iraq and Syria and on Tuesday claimed to have beheaded a second American journalist, Steven Sotloff. And certainly, the president's detractors have pounced on his poorly chosen words.

It's easy to focus on Obama's comment and ignore the real issue: What is the right strategy for countering ISIL? The president has an approach for countering ISIL in Iraq but understands that he cannot succeed against ISIL without also dealing with it in Syria. A safe haven in Syria where ISIL is able to plan, recruit, rearm, recover and return to battle is a prescription for enduring war in Iraq and for increasing threats in the region and even to the U.S. homeland.

So the administration is now wrestling with what its real options in Syria might be. But options need to be guided by a clear objective. In Syria since 2011, there has been a mismatch between the United States' objective of having President Bashar al-Assad go and the means it has been prepared to apply to achieve that end.

Small wonder, therefore, that the administration is struggling now to decide what it should do against ISIL in Syria. It wants to weaken ISIL without strengthening Assad, and yet not be drawn into the Syrian civil war. Avoidance as a strategy in Syria, however, is no longer tenable.

If ISIL is a "cancer," as President Obama has correctly called it, we cannot avoid attacking its presence in Syria. Containment cannot be the objective; rollback must be our aim. The president has said as much -- including in last week's press conference -- but again, we are not applying the means to achieve that end.

Clearly, ISIL is not a threat only to us, and the answer is not and cannot be just a military one. Here again, President Obama is right. To defeat ISIL, Sunnis must turn against it. The Sunni tribes, who revolted against its earlier incarnation in Iraq in 2007, must do so again. They must be backed as they do so financially and militarily -- in both Iraq and Syria. The region's leading Sunni powers -- the Saudis, Emiratis, Jordanians and Turks -- must all play a role here.

As is often the case, however, if the United States does not mobilize and coordinate a multinational response, one is unlikely to emerge, much less be coherent. Moreover, the readiness of others in the region to act -- overtly and covertly -- will depend on seeing what the United States is prepared to do. Secretary of State John Kerry has spoken eloquently about putting together a global coalition to confront ISIL; when he goes to the Middle East later this week, however, the Saudis and others will ask him pointed questions about U.S. strategy.

The secretary will need to show that the United States has a game plan in mind. He will need to be able to spell out that President Obama is prepared to carry out air strikes against ISIL positions in Syria as well as Iraq -- and that the United States will, in a timely fashion, provide significant lethal assistance and logistical support to those fighting not just ISIL but Assad as well.

The latter is essential, particularly given the narrative that has emerged among Sunnis in the region: The United States did nothing when thousands of Sunnis were slaughtered in Syria, but when Yezidis, Christians and Kurds were threatened, America began to bomb ISIL. Launching attacks against ISIL but doing nothing against Assad will feed this narrative. The same is true of appearing to be working in tandem with the Iranians, and Iranian-backed Iraqi Shiite militias, against ISIL.

Although ISIL is trying to exploit this narrative to build its appeal among Sunnis, the good news is that the United States doesn't have to convince the Saudis and others that ISIL is a threat. Saudi King Abdullah has become vocal in condemning ISIL, and now Saudi religious authorities are doing so as well.

Kerry needs to capitalize on the Saudi posture. Yes, the Saudis will press to know what the United States is prepared to do, but he can also press them to step up and take a leadership position in challenging ISIL.

Why not ask them to host an international conference designed to counter the ISIL threat? Prepare the conference so that all who attend know in advance that they must make a tangible commitment to defeating ISIL. Having a Sunni Arab state in the lead can only add to the legitimacy of the campaign against ISIL -- and the Arab states in this campaign must also provide military support -- involving forces, arms, training; subsidies for the tribes; intelligence; and diplomatic and even religious efforts to discredit ISIL. (Egypt's al-Azhar University, which is the leading regional center for Sunni religious scholars, could be enlisted to condemn ISIL and the threat it poses to Islam.)

Only a comprehensive strategy can defeat ISIL. But the objective must be clear; it must involve rolling back ISIL in Syria; it must provide the means to support and protect those Sunni tribes that will fight the group; and it must enlist the leading Sunni states and have them play a role that goes beyond only writing checks.

None of this will happen by itself. The United States will have to be prepared to act in Syria in a way that is credible to our key Sunni partners. But if they want us to use air power, logistical support and our intelligence means more systematically, including in Syria, we need to know what they are prepared to do directly as well. After all, ISIL is far more of a threat to them than it is to us.

As a general principle, President Obama has sought to have international support and participation when the United

States uses force abroad. The threat posed by ISIL makes an international response possible, provided we don't equivocate about our objective or the means we are prepared to employ to achieve it. We need, in a word, a strategy.

Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. He served as special assistant to President Obama from 2009 to 2011. ❖

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