

# ISIS Poses Threat Beyond Iraq

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Jul 2, 2014

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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**In addition to addressing the Iraq crisis directly, Washington should take a more robust, strategic approach to Syria while preempting possible threats to Jordan and other states.**

**A**ny traveler to the Middle East today can feel the tidal wave sweeping the area. The Arab Awakening is now a distant memory, and the hopes for democracy have been replaced by the black flags of al-Qaeda. In their pickup trucks, they sweep into broader areas of northern and western Iraq, remove the border posts separating Iraq and Syria, threaten the transit areas that ship Iraqi oil to Jordan, and potentially endanger the Hashemite Kingdom and Saudi Arabia.

Now they declare themselves not the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), but just the Islamic State, and proclaim their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "caliph" over all Muslims.

## CHANGE the BALANCE OF POWER

**W**hile this declaration is surely overstated, there is good reason to worry about the al-Qaeda offshoot we call ISIS embedding itself in the Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria. This is an area with a deeply disaffected Sunni population, which permitted a collection of ISIS and related allies to overwhelm an Iraqi army vastly superior in numbers and firepower. If al-Qaeda, from its sanctuary in Afghanistan, could produce 9/11, imagine the threats ISIS can pose from the much larger area in Iraq and Syria.

President Obama is right to call attention to the threat. It goes beyond the one ISIS poses in Iraq, and addressing it requires support from our traditional Arab friends.

## IRANIAN THREAT

**B**ut while the Saudis, Turks, Emiratis and Jordanians are worried about ISIS, they will not be responsive to American pleas for help if they think it will lead to the dominance of Iran and its Shiite militias over Sunni

populations. The Saudis and others are suspicious when both the U.S. and Iran send advisers and supply drones and provide material support to Iraq to deal with ISIS, even as Bashar Assad's government in Syria bombs ISIS positions along the Syrian-Iraqi border. Our partners must see we are determined to change the balance of power in the Syrian civil war -- a conflict inextricably linked to what is happening in Iraq -- not just against ISIS but against the Assad regime.

The White House announcement seeking to provide \$500 million in assistance to the Syrian opposition will help, but only if it is seen as part of a coherent plan for weakening the Assad regime and offsetting the flood of Iranian and Russian arms.

And, it must also be tied to ensuring collectively that ISIS does not spread to Jordan. Jordan has absorbed close to a million refugees from Syria (on top of the large number of Iraqis it took in during the worst years of the war in Iraq). How many among these Syrians and Iraqis may be cells planning to support the entry of ISIS? The Hashemite Kingdom has a highly professional, well-motivated military. It will not collapse like Iraq. But the Jordanians are feeling the strain of absorbing huge numbers of refugees, and we can ill afford to be surprised in Jordan the way we were surprised in Iraq.

## IMPORTANCE OF JORDAN

Jordan is a buffer for Saudi Arabia to the south and Israel to the west. We should talk to the Israelis about what they see and do contingency planning with them -- and do the same with the Jordanians, the Saudis and Emiratis. Although mindful of ISIS threats, the latter two want to see that the U.S. is neither withdrawing from the area nor under any illusions about the threats from Iran. Of course, this cannot be a one-way street. The Saudis and Emiratis must do more than write checks. Are they prepared to put their own forces into play in supporting Jordan or in building a buffer for Jordan in southern Syria, if necessary -- and what might they require from us to do so?

The point is that we are facing a wider threat in the region, and our approach cannot be limited to Iraq. Because the war in Syria is connected to Iraq, our approach to Syria must become much less limited and much more strategic. We must anticipate and pre-empt possible threats to Jordan. In doing so, as we shape options, our choices cannot be framed as either putting boots on the ground or doing nothing.

*Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

*USA Today*

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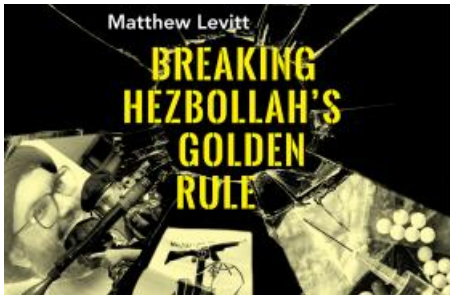


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