

Aligning Means and Ends, Policies and Strategy in the War on ISIL

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Chairman Wilson, ranking member Langevin, distinguished members of the subcommittee: thank you for giving me this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss this matter of great importance to our nation.

Recent gains by Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria mark major setbacks in the nearly year-old campaign against the group. These developments undermine Obama administration claims of progress in the war, and highlight fundamental flaws in the administration's strategy that need to be rectified if the United States and its coalition of 60-plus states are to succeed. President Obama was only partially right when he said several weeks ago that America lacks a "complete strategy" for dealing with ISIL because of Iraq's lack of commitment. In fact, much of the dysfunction in U.S. strategy derives from American policies, the policies of partners in the counter-ISIL campaign, and the policies of the Iraqi government.

For starters, the United States needs to address the means-ends mismatch in its strategy. It has devoted inadequate resources in pursuit of a goal — to "degrade and eventually destroy" ISIL — whose ultimate objective is likely to remain unattainable for the foreseeable future. This is due to ISIL's resilience, the weakness of America's regional partners, and the incoherence of current U.S. strategy.

Resilient Organization. ISIL's predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), was defeated between 2007-2011 before returning in its current guise. Its ability to rebound from this blow is rooted in a number of factors.

For its supporters, ISIL's ideology embodies "true" Islam, unsullied by the demands of political competition or undue concern for the opinion of unbelievers. They are likewise unbothered by the criticism of establishment Muslim clerics, whom they regard as servants of an illegitimate state system. For this reason, it is difficult to delegitimize ISIL on religious grounds. Administration efforts to use critical statements by mainstream clerics to do so are likely to only succeed on the margins.

ISIL had previously survived as an underground terrorist network and could do so again if it were run to ground, drawing on skills honed during its years in the shadows. It can, moreover, draw on financial and manpower reserves from around the world (though the coalition is trying to stem the flow of both), and it has recently started taking on the attributes of a decentralized network, with jihadist groups around the region pledging fealty (*bay'ah*) to it. This will likely ensure the survival of the ISIL brand in some shape or form, even if its flagship operation in Iraq and Syria is defeated.

The operational environment in the Middle East is likewise conducive to ISIL's continued survival. Since the popular uprisings of 2011, the region has been increasingly characterized by weak and failing states which lack the capacity to root out terrorist networks or defeat insurgent groups, and the emergence of ungoverned spaces which serve as safe havens for such organizations (such as eastern Syria). The zero-sum politics that prevails in the region helped bring about this state of affairs, and will ensure the survival of groups like ISIL, which feed on the grievances and aspirations of the region's Sunni population.

While ISIL enjoys a number of strengths in the realm of military leadership, organization, and tactical virtuosity, it is also bedeviled by numerous vulnerabilities: overextended forces; a propensity to alienate its support base; internal divisions between Iraqis, Arabs, and non-Arabs; uncertain finance streams; and its landlocked position — though it has proven particularly adept at exploiting its porous border with Turkey. Yet, the weakness of the Arab state system has prevented America's regional partners from capitalizing on these vulnerabilities.

Thus, while the United States and its partners can potentially degrade ISIL, they will not be able to destroy it — at least anytime soon. In the long run, without addressing those factors that contribute to the appeal of groups like ISIL and al-Qaeda, the best the United States can hope for is to destroy its overt military formations, to dismantle the administrative machinery of its state, and to push it underground — at least in Iraq. But as recent events have shown, efforts to date have borne only mixed results. While U.S. military operations may be attriting ISIL forces, and its partners have retaken ground previously lost to the group, the coalition has not degraded the overall capabilities of an organization that has demonstrated impressive regenerative powers, and which remains on the offensive on a number of important fronts.

Yet, the solution is not another major U.S. ground commitment to the region. The American people would not support such a deployment, and even if they did — and the United States were to put 50,000 service-members on the ground, were to defeat ISIL's military forces, and were to dismantle its state — without a change in the nature of politics in Iraq (and other troubled states in the region), U.S. forces would almost certainly have to return again 3-5 years hence to deal with this problem. The Middle East has an insatiable appetite for American blood and treasure that the Washington should not indulge; it would do better to avoid this vicious cycle.

Walking away is not an option either. The Obama administration's experience of the past six years shows that “if you don't visit the Middle East, it will visit you.” The challenge is to find the right balance; the United States and its coalition partners need to adjust their light footprint strategy to ensure that the coalition can gradually roll back ISIL while avoiding additional major setbacks and addressing the factors that contribute to its appeal.

Disjointed Strategy. The United States and its partners have often pursued policies that have strengthened salafi-jihadist groups such as ISIL, thereby undermining the U.S.-led campaign. Doubling down on the current approach in Iraq and Syria — as promised three weeks ago in Paris by U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Tony Blinken — without altering policies that work at cross-purposes to the coalition military effort will only serve to further complicate matters.

First, Washington needs to acknowledge that its own policies contributed to the rise of groups like Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL in Syria, and the return of ISIL to Iraq. American inaction in the face of the Syrian civil war and the Maliki government's exclusionary politics in Iraq, the widespread perception in the region that the United States is tacitly aligned with Iran, and the fact that America's first military strikes in Iraq were to save Yezidis, Turkmen, and Kurds — anybody but Sunni Arabs — were a recruiting boon for jihadists.

Second, America's Syria policy has been hostage to its Iran policy. The administration has not done more to militarily assist the Syria opposition at least in part to avoid jeopardizing a nuclear deal with Iran. Yet the prospect of a deal has not constrained the Islamic Republic in Syria. The United States must pursue its own interests in Syria, which means increasing support for what remains of the “moderate” opposition there, even while pursuing a nuclear deal with Iran. Otherwise, fighters will continue to flock to extremist groups to fight the Assad regime and their Iranian allies.

Third, the United States insists that it is training and equipping the “moderate” Syrian opposition to fight ISIL, while the opposition, as well as America’s partners in this effort — Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar — insist that it fight the Assad regime. The U.S. stance is likely to stymie efforts to recruit Syrian opposition fighters who are not interested in fighting ISIL, while the divergence between Washington and its partners on this matter is a formula for disaster.

Fourth, the success of America’s counter-ISIL strategy is hostage to the politics and policies of its regional partners. Several have provided or permitted their citizens to provide financial and military support to jihadist groups, and some still do. Some of this aid has found its way to ISIL, while members of these groups have sometimes pledged fealty en masse to ISIL. Foreign support for jihadists often redounds to the benefit of ISIL, because it is perceived by many to be the most successful jihadist brand. Meanwhile, Iraqi Prime Minister Haydar al-Abadi has not done much to change the zero-sum politics in Iraq that created the conditions for the return of AQI in the guise of ISIL; efforts at Sunni outreach by Baghdad remain stillborn.

Finally, the United States will not succeed in its fight against ISIL in Iraq if it does not succeed in its fight against ISIL in Syria. Eastern Syria served in the past as a safe haven for ISIL and continues to serve as a support base for its operations in Iraq. If ISIL is not expelled from eastern Syria, it will continue to destabilize Iraq from there. For this reason, America needs to replace its Iraq-first strategy with one that pursues a simultaneous two-front fight against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. This will convince Syrians that Washington is concerned about their fate, and improve prospects for the train and equip program for the moderate Syrian opposition that could divert personnel and materiel now going to more extreme groups.

It is not too late to correct course. The fires now consuming Iraq and Syria will, tragically, continue to burn for years to come, and the outcome of these struggles is far from assured. The United States can make a difference if it remains politically and militarily engaged, creating opportunities, while exploiting those that arise.

Aligning Means and Ends, Policy and Strategy. So what would a prudent and effective course-adjustment involve? In Iraq, this would mean more reconnaissance drones (most now support operations in Afghanistan), more joint terminal attack controllers and special forces — with rules of engagement that enable them to accompany Iraqi units into combat, more airpower, and more personnel devoted to the train and equip effort for the Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish peshmerga. It would also entail more pressure on the Iraqi government to permit the arming and training of Sunni Arab tribesmen as militiamen — to gain Sunni buy-in and create a force to fight ISIL in predominantly Sunni regions of Iraq.

The United States likewise needs to rethink its approach to train and equip. It needs to work with the Iraqi government to find solutions to persistent problems with military leadership, unit cohesion, and motivation. It needs to constantly emphasize to Baghdad that if it fails to get the politics of the counter-ISIL campaign right — if the security forces continue to be perceived as driven by sectarian or political considerations — and if corruption remains rampant, the prospects for the counter-ISIL campaign will be dismal. The United States should look to successful Middle Eastern insurgent groups, militias, and armies for leadership and team-building models that have worked well within the region’s cultural context.

Finally, the coalition needs to avoid additional reverses as occurred in Ramadi. The perception that momentum has shifted against ISIL is key to success in Iraq (and Syria). New victories for ISIL — even if ephemeral — will be fatal to efforts to rebuild American credibility and to convince Sunni Arabs sitting on the fence to join the coalition against ISIL.

In Syria, the United States should likewise beef up its effort to train and equip “moderate” opposition groups, while dropping its prior insistence that these groups fight only ISIL. These groups have been

decimated in the past 1-2 years (due in part to a lack of American support), and while this most recent effort has gotten off to a slow start, money and weapons have a way of generating their own demand.

The United States should not, for now, fixate on numbers. Quality is more important than quantity, as the Syrian battlespace is highly fragmented, and the challenge is to create organizations that can seize and hold ground, hold their own in local fights, and effectively govern small, defensible enclaves. Perhaps the most important task is to demonstrate that the United States is finally serious about supporting the opposition, in order to attract new recruits and win back defectors who opportunistically migrated from the Free Syrian Army to better resourced (and frequently more extreme) groups. And by more strongly supporting the moderate opposition, the U.S. will be able to more effectively pressure allies to pare back support for jihadist opposition groups.

To deal with the Assad regime barrel-bomb threat, the United States should work to create a serious anti-aircraft artillery capability in the opposition groups it supports, while avoiding the provision of MANPADs in large numbers due to proliferation fears. Though low-tech, flak is highly lethal; even when it does not succeed in shooting down aircraft, it forces enemy pilots to deliver their unguided ordnance from higher altitudes, thereby degrading their accuracy. And it is useful in ground combat.

In addition to receiving military training, U.S.-supported opposition groups should be trained in governance and administration, to enable them to create secure enclaves for local residents and internally displaced persons. Making this the principal criteria by which opposition groups are assessed may be one way for the United States and its partners to reconcile their divergent views regarding the role of the opposition vis-à-vis the Assad regime and ISIL — at least for now — and address Washington's concerns that Tehran would use the ramp-up of the train and equip effort as a pretext to encourage pro-Iranian militias to attack U.S. forces in Iraq.

In sum, closing the gap between means and ends in the counter-ISIL strategy is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for success. If the United States is to succeed in Iraq and Syria, it will also need to alter its policies — and those of its partners — which have greatly complicated the military effort, and more closely align its policies with the counter-ISIL strategy. Should it prove unwilling or unable to do so, the prospects for success against ISIL will become close to nil. The success of the U.S. strategy, then, depends in part on its allies' politics and policy choices—and this is its Achilles' heel.

The Defeat Mechanism. If ISIL's military is to be defeated and its "Islamic state" dismantled, the United States will need to exploit its vulnerabilities and sharpen the contradictions inherent in ISIL rule. This will require intensified action along military, economic, and psychological lines of effort to create synergies capable of producing decisive results:

Military operations should attrite ISIL's combat power, hit symbolic and substantive targets associated with its rule (e.g., key leaders), and pressure ISIL simultaneously in Iraq and Syria — prioritizing neither, while employing different means in each—in order to overextend ISIL and render it vulnerable to internal uprisings and external attack.

The United States should likewise continue to disrupt ISIL's oil production and smuggling activities to choke off its revenue stream and resources available for public services, governance, and economic activities. This will hopefully stir discontent and unrest in areas it controls. Disrupting the criminal activities that have traditionally been its main source of income will, however, be much harder.

The United States should likewise strive to transform the psychological environment in Iraq and Syria by creating the perception, mainly through military means, that ISIL's days are numbered. Such an effort may induce less committed supporters or members to defect or turn on the group; deter prospective

foreign fighters from joining it; and embolden subject populations to rise up against its overstretched forces.

However, military reverses, as recently occurred in Ramadi, undermine such efforts. They deter Sunnis from undertaking the kinds of uprisings that will be essential to defeat ISIL by instilling fears that after rising up, they might once again find themselves under ISIL rule and subject to retribution.

Efforts to transform the psychological environment should likewise include attempts to convince Syrians that the “moderate” opposition constitutes a viable third way between the regime and ISIL, and to convince Iraqi Sunnis that the government of Prime Minister Abadi offers a better future than does ISIL. Offers by the Iraqi government of administrative and security federalism to the largely Sunni provinces of Iraq will be crucial here.

Undermining ISIL’s Appeal. The main purpose of ISIL’s prodigious and sophisticated media efforts is to enhance its appeal, burnish its ideological credentials, and build up its brand. Because so much of ISIL’s appeal derives from its aura of military invincibility, its defeat would show that ISIL was just another failed ideological movement that brought only ruin to those who embrace it. Moreover, its defeat would mean no caliphate, no Islamic utopia, no glory and adventure, no opportunity to dominate others, no spoils of war, and no sex slaves — the things that have drawn so many to embrace its cause. Through military victories, the United States can defeat ISIL’s media effort by demonstrating that the tide is turning against it and that its days are numbered. The defeat of ISIL is thus key to undermining its appeal, discrediting its ideology, and demolishing its brand. And this, ultimately, is the most important goal of the counter-ISIL military campaign. But the administration’s current light footprint approach permits ISIL to continue to accrue victories that undercut this effort.

Finally, the U.S. needs to figure out how al-Qaeda and its affiliates as well as Iran fit into all of this. For if the coalition enfeebles or defeats ISIL only to clear the way for primacy of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria and the expansion of Iranian influence in Mesopotamia and the Levant, the United States will have only succeeded in adding fuel to the region’s raging sectarian and geopolitical conflicts. The sooner Washington realizes this, the sooner it can work to avert an even greater disaster down the road that it may be inadvertently abetting.

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