

## The Fight Against ISIS: The Road Ahead

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Battlefield Successes and Challenges: Recent Reform Efforts to Win the War Against ISIS

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1. The destruction of the ISIS caliphate is nearly complete. The last figure provided to the public by the Administration is that ISIS now holds only 5 percent of the territory it controlled at its peak. This is a significant success story, and compliments go to both the Obama Administration, which put together the overall strategy of fighting the group through proxies supported by the United States and to the Trump Administration, which made some meaningful adjustments in military tactics, including putting additional U.S. special forces on the ground and deploying them closer to the fighting, cutting off escape routes for ISIS fighters trapped in urban areas, and employing a greater use of U.S. airpower (with a consequent increase in civilian casualties, which ISIS is using in its propaganda). I have no doubt that the Obama Administration's tactical approach would have brought us to where we are today, but I also have no doubt that the Trump Administration's tactics accelerated the success. The destruction of the caliphate is important as it has already reduced the ability of ISIS in Iraq/Syria to direct attacks in the West and as it will undermine the ISIS brand and therefore eventually lead to a reduction in attacks in the West inspired by ISIS in Iraq/Syria.
2. The elimination of the caliphate is not the same thing as the elimination of ISIS in Iraq/Syria. ISIS fighters will now go underground, will now operate out of the shadows, much like its predecessor organization, al-Qaida in Iraq did for years. From these shadows, we will see traditional terrorist attacks in both countries – against regime targets and against Shia targets in an effort to kindle sectarianism – as well as attacks in neighboring countries. What is the U.S. strategy for dealing with the remnants of the group in both countries and the near-term risks they pose? I have not yet heard the Administration articulate such a strategy.
3. Importantly, military/security success against ISIS is only the first step in ensuring that we do not see a reemergence of a safe haven for group in Iraq/Syria. We need a similar political success in both countries. What is that success? It is the Sunnis in both Syria and Iraq feeling as if they have a stake in the future of their countries and that they have a say in how they are governed. Without that, ISIS, in that name or some other, will reemerge, and our current military success will be for naught. Thus, the focus now needs to shift from DoD to the State Department. What is State's political strategy for both countries? I have not heard this clearly articulated. Two final points on this: First, some say that this is not the job of the U.S. Some say this should be left to the region to resolve. The answer to that point is that if we do not lead, it won't happen, and we will be the ones who pay the price down the road. And, second, a political solution in both countries, particularly Syria, will be exceptionally hard to achieve. But we should not shy away just because it is hard. America can and is able to do hard.
4. ISIS has spread around the globe. ISIS affiliates now operate in some over 20 countries, including in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, Egypt, the Philippines, and many other countries. My sense is that DoD is on the offensive against these groups, aggressively assisting local forces and allies/partners in their fights against them. This is important and needs to continue, as we can't

let ISIS outside Iraq/Syria become the new center of gravity for the group, become the new caliphate, become the place where the group can again direct operations against the West, become the place that can inspire young men and women to either join the group where it is or fight where they are by conducting lone-wolf attacks. The overriding lesson of my time working CT issues for both the Bush and Obama Administrations is that you have to keep the pressure on terrorists and that the best way to do that is, as a first choice, supporting allies/partners in their fights but also being willing to do it on our own when allies/partners are not available.

5. The United States and its allies/partners have largely focused on the symptoms of the extremist disease – that is, those terrorists who already exist, those terrorists who are trying to kill us. We have not focused on the causes of the disease – poor governance in many countries around the world, the regional struggle between Iran and the Sunni gulf states, and the struggle within Islam between fundamentalists and moderates. We cannot solve these problems, but we can lead those who can solve those problems. If we do not – and we have not in the past and we are not doing so today – the problem of Islamic extremism will be with us for generations. As fast as we take bad guys off the battlefield, the enemy will put more on it.