



# Next Steps for U.S. Foreign Policy on Syria and Iraq

House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on Middle East and North Africa  
November 19, 2014

Statement of  
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American strategy in Iraq and Syria continues to suffer from a fatal flaw. President Obama explicitly ordered that it focus only on “degrading” and “destroying” the Islamic State to the exclusion of any other American national security interests and regardless of the likelihood of the long-term success of any such effort undertaken in isolation. As a result, the strategy has achieved some limited successes against the Islamic State, but those isolated successes are coming at the expense of other important American security concerns. The current approach, in particular, has strengthened the position of Iran, its armed forces, and its proxies in Iraq, and has allowed al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra to expand its control and influence in Syria. These trends are very likely to continue if the U.S continues to pursue the present strategy.

Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, recently said that the battle against the Islamic State is beginning to turn, but that the campaign to defeat it would take several years. He also said that he might have to recommend the deployment of additional American forces and their use in combat alongside Iraqi troops to retake the city of Mosul. I agree with his assessments and I continue to believe that U.S. forces will, indeed, be needed to clear Mosul. The current change of momentum provides a good opportunity to consider the likely outcome of the present effort in Iraq, its potential stability, and the degree to which it coheres with American national security interests. It is also an important moment to remember that there is no parallel campaign in Syria, where the situation continues to worsen as Jabhat al Nusra gains territory, the Islamic State retains the lands it had taken, Bashar al Assad continues to murder his own people, and such moderate opposition as there is receives little meaningful support.

U.S. strategy in Iraq today relies on a combination of Iraqi Security Forces (which are fundamentally different from what we left behind in 2011), Popular Mobilization Units (hastily-trained anti-ISIS volunteers, largely from Shi’a areas), Iranian-controlled Shi’a militias, a limited number of Sunni tribal volunteers, and some Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Qods Force advisers (including Major General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Qods Force, himself).

American strategy complements Iranian goals, perhaps inadvertently. Iran is pursuing a strategy in Iraq that is analagous to the one it has been pursuing in Syria. It will create in Iraq a security structure in which anti-American Iranian-backed militia commanders operate side-by-side and overtly with Iraqi Security Forces with a degree of interdependence that will make them inseparable. Such a force can never be representative of Iraq as a whole, and will never be accepted over the long term by any of Iraq’s minority populations. It will also be antithetical to American interests in the long term, while remaining a vector for Iranian control and influence. The outcome of this approach will be unstable and will entrench Iran in Iraq at the expense of America and our allies.

The Obama Administration still has not articulated any strategy in Syria. U.S. efforts there appear confined to a limited number of airstrikes, carefully restricted to hit only Islamic State or Khorasan Group targets. On the rare occasions when Jabhat al Nusra fighters have been hit, the White House

has moved rapidly to deny that it was targeting them. The U.S. has taken no measures to weaken the Assad regime militarily. Assad therefore continues to fly combat aircraft and helicopters and to use them to conduct barrel-bombing attacks and other atrocities against his own people. Assad has nevertheless lost ground to the Islamic State, and is struggling to maintain a presence in eastern Syria. He has also lost ground in Dera'a and Quneitra south of Damascus to Jabhat al Nusra and other rebel forces. The forces that the U.S. has nominally been backing have suffered losses at the hands of the Islamic State, Jabhat al Nusra, and the regime.

The current trajectory in Syria, therefore, will likely lead to a situation in which Jabhat al Nusra and some of its Salafist allies control significant areas south of Damascus and in the Idlib countryside; the Islamic State retains control of much of the Euphrates River Valley; the regime continues to fight for Damascus, controls the M5 highway to just past Hama, and controls the coast; and the moderate opposition remains marginal and incapable of shaping the battlefield in any material way.

President Obama has misdefined our mission in Iraq and Syria by attempting to deal with one problem in isolation from its context and from the many other challenges facing the U.S. We have seen this movie before. The Bush Administration also misdefined the problem in Iraq before 2007, believing that an inclusive political process combined with assistance to the nascent Iraqi Security Forces would solve the problem. Both administrations then fell into the trap of focusing on measures of progress that were relevant only within the narrowly-constrained view of the situation they had decided to confine themselves to. Thus the Bush administration kept briefing the acres of territory turned over to Iraqi security leads and highlighting Iraqi security operations that were actually sectarian cleansing undertakings that made the underlying problem worse. The Obama administration is likewise focused on reporting progress only in limited areas--strikes conducted against Islamic State positions, however trivial, and limited tactical gains made by the highly-sectarian and Iranian-dominated security forces on the ground.

We must raise our gaze from the tactics of fighting the Islamic State. We need a strategy not only to disrupt and defeat the Islamic State, but also to reduce Iranian influence in the region rather than expanding it, to develop inclusive Iraqi security forces rather than sectarian units intertwined with militias and the Qods Force, and to bring the Sunni tribes in Iraq once more to the negotiating table to hammer out a revised political deal with the Shi'a dominated government in Baghdad rather than helping that government try to simply crush them.

And we need a strategy in Syria. It must not hand Syria's Sunnis over to either the Islamic State or Jabhat al Nusra. It must not leave Assad in power. It must expel Lebanese Hezbollah from Syria. And it must find and build up a moderate opposition among Syria's Sunni, 'Alawites, and Kurds who will be able one day to form a new, inclusive government acceptable to the Syrian people. Any strategy that aims at lesser goals is a recipe for permanent sectarian and regional proxy war that will provide an excellent safe-haven for al Qaeda-affiliated groups and Iranian terrorist allies in Syria, and will ultimately undermine any stability that might be achieved in Iraq as well.

**Dr. Kimberly E. Kagan** is the founder and president of the Institute for the Study of War. She is a military historian who has taught at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Yale, Georgetown, and American University, and is the author of a number of books and numerous essays. Most recently, she is the co-author (with Frederick Kagan and Jessica D. Lewis) of *A Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State*. ISW has tracked and predicted the rise of ISIS since late 2011 and that research may be found in “*Predicting the Rise of the Islamic State*” at [www.UnderstandingWar.org](http://www.UnderstandingWar.org).

Dr. Kagan previously conducted regular battlefield circulations of Iraq between May 2007 and April 2010 while Gen. Petraeus and Gen. Raymond T. Odierno served as the MNF-I Commanding General. She participated formally on the Joint Campaign Plan Assessment Team for Multi-National Force-Iraq in October 2008 and October 2009, and as part of the Civilian Advisory Team for the CENTCOM strategic review in January 2009.

In addition, she served in Kabul for 17 months from 2010 to 2012 working for commanders of the International Security Assistance Force, Gen. David H. Petraeus and subsequently Gen. John Allen. Dr. Kagan also served as a member of Gen. Stanley McChrystal’s strategic assessment team, comprised of civilian experts, during his campaign review in June and July 2009. Admiral Mike Mullen, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recognized Dr. Kagan for this deployment as a volunteer with the Distinguished Public Service Award, the highest honor the Chairman can present to civilians who do not work for the Department of Defense.

She is the author of *The Eye of Command* (2006) and *The Surge: A Military History* (2009), and editor of *The Imperial Moment* (2010). Dr. Kagan has published numerous essays in outlets such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Weekly Standard*, and *Foreign Policy*. She co-produced “The Surge: The Whole Story,” an hour-long oral history and documentary film on the campaign in Iraq from 2007 to 2008.

Dr. Kagan held an Olin Postdoctoral Fellowship in Military History at Yale International Security Studies in 2004 to 2005 and was a National Security Fellow at Harvard’s Olin Institute for Strategic Studies in 2002 to 2003. She received her B.A. in Classical Civilization and her Ph.D. in History from Yale University.