

## **The Imploding U.S. Strategy in the Islamic State War?**

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It is too early to say that the U.S. strategy against the Islamic State is imploding, but it is scarcely too soon to question whether this is possible. In fact, it is far from clear that the original U.S. strategy ever planned to deal with the complications that have arisen since President Obama officially announced a portion of what that strategy really had to be.

### **The Non-Strategy for Dealing with the Islamic State**

To begin with, the basic goal of degrading and destroying the Islamic State always bordered on the ridiculous. It was always clear that some form of violent Islamic extremism would survive any combination of U.S. air attacks, Iraqi efforts to clear Iraq on the ground, and the limited capabilities of the Free Syrian Army. In fact, senior U.S. defense officials and military officers have repeatedly made this clear by limiting the objective to “degrade” and noting that the struggle against violent religious extremism would go on for years if not more than a decade.

U.S. counterterrorism data make the broader nature of this struggle all too clear even if the fact the United States is working with its regional allies to deal with other extremism movements in virtually every country with a large Muslim population did not. Like the worst moments in the Christian Reformation and Counterreformation, this is a struggle that goes far beyond one country or one movement.

The database for the most recent U.S. State Department Country Reports on Terrorism shows an increase from less than 300 major terrorist incidents a year in the Middle East and North Africa during 1998 to 2004 to 1,600 in 2008, then from 1,500 in 2010 to 1,700 in 2011, 2,500 in 2012, and 4,650 in 2013 – a fifteen fold increase since 2002, and threefold increase since 2010. Yet, bad as these figures were, the worst cases of terrorism were outside the region and in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

A recent RAND study found a 58-percent increase in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups from 2010 to 2013, and that the number of Salafi jihadists more than doubled from 2010 to 2013, according to both its low and high estimates. Moreover, for all the U.S. and other Western fears of terrorism, RAND found that, “Approximately 99 percent of the attacks by al Qaeda and its affiliates in 2013 were against “near enemy:” largely other Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa.

No one should ignore the fact that the Islamic State is a key threat. RAND did find a significant increase in attacks by al Qaeda–affiliated groups between 2007 and 2013, although the most the violence in 2013 was perpetrated by the Islamic State (43 percent), which eventually left al Qaeda. But, the other leading groups were affiliated with al-

Qaeda and were al Shabaab (25 percent); Jabhat al-Nusra (21 percent); and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (10 percent).

It is also critical to point out that even if the Islamic state does not survive as an entity in both Syria and Iraq, intelligence estimates by one Arab ally count some thirty rebel factions in Syria and the largest and most powerful are violent Islamic extremist. Some U.S. expert counts list more than 70 rebel factions and subgroups, although both sources seem to agree that the most likely group to emerge if the Islamic State ever does break up is Jabhat al-Nusra – an affiliate of al-Qaeda.

What this means in simple terms is that even if the Islamic State could be “destroyed,” rather than “degraded,” a strategy based on that objective rather than forging a comprehensive strategy and set of partnerships to fight violent religious extremism make no sense even in Syria, much less for a world power – particularly one already fighting other military battles against such movements in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. At present we have a partial if not a non-strategy even against our declared enemy and no clear strategy for what we once called a “war on terrorism” and one where every metric shows we are not winning.

We not only need to clarify every aspect of what we are really trying to do in Iraq and Syria to fight the Islamic State, we need to go from reporting on global patterns in terrorism and engaging in the struggle of the moment to some clear set of priorities, well defined partnerships with Muslim and other key states, and creating a global strategy that defines clear patterns of action, resources to implement them, and *honest* metrics for measuring progress – none of which we have done well over a decade after 9/11.

### **The Non-Strategy for Dealing with Syria**

In fairness, many of those who shaped the strategy for dealing with the Islamic State were so focused on Iraq that they almost certainly thought they could decouple the campaign to degrade the Islamic State and drive it out of populated areas in Iraq from any broader goal in Syria for either defeating Assad or creating a meaningful force of moderate rebels.

Given the sharp constraints on the size and use of air power, an advisory and enabling presence on the ground, and the earlier de facto strategic decision to let Syria fester, it made a kind of sense to talk about a token level of new training for Syrian rebels of some 5,000 a year, undefined additional arms and funding, and bypass Syria except for humanitarian relief and better cooperation with key Arab allies like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

None of this has actually worked out. The United States underestimated the extent to which the Islamic State could exploit humanitarian issues in Syria like the Yazidis and the Kurds. It only seems to have dimly understood what the Islamic State understood all too well: the Erdogan government in Turkey’s focus on destroying Assad and willingness to deal with Sunni Islamic extremists like the Islamic State. It seems to have forgotten how easy it has often been for outsiders to exploit Kurdish factions, and just how much the very real suffering and discrimination the Kurds face can motivate them.

The end result is a strategic mess. The Assad forces are using the U.S. and allied campaign against the Islamic state to make a massive step up in air attacks on other rebels

with some 200 strikes on October 20th. The Turks have been caught between their own Kurdish problem and the threat to the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, seeking a buffer zone and massive escalation of the U.S. role in Syria against Assad while finding that the Islamic State can use Turkey much more effectively than Turkey can use the Islamic State.

The U.S. air campaign has turned into an unfocused mess as the U.S. has shifted limited air strike resources to focus on Syria and a militarily meaningless and isolated small Syrian Kurdish enclave at Kobani at the expense of supporting Iraqi forces in Anbar and intensifying the air campaign against other Islamic State targets in Syria. As of October 20<sup>th</sup>, the United States had flown some 310 strikes in more than 2½ months of air activity in Iraq, and 231 in Syria. It began its strikes in Iraq, however, on August 8<sup>th</sup>, escalated to major air strikes on the Islamic state and an Al Qaeda element in Syria on September 22<sup>nd</sup> to October 3<sup>rd</sup>, and then let the Kurdish crisis in Kobani dominate the air campaign after October 5<sup>th</sup>.

This, however, is an air campaign that USCENTCOM reports is so small that it rarely totals even 25 strikes a day in both Iraq and Syria against a steadily more disperse Islamic State that can shelter in populated areas and use human shields without reservation. It has flown well under 10 strikes per day on average in both countries, and at best is most effective in striking at exposed combat vehicles visible and isolated enough to make easy targets – albeit under conditions where the strike sortie costs vastly more than the target is hit.

According to a BBC analysis of USCENTCOM data, the strikes hit some 300 combat vehicles through October 8th, but only about 25 were directed against exposed IS fighters. Some 20 more hit refineries, 75 hit firing positions, 35 hit bases and headquarters of all kinds, 35 more hit checkpoints/garrisons/training camps. Issuing daily PR statements about its successes out of the context of its overall impact on both the Islamic State and Iraq serve little to no real purpose.

This does not, however, explain the broader causes of reporting by Rajiv Chandrasekaren in the *Washington Post* on October 23<sup>rd</sup> that states that the mission for training moderate Syria rebel forces will be to make the 5,000 additional rebels trained in Saudi Arabia home defense forces for areas already under their control. Really, defense against what – Assad forces, other rebel forces? In isolated enclaves with no clear tactical defense, strategic purpose, or chance of winning control of Syria unless other forces self-destruct?

The point is what? The force that will rescue them if they begin to be overrun is whom? This relates to the fact that General Dempsey has discussed “considering” a buffer zone in Syria how? It will affect our Arab allies and turkey in what ways? It offers Syria what – if any – prospect of coming out of a humanitarian nightmare that the UN estimates puts some nine million people at risk and freezes or undercuts the nation’s development how? And if this is really a “let Syria rot strategy,” how do we now halt the pattern of escalation we have been in for most of October?

The United States does face many strategic challenges and other priorities, but it needs to make far more firm and explicit decisions about the future strategic role in Syria and tailor its future level of escalation accordingly. It is one thing to work with an Iraqi government and key factions over time with some credible chance of success. It is another to offer false hope and leave the resulting mess to the next president.

## The Uncertain Strategy for Dealing with Iraq

The U.S. strategy for dealing with Iraq has already been the third major pillar of the real world campaign against the Islamic State, and – in fact – by far the most important one in U.S. strategy. While it has never been stated as such politically for obvious reasons, ever since Maliki and the cadre around him created an authoritarian mess, provoked a new low level civil war, largely corrupted and destroyed Iraq's security forces, and then lost most of the Sunni parts of the country to the Islamic State, it has been to push Maliki out. It has then been to create a meaningful national government, bring the Kurds and Sunnis back into a broad alignment with the central government, and rebuild Iraqi forces so they can win a ground war to retake the country with U.S. air support.

At the same time, it has been to secure Jordan and the Arab Gulf states against the expansion of the Islamic State into an oil exporting region that is vital to the function and stability of the global economy and – as such -- a vital national security interest for the United States. It has been to rebuild Iraq as an strong independent nation that is a counterbalance to Iran and with solid links to its Arab neighbors, and – to the extent possible – resolve the Iraqi Kurdish issue in ways that give the Kurds security and some form of federation, but still ties them to the central Iraqi government and in ways that keep their close ties to Turkey.

This is a *possible* set of strategic goals, but it is also an extremely ambitious one. *Possible* is not *probable* in every respect although this is an area where the United States has already made some gains. Maliki is gone. There is some hope of a truly national government, and some progress is beginning to be made in strengthening Iraqi army and pesh merga forces.

The new Iraqi government is an awkward mix of Arab Shi'ite, Arab Sunni, and Kurd, but it at least has enough national unity to agree on a Sunni Minister of Defense and a Shi'ite Minister of the Interior. The Kurds are participating in the government. Some Sunni politicians are more active in supporting it and a few tribal elements seem to be tilting back towards the government and away from the Islamic State. It is far too early to talk about meaningful success, but it is still major progress over Maliki – a man who ultimately managed to rival Saddam in weakening and dividing his country.

The United States does have some 1,600 to 1,900 personnel on the ground – many of whom are allowed to wear boots. It has helped Iraq establish operational command centers in Baghdad and Irbil, has won acceptance for at least the concept of a Sunni National Guard in the Sunni dominated provinces so the Islamic state can be weakened and driven out, and has pushed the central government to accept the importance of a strong pesh merga even if it does not accept the need to accept Kurdish control of disputed areas and its right to export oil on its own.

At the same time, the United States has clearly not provided the level of air strike support it originally planned and has seen much of the focus on the air campaign shift to a peripheral objective in Kobani. It has found that the Iraqi military forces are even weaker than it is original assessments indicated, and they indicated that some half of the 50 plus combat brigades in the Iraq forces would need to be disbanded or totally reorganized, and the other half would take a year to several years to build up into fully effective combat units.

Iran still has strong influence over Shi'ite militias largely hostile to the United States, and over key elements of the Iraqi government and security services. It still has some chance of actually exploiting U.S. efforts to build up Iraqi forces by taking advantage of stronger Shi'ite forces and Kurdish buffers against the Sunnis, and its calculation that it will often be on the ground when the United States will be in secure areas in the rear. It may well feel it can gain from U.S. indecisiveness in Syria and the way it empowers Assad, and it is not clear that the United States has seen that the need for firmness in negotiating over the P5+1 negotiations on Iran's nuclear programs must be part of a comprehensive strategy for firmness in dealing with Iran's overall role in the region.

There is no point in demanding the impossible at the political level. The United States cannot force political unity and reform on all the elements of Iraq, and is making what seems to be as an effective effort as it can. There is a need, however, to make it clear to everyone that U.S. support is truly conditional on the Iraqi central government reaching out to the Sunnis, and actually reforming and restructuring its security services.

It is equally necessary to show that U.S. support to both factions is truly conditional on the central government and the Kurds reaching a working set of compromises. The United States cannot afford to be sucked into a political mess of the Iraqis own making, and if they do not move forward, it should make it brutally clear that it will focus on other Arab states and leave them to the consequences.

The United States does, however, need to develop a far more realistic strategy at the military level. The present air campaign is simply too small and unfocused. The train and equip campaign needs enough forward advisors and boots on the ground to support current Iraqi forces which help in command and coordination and using air power, and help Iraqi ground troops that go through reorganization and re-equipment to become fighting forces. If Iraq seems all too likely to fail at the political level, the U.S. military effort seems too little, too slow, and too limited at the military level.

This highlights the need for transparency in reporting on what is really the key aspect of the "Islamic State War" to the American people, the Congress, the media, and our allies. If there is any bipartisan lesson we should have learned from the failures in two wars under two administrations from two parties, it is that fighting a war based on spin does not get the honest criticism, effective strategy, and effective conduct of a war that is needed to win.

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