

The Islamic State War: No Clear U.S. Strategy

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November 10, 2014

The campaign against the Islamic State and the broader elements of Operation Inherent Resolve confront the US with some of the most complex problems in defining a viable strategy in its recent military history. Not only must the US deal with a religious extremist movement at time when Islam is at war with itself, but it also faces a wide range of allies and other states with varying goals, diverging motives, and different perceptions of US capability and motivation.

The US is being asked to operate in a theater and a wider region where Sunni is often at war with Shi'ite, and Sunni extremists are at war with Sunni moderates. This is a struggle where the US is at best seen as an outsider and is often portrayed as a neo-imperialist or "crusader," and is the natural target of conspiracy theorists in a region with no shortage of overlaying – and sometimes conflicting – conspiracy theories.

So far, the US has only made slow and unstable progress in developing a strategy to deal with the Islamic State, and shaping a workable US political and military approach to degrading the Islamic State and dealing with the other US strategic priorities involved. It has not provide any credible public rationale for its actions that would receive Congressional authorization for the use of force, shape the size of the US military role in the region, reassure US partners and deter potential enemies, and support the use of key tools like strategic communications.

Operating Against the Islamic State in the Middle of the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Conflicts

This lack of a viable and public strategy is particularly detrimental because the US effort to degrade the Islamic State must operate in the context of two major civil struggles of equal strategic importance. The campaign against the Islamic State is in many way a mask for making hard choices about the level of US intervention in Syria and the US effort to secure and stabilize Iraq and support its Arab allies.

Syria is one of the most violent and socially disruptive civil wars in modern history. For all the US rhetoric about a moderate Syrian political element, and training and strengthening the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the reality is that Syria is a nation divided between an Assad-Alewite dominated government in western Syria backed by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah on one side, and a fragmented set of rebel of forces in the less populated

eastern Syria split into at least 30 – and as many as 70 – factions, and dominated by Islamist forces, on the other side.

Iraq is critical as an oil power, a counterweight to Iran, and the security of key Arab allies. For all the public US focus on the Islamic State, it was a low-level civil war in Iraq, and Maliki's alienation of Iraq's Shi'ites and Kurds, that empowered the rise of the Islamic State in Sunni areas like Anbar and Mosul in the north, and deeply divided Arab Shi'ite, Arab Sunni, and Kurd.

Iraq's former Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, turned the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) into an instrument of political power, corrupted the command and promotion structure, and used the police and army against the Sunnis. He also steadily exacerbated a power struggle with the Kurds, cutting off their share of the nation's oil revenues, blocking efforts to integrate the Pesh Merga into the Iraqi Army, and in turn sharply raised Iraqi Kurdish demands for independence, federalism, and/or expanding Kurdish areas of control, together with the increased autonomy over their oil and gas exports.

Interacting with Broader Regional Struggles

The Islamic State struggle also cannot be separated from a litany of broad regional conflicts playing out in the Middle East at this time. Struggles over the future of Islam, Sunni versus Shi'ite/Alewite, subjugation of minority rights, Arab versus Persian, and Israel versus Arabs and Iranians. These various struggles spill over into a wide range of other struggles and areas of US interest and influence – all of which further complicate the problem of information operations.

- They involve a divided Lebanon whose Hezbollah is a major element of Assad's forces, empower Al Qaida and the Islamic State in northern Lebanon, and create a massive refugee problem.
- They put pressure on Israel and the Golan.
- They complicate US tensions with Iran throughout the region and at a critical time in the P5+1 nuclear negotiations and US competition for influence with Iran in Iraq.
- They have raised serious tensions with Turkey, which gives priority to ousting Assad, has its own Kurdish crisis, faces a major refugee problem, and increasingly distrusts the US.
- They add to the pressure on Jordan caused by its own internal divisions by adding a massive new refugee problem and a threat on its border.
- They complicate the tensions in deeply divided GCC, where key allies like Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are skeptical of US resolve, and perceive the US to have failed to act in Syria, tolerated the rise of the Moslem Brotherhood in Egypt, and as leading an uncertain effort to negotiate with Iran.
- In spite of cosmetic efforts at unity, Qatar remains far more supportive of Islamist movements than the other GCC states, and is closer to Turkey in this respect. Every GCC state also takes a somewhat different stand in limiting private funding of Islamist extremist movements in Syria, the Islamic State, and Al Qaida.

- The rising flow of foreign volunteers to the Islamic State and other Islamic extremist movements both sharply affects the Islamic State conflict and Operation Inherent Resolve, and the overall flow of violent extremist cadres throughout the MENA region and Islamic world. The early victories of the Islamic State have led to a major rise in the number of volunteers from North Africa, the rest of the Middle East, Europe and North America, Russia, Central Asia, and the East. They have also transformed the use of the Internet, smart phones, other media, recruiting and training, and much of the content of extremist information campaigns.

Mission Improbable or Mission Impossible

All of these forces interact with what may well prove to be a US failure to define a practical mission and set tangible goals for Operation Inherent Resolve. The key to a successful strategy, to a meaningful Congressional authorization of the use of force, reestablishing trust and confidence on the part of our regional partners, and a successful information operation, or strategic communications effort, is to set forth goals that are clear, credible, and meet the expectations of both the US and its partners/allies.

In practice, the US has failed to do this in all three of the most critical areas relating to Operation Inherent Resolve, although to some extent this is the unavoidable result of the deep differences in the goals and expectations of both our partners/allies, and those involved in the conflict.

Degrading and Destroying the Islamic State?

The US has talked about “degrading and destroying” the Islamic State without setting clear goals for what this actually means. It initially focused on a very limited air campaign to both halt ISIS gains and attack key Islamic State centers in Syria. This effort came too late and was so publicly foreshadowed that key elements of the Islamic State (IS) were able to heed the strategic warning and disperse and shelter in populated areas.

Since that time, the US air effort has been driven by Islamic State actions in key areas like the Mosul Dam and Bajji refinery, but increasingly by non-strategic operations in Syria, like Kobani and Mount Sinjar – which sources like USCENTCOM and the BBC indicate accounted for some 400 of the roughly 715 strikes conducted since the start of the air campaign on August 8th and November 4th.

Moreover, key elements of the air campaign have not been directed at the Islamic state. At least two other major series of US strikes have been directed at the Khorasan Group, an element of the Al Nusra Front in Syria, a group affiliated with Al Qaida and hostile to the Islamic State. One set of strikes were carried out on September 22, 2014, and another on 6-7 November, 2014. In practice, these strikes seem to have reflected the fact that the US found the Khorasan Group/Al Nusra Front to present a more serious potential source of direct terrorist attacks on the US than the Islamic State.

This highlights a critical set of weaknesses in the stated US strategic objective behind the attacks on the Islamic State. There is no real chance that the US can destroy all of the violent Jihadist elements in the Islamic state any more than the “surge” and the Son of Iraq could destroy the underlying structure of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia (AQIM), the structure out of which the Islamic State evolved. Furthermore, the competing Islamic extremist

threats are in many ways as serious a problem on a regional and local basis as the Islamic State.

It did carry out at least one focused attack on the leadership of the Islamic State on November 8th, but it is unclear how much success this attack had or that the overall impact of the air campaign since it began in August has had a major impact.

The level of air activity has remained limited to an average of well under 20 strikes per day and sometimes failed to relieve pressure on Iraqi forces in Anbar. Key US officers have noted the increasing capability of IS to shelter and disperse, and it is clear that the US and its allies are operating under severe limits to their targeting and under tight rules of engagement, although no information effort has been made to explain or justify these.

The US may be limiting the use of airpower to push the Iraqis towards some form of unity and cooperation. But it has failed to show the current campaign fits the threat, is effective, is not driven by current events and media crises, and is making carefully calculated judgments about the balance between effectiveness and civilian casualties and collateral damage.

The disappointing information campaign explaining both the US overall US strategy for dealing with the Islamic State, and the impact of US efforts to date, has been worse than no information campaign. It has produced overambitious spin and largely meaningless daily strike statistics. The end result has been to convince many of the actors involved that the US is not serious or has other motives.

At the extreme, it has fueled conspiracy theories, including those who believe the US is cooperating with Iran to create the Islamic State and/or back Assad. At a broader level, it has left both regional and other US allies with serious question about US intentions, the credibility of US willingness to use effective amounts of force, and whether this is another case where American actions fall far short of American words.

It is still unclear how the US plans to convince Iraqi Sunnis to back the Iraqi government, or deal with the growing anger among the more moderate Syrian rebels (and their outside Arab supporters) about the lack of US support for Syrian Sunni rebels. It is unclear that the US can “destroy” or eliminate the Islamic State as a major terrorist force in Iraq, produce more than a minimal shift away from Islamic extremism as the dominant force in Syria, or address the much broader impact that the IS has had in the overall now global struggle for the future of Islam.

So far, the US only seems to have begun trying to use local sources to counter the IS wave of different media, to focus on fully informing key population segments on the abuses and extremism of the Islamic State, call attention to the fact its chief victims to date have been fellow Sunnis, and find effective ways to make its extremism a constant focus of regional and local information warfare.

The religious, ideological, and political war against both the Islamic State and all forms of violent Islamic extremism in the region still seems to lack any coherent effort and drive. The US has said that it is seeking to create a broader effort by its Arab allies and Turkey to limit the flow of foreign volunteers, reduce the funding of the IS, and create a broad religious and political information and education effort to convince both publics and

potential young volunteers that the Islamic State is based on non-Islamic values, extremism, and is religiously and practically illegitimate.

So far, however, most measures seem to be efforts to strengthen counterterrorism and crack down on the preaching of officially recognized clerics:

- Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have all made some efforts, but most have been traditional statements by senior religious figures, and they have lacked scope, intensity, and focus.
- Turkey and Qatar have not really supported such efforts.
- Other Arab states like Jordan have focused on internal issues, and most states have relied more on stricter counterterrorism laws and activity, sometimes bordering on repression.
- US and European efforts have been general and unfocused.
- Iran and the Iraqi government efforts focus on Shi'ite priorities. Kurds focus on Kurdish interests.
- Central Asia, Russia, and China focus on stricter counterterrorism laws and activity, sometimes bordering on repression.

The need for a comprehensive strategic communications effort – tied to a common strategy – is particularly important because of the possibility that the Islamic State could be made to largely self-destruct, if exploiting its abuse and extremism can be made a key element of US strategic communications and information warfare.

Media reporting is uncertain, but there already are indications that the Islamic State is systematically purging all potential opposition in Sunni areas, executing potential rivals and dissidents, and creating growing problems with Sunni tribes and so-called Ba'athists.

These vulnerabilities will also grow if the US can develop an equal level of cooperation in making it steadily harder for the Islamic State to maintain the flow of money, services, and economic activity necessary to win public support. The Islamic State and other Islamic extremists cannot be defeated by military means alone, but US use of force will become far more effective if the US provides an equal focus on strategic communications and attacking the economic underpinnings of its operations.

Over time, the key enemy of extremists may be the fact they are too extreme and too poor to sustain enough support to keep power and/or function. So far, however, the US strategy in both areas seems to be one of intentions unmatched by clear plans and actions.

Betting on Iraqi Unity and Cooperation

The US has had significant success in pushing out Maliki, creating a broader and more national government under Haider al-Abadi, bringing the Kurds back into a formal role in the government, bringing some key Sunni politicians back into the government, creating real Ministries of Defense and the Interior, and laying the political groundwork for the rehabilitation of the Iraqi security forces. It has had significant help in calling for unity from key figures like the powerful Shia Ayatollah, Ali al-Sistani, and it has not faced major challenges or opposition from Iran on these efforts.

What is not clear, however, is that US efforts can actually produce a unified and effective enough Iraqi central government to deal with and control the various problems Iraq faces:

- ***Finding a way to bring a truly national government to power, end the deep divisions within the Shi'ite political structure, and limit the role of Shi'ite militias, hardline movements, and role of Iran and the IRGC.*** The divisions between Arab Sunni and Arab Shi'ite, and those between Iraq's Arabs and Kurds are matched to some degree by the divisions between Shi'ite elements.

The new Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who assumed office in September 2014, is part of Maliki's Islamic Dawa party. Maliki still has serious influence. Sadr remains a major force. So do Shi'ite militias, some of which had had visible ties to the Iranian Islamic revolutionary Guard during their recent operations in support of the Iraqi Army against the Islamic State.

Abadi did succeed in making a Sunni lawmaker Jaber al-Jabber defense minister, and Riyadh Ghareeb, a Shi'ite lawmaker with the State of Law bloc, interior minister on September 8, 2014. *But*, it is still unclear how freely they will be able to operate. Abadi has also talked about raising one million volunteers to fight the Islamic State, but almost all were Shi'ite and it is far from clear how they can be used or absorbed without exacerbating Sunni and Shi'ite divisions.

More generally, Iraq's lack of effective governance and ability to use its oil money and budget resources still combines with its ongoing economic and security problems and acute, permeating, nation-wide corruption. It is not enough to achieve political accommodation at the level of the central government, important as this is. Iraq needs effective government, a restoration of its rule of law and police force, and effective use of its economic resources – all areas where the US has no declared strategy and no clear plans to provide expertise and provide influence.

- ***Creating a stable, working relationship between Arab and Kurd***, solving the financing issues involved, creating a lasting level of coordination between the Iraqi forces and Pesh Merga, and creating some kind of federalism that will both help Iraq function as a nation and deal with reality the Kurds now occupy even more disputed territory – including key areas like Kirkuk and its nearby oil fields.

The economic crisis in the Kurdish zone that began in January 2014 when Maliki stopped sending a share of Iraq's oil wealth to the Kurds -- a share that already only equaled 12% rather than the promised 17% -- has been compounded by Kurdish insistence of their right to develop and export their own oil and gas.

This split has encouraged Iraq's main oil exporters in the Shi'ite south to consider following suit by restricting the sharing of what they see as "their" oil wealth, and left the broader problem that some sources estimate the Kurds could only earn some \$7 billion a year from exporting their own oil and has in the near term versus that \$12 billion they would get if the Iraqi central government agreed to restore their full share of national oil revenues.

Moreover, it remains unclear how the US can help Iraqi develop an effective approach to fighting the Islamic state in northern Iraq if the Pesh Merga and Iraqi government forces do not fully cooperate and could even turn on each other, or how Iraqi unity can ever be real if Arab and Kurd cannot move towards some viable form of federalism.

- ***Creating real-world openings to the Sunnis in Anbar, Nineveh, and other Sunni Dominated Areas.*** The US has talked about creating a new Sunni National Guard – somewhat similar to the Sons of Iraq – but with a more lasting federal structure based on key Sunni populated areas and governorates (provinces).

Unfortunately, the US has not explained this concept, shown how it can work, or indicated that it has clear support from the Iraqi central government. To date, the Iraqi government has lost more Sunni territory, and has not had a major new Sunni element, tribal grouping, or other powerful faction break from the Islamic State or realign itself with the Iraqi military.

This is particularly strike because – as is explained later – President Obama said he would deploy another 1,500 Us troops to Iraq to train and equip Iraqi forces on November 6, 2014, but does not seem to have made any plans to provide such manning for the creation of an Iran Sunni National Guard, included this in his request for additional funding, and explained how this could succeed at time when the Islamic State seemed to still be making gains in defeating the few visible Sunni tribal elements that were hostile to it.

The problem is also growing steadily worse in human terms. UNAMI estimates that some 5.2 million Iraqis are now in need, and the violence in Iraq since January 2014 has raised the number of Iraqis displaced by the recent fighting from 85,000 to 1.8 million.

Creating effective Iraqi forces in Time to be Meaningful

The US has said it can take up to three years to rebuild the Iraqi security forces. This does not include the police and justice system – which eroded to the point of near collapse in many areas under Maliki. It is still, however, a massive challenge and one the US may not be able to fully meet.

- *First, the US cannot succeed without Iraqi political unity.* In fact, it faces a real risk that its military efforts will be offset by a return to Sunni versus Shi'ite clashes dominated by IS and Shi'ite military forces along the (re)emerging Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian fault line.
- *Second, even the effort to restructure, retrain, and re-equip the Iraqi forces is extremely challenging* – as General Dempsey, General Allen, and General Austin have all made clear. Military progress in Iraq requires Iraq political unity to overcome the devastating divisiveness of the Maliki regime, his split with the Kurds, his steadily politicization of the Army with officers loyal to him regardless of corruption and competence, and his increasing use of the army and police against largely peaceful Sunni demonstrations from 2012 onwards – actions which so alienated the Sunni population in Western and Northern Iraq that it created the climate that made massive Islamic State gains possible.

The Iraqi security forces should never have been vulnerable to Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL) forces in the first place. As incompetent, political, and corrupt as many officers may have been, reports estimate that the Iraqi Army still had an authorized strength of some 193,400 men towards the end of 2013. While Iraq did not have a real air force, it did have a sizable security force under its Ministry of Interior. While Iraq's undersized air force was made up some light combat trainers and some 30 armed helicopters, its security forces – which Maliki had increasingly used effectively against the Sunnis – totaled 531,000 personnel, made up of 302,000 regular police, 44,000 paramilitary Federal Police, and 95,000 lower quality security guards in the Facilities Protection Service.

While US intelligence estimates put the Islamic State forces at some 31,500 by the late summer of 2014, the Islamic State forces probably did not total more than 10,000 full-time fighters when they took much of Anbar province. They were still well under 30,000 when they took Mosul. They also were initially light armed, largely with “technicals” – armored trucks mounting automatic weapons and mortars.

In contrast, the Iraqi Army initially had 2 special forces brigades, 1 armored division, 5 mechanized divisions, 3 motorized divisions, 4 infantry divisions, one commando division, and two presidential security brigades – for a nominal total of well over 50 combat brigades. It also had 336 medium tanks (including 140 M1A1 Abrams), 1,194 armored personnel carriers, 188 armored infantry fighting vehicles, 1,334 light wheeled combat vehicles, 48 self-propelled heavy artillery weapons, 138 towed heavy artillery weapons, multiple rocket launchers, and 1,200 mortars.

It may well take years to rebuild the Iraqi forces that were undermined and crippled by Prime Minister Maliki's failures, and then defeated by the Islamic State and other Sunni forces. And it is obvious from its recent defeats that it desperately needs forward US advisors, not just joint operations centers in Baghdad and Irbil and advisors in the rear down to the brigade level. Studies by the US military before the present air effort in Iraq that indicated that only about half of the 56 Iraqi Army brigade equivalents (47-50 combat elements) that survived the rout leading to the Islamic state capture of Mosul were worth retraining.

As noted earlier, it is also far from clear that President Obama's announcement on November 7, 2014, that he planned to send some 1,500 more troops to support the 1,400-1,900 already in Iraq will come close to meeting the need. The Department of defense described this deployment follows:

The commander in chief has authorized Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel to deploy to Iraq up to 1,500 additional U.S. personnel over the coming months, in a non-combat role, to expand our advise and assist mission and initiate a comprehensive training effort for Iraqi forces.

Secretary Hagel made this recommendation to President Obama based on the request of the Government of Iraq, U.S. Central Command's assessment of Iraqi units, the progress Iraqi security forces have made in the field, and in concert with the development of a coalition campaign plan to defend key areas and go on the offensive against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

U.S. Central Command will establish two expeditionary advise and assist operations centers, in locations outside of Baghdad and Erbil, to provide support for the Iraqis at the brigade headquarters level and above. These centers will be supported by an appropriate array of force protection capabilities.

U.S. Central Command will establish several sites across Iraq that will accommodate the training of 12 Iraqi brigades, specifically nine Iraqi army and three Peshmerga brigades. These sites will be located in northern, western, and southern Iraq. Coalition partners will join U.S. personnel at these locations to help build Iraqi capacity and capability. The training will be funded through the request for an Iraq Train and Equip Fund that the administration will submit to Congress as well as from the Government of Iraq.

Over the coming weeks, as we finalize the training site locations, the United States will work with coalition members to determine how many U.S. and coalition personnel will be required at each location for the training effort. Ultimately, these Iraqi forces, when fully trained, will enable Iraq to better defend its citizens, its borders, and its interests against the threat of ISIL. This effort is in keeping with our overarching strategy to work with partners on the ground to destroy ISIL.

On the one hand, a careful reading shows that this deployment may only be the start of a much largely deployment. The President also said that \$5.6 billion would be provided for operations against the Islamic state and to help create effective Iraqi forces. The request included \$5 billion for the Defense Department to conduct a range of military operations against ISIL in the Middle East, of which \$1.6 billion was for an Iraqi train-and-equip fund.

The Department of defense stated that Iraq's government and coalition nations were expected to contribute an unstated amount of support and advisors, and that the train-and-equip fund also may be used toward training Sunni tribes that are operating under the auspices of the Iraqi Defense Ministry, Kirby said. "Ultimately, we expect that we'll be able to conduct some of that training at the same locations where we will train Iraqi army and pesh merga brigades."

These statement may well gloss over an unworkable approach to train and equip that could cripple US and Iraq efforts, as well as the problems raise by the role of Iraqi Shi'ite militias and the Iranian IRGC.

Previous reporting has indicated the President still opposes military recommendations to provide US advisors and support personnel at the brigade level of actual operations and below -- a kind of presence that has been critical in coordinating effective close air support operations in the past and creating combat effective allied forces. Equally important, no mention is made of the full range of challenges in creating an Iraqi Sunni National Guard, and the role the US plans to play in meeting it.

The US statements also do not address the level of tensions between Arab Shi'ite and Arab Kurd, or the practical problems in driving the Islamic State out of Mosul and Ninevah in the north without creating a confrontation between Sunni Arab and Kurd over the Kurd's expansion of their zone of control into areas they sharply dispute with Iraq's Sunnis.

It is equally critical to note from both the viewpoint of gaining allied support confidence - - and any meaningful effort to win Iraqi Sunni support and conducting a meaningful information campaign -- that the Iraqi government and Iraqi forces present a convincing picture to key Arab allies, as well as Iraqi Sunnis, of their willingness and ability to nationally reunify the country.

Otherwise, the US will find steadily growing opposition from Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. This is absolutely critical to a successful information campaign because it is essential to convince our most critical Arab allies that Iraq will be an independent Arab state that gives Sunnis full rights and share of oil wealth, and alleviate fears that the US is not indirectly empowering Assad and Iran.

Betting on a Non-Strategy in Syria

The US strategy for dealing with Syria seems to be to lie by indirection and omission and hope the crisis will eventually force the Syrian government and rebels to negotiate some acceptable form of accommodation.

Ever since the US failed to support the Syrian rebels during the peak of their success (and moderation) against Assad in 2011, the US has issued a series of empty statements saying that it was going to provide more training and arms for the Syrian rebels. It has never explained in any meaningful detail what each successive statement actually means, tried to explain the changing balance of rebel forces, or gone beyond the hope that somehow a time will come when negotiations can push Assad out without letting extremists like the Islamic State and Al Nusra Front in.

As of November 2014, the US is still talking vaguely about training and equipping the more moderate elements of the Free Syrian Army at a rate of some 5,000 men in Saudi Arabia plus additional training in Jordan without any public statement of what total forces is to be created, how long it will take, and what it is supposed to do. It has made over 300 air strikes in Syria, but rarely more than 15 a day, and has only provided minimal support of the Syrian rebels, which took major defeats in the north in early November.

The US has tended to react to media driven events involving Islamic State attacks on Syrian minorities and an isolated enclave like Kobani instead of responding to attacks on the

moderate rebels or by attacking key Islamic State targets. Actions such as these have fueled Arab conspiracy theories that the US is inadvertently aiding Assad, and the weirder theory it is colluding with Iran to use the Islamic State to empower Assad.

The initial real world (and undeclared) goal in August 2014 when the US began its air campaign in August seems to have been to try to isolate the Syrian civil war from the US effort to attack the Islamic State's major centers and resources in Syria, while concentrating on helping Iraqi recover its lost territory.

To the extent US officials have explained the intention on background, the broader goal in Syria seems to have been to protect the moderate rebel elements, try to build a functional level of political unity, provide humanitarian aid, and let the broader struggle between the Assad regime and all rebel forces burn out. The objective, it seems to have been, was to reach the point where battle-fatigued and exhausted remnants would allow some Geneva-like settlement to negotiate both Assad's departure and some form of stable compromise moderate government that included both Alewites and Sunni Arabs.

Events since August have shown just how grim the prospects are for the success of these objectives. The US has been driven into using airpower in Syria for very different reasons, has publically clashed with Turkey and more privately with allies like Saudi Arabia over its lack of support for the rebels, is increasing focus of regional conspiracy theories, has seen serious new defeats of the rebels it did the most to actually arm, has no meaningful strategic communications to make, and is betting on the come for a strategy that seems to be yet another a "triumph of hope over experience" – without any serious commitment.

At the same point in November where US officials and officers were making vague claims of progress in attacking the leaders of the Islamic State and supporting Iraqi operations around the Bajji refinery, the Al Nusra Front was making critical gains in defeating the key "moderate" rebel factions the US had armed and backed in the northwest boarder area of Iraq in Idlib Province and near the Bab al Hawa border crossing.

The Harakat Hazam and Syrian Revolutionary Front suffered a major defeat, seem to have lost much of their US-supplied arms, and lost much of their military credibility as well. They did so at a time the US used air power to attack the Khorasan Group (aka Jabhat al-Nusra), but made it publically clear it would not use airpower to support the rebels and potentially confront Assad.

Exactly how this can be dealt with in terms of an information strategy is the most serious of the long list of problems outlined earlier. One thing that is certain is that another set of empty Presidential statements and stream of equally empty daily spin is not going to help.

It is also worth pointing out that as bad as the Islamic State and Al Nusra Front are, the Assad regime is the key force behind the overall plight of Syrians – a plight that has already led the US to program more than \$2.9 billion in aid funds. To put that plight in perspective, the UN and USAID estimated in September and October 2014 that Syria, a country of roughly 18 million remaining residents, had a per capita income that may have dropped to the level of Yemen, and was facing the following human consequences:

- 10.8 million people in need of humanitarian assistance
- 4.6 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in besieged/hard to access areas
- Roughly 191,369 killed and over 250,000 wounded
- 1 million injured
- Well over 6.45 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)
- Well over 3.2 million Syrian refugees in Neighboring Countries, including:
 - 1.1 million Syrian Refugees in Lebanon
 - 1.1 million Syrian Refugees in Turkey
 - 619,000 Syrian Refugees in Jordan
 - 222,000 Syrian Refugees in Iraq
 - 140,000 Syrian Refugees in Egypt

Waiting for a Real US Strategy: Interim steps in Strategic Communications and Information Operations

If the US is have an effective strategy, it must address all of these issues far more honestly and show it can deal with all of the issues involved. This now only seems likely if the Congress pressure the Administration into action as part of the President effort to get Congressional support and authorization. There is, however, one area where the US may be able to take effective action in the interim

There is no way that the United States can conduct a truly effective form of strategic communications and information operations with its current strategy. It has not revealed its overall plan in dealing with internal tensions in Iraq. It does not seem to have a real strategy in dealing with the Islamic State. And its undeclared strategy in Syria seems to be to wait it out until the situation eventually burns out in favor of the moderate forces and produce some form of compromise that the US can accept. For all the reasons outlined earlier, the situation has also has moved far beyond the point where “spin” can substitute for substance.

There are, however, some areas where the US can at least ease the situation until it finds a more coherent strategy.

Dealing with Tactical Realities in Iraq

The Administration seems to have has decided to keep US troop levels in Iraq tightly limited and prevent them from providing any effective form of operational or forward support. It seems determine to avoid even minimal casualties at the cost of avoiding any advisory or direct combat support mission at the brigade level or below.

Historical experience since Vietnam indicates that this greatly increases the chance of failure. Between the US lack of situational awareness, Iraqi forces lack of immediate intelligence and air strike planning support, advisors who will not be present to help

develop combat leaders, and the absence of a neutral presence to mediate between sects and ethnic groups, and no alternative voice to call for aid and reinforcement, historical precedence is not on the side of this sort of strategy.

The US can, however, at least try to develop tactical information operations in spite of restrictions on the role and presence its forces that may lead to failure in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The US learned both in dealing with the Sons of Iraq and Shiite factions in the south that it needed to carefully chart and map the leaders and interests of both friendly and hostile forces at the local level, and develop support in information efforts that would reinforce the growth and support of friendly forces.

This will be critical in dealing with Sunni forces if the National Guard can actually be created, in dealing with Sunni tribes, in reducing problems with Shi'ite militias, in working with Kurdish groups, in seeking to create reintegration campaigns, in isolating foreign fighters, and in dealing with frictions between friendly groups as they develop.

Training Iraqi forces to use such methods will be critical, and so will broader US efforts to persuade Iraqi Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish leaders to constantly emphasize unity of effort, tactical successes, and flaws in the conduct of Islamic State and other hostile forces. Information operations win or fail at the tactical level, and to paraphrase Tip O'Neill, all counterterrorism and counterinsurgency "is local."

It is critical that the US build on its earlier experience in Iraq and Afghanistan to make this work. It is also one more reason why the statements by General Dempsey, General Allen, and General Austin that the US may need to expand its advisory presence to the tactical level are likely to prove all too necessary.

Focusing on National Unity in Iraq

For similar reasons, the US needs a carefully managed information campaign that combines US official statements, media briefings, and work with Iraqi media – overtly and covertly – to push for Iraqi unity at every level, to highlight progress, and highlight failures and barriers as well.

Information operations need to be a political weapon, not a vacuous exercise in spin. The US needs to use quiet diplomacy, but it also will need to exercise every form of leverage it can. Ignoring problems and celebrating failure increases what already is a serious set of risks.

Encouraging the Islamic State to Self-Destruct

The US needs to tie its intelligence and other data collection efforts to a systematic effort to exploit every mistake and act of extremism by the Islamic State, in order to encourage divisions within it. Above all, it must highlight the extent to which the Islamic State abuses and attacks Sunnis. This requires an information operations focus on (a) those still under Islamic State control, (b) other Iraqis and Syrians, (c) possible foreign volunteers, (d) "donors," and (e) the wider mix of audiences throughout the Islamic world. Wherever possible, the key media outreach effort should be led by Arab Muslims.

Using US intelligence and Analytic Methods to Make Partner Information Operations More Effective

The US also needs to use all of its technology to clearly identify the full range of tools the Islamic State is using in its own information operations, and help partner and allied states counter and suppress such tools. Information operations should be partner operations, usually tailored to the specific needs of given countries and activities.

Proactive US Information Operations in Support of Air Strikes, Train and Assist, and Aid

The US needs to be far more proactive in communicating the extent to which it seeks to minimize civilian casualties and collateral damage, the reasons why some such losses are inevitable and reduce total losses over time, and that it does estimate civilian casualties and provides serious and reliable efforts to react when incidents occur. Past US efforts have often been slow to react, ceded the ground to the enemy for several days, then reacted in legalistic terms, and the US has perceived civilian casualties as a failure in perfect war.

The US cannot afford to give up the ability to use precision weapons, UCAVs, and a range of technology that actually sharply reduces civilian losses relative to past uses of airpower and indirect fire.

Similarly, the US needs to make it clear to Iraqis, Syrians, and other Arabs that it is actively providing military train and assist capabilities, working with real Arab partners, and is a key source of civil aid – especially in a nation like Syria where the common Arab impression is that the US is doing far too little or nothing. The US military has been far too passive in explaining its train and assist efforts. USAID has developed good information sheets, but they are not a substitute for a major US campaign.

Create New Information Operations Teams in Each Key Country and Make Tailored Operations a Key Activity

The US chronically understates the differences between Arab states and moves towards broad regional or international operations when it needs to strengthen the country teams, tailor its efforts to the very real differences between Arab states, and work closely with local governments and media. The conflicting interests and differences between countries outlined at the beginning of this analysis illustrate the degree to which success stands or fall on the basis of national efforts.

Push Allies Hard to Deal with the Challenge of Religion

The US is a secular state with a Judeo-Christian tradition. The battle for religious moderation, eliminating sectarian tension and violence, defending modern Islam, and defending practical governance and progress must be won by Arab and Muslim states.

There is nothing particularly wrong with broad US campaigns, but they are inherently ineffective in comparison with well-structured efforts by our Arab and Muslim partners. The US should be encouraging and aiding its Arab and Muslim partners to every extent possible, including their media, educators, and scholars.

Address and Refute Every Conspiracy Theory in Detail

Far too often, the US seems to deal with conspiracy theories by trying to ignore them and hoping they will go away. No one who actually works with even well-educated Arabs can believe this works. The US needs to aggressively refute conspiracy efforts by publicizing the facts and doing so repeatedly.

Dealing with Turkey

The US has nothing to gain from any kind of open split with Turkey. It should concentrate information operations on building good relations – if and until – the US has a meaningful strategy for dealing with Syria.

Dealing with Iran

The US needs to be extremely careful in dealing with Iran. It should not create pointless areas of confrontation, and only focus information operations on areas where there are clear indications Iran is taking hostile action. It should, however, make it completely clear to Arab states that there is no truth to charges that the US is somehow tilting towards Iran and away from its Arab allies.

The US also needs to realize that the nuclear negotiations present a critical challenge. If they succeed, then the US must react immediately to show that this does not occur at the expense of Arab states, Turkey, and Israel. If they fail, the US must be prepared to deal with both the practical and information operations aspects of Iran hostile action in Syria and Iraq.

Foreign Volunteers and the Broader Reach of the Islamic State and Al Qaida

Finally, the US needs to combine information operations with its counterterrorism programs to address the problem of “foreign volunteers” in more depth and on a far more focused level. On the one hand, it needs to encourage its allies and other states to focus more on education, re-education, assimilation, and reintegration rather than simply taking more strict measures and relying on repression.

The kind of positive efforts to reintegrate young extremists pioneered by Saudi Arabia and the UAE are cases in point. So is the need to stop making incarceration centers the training grounds for terrorists and extremists. Minor arrests and other missteps that turn the innocent into hardened enemies are just as dangerous as unnecessary civilian casualties and collateral damage.

Success, however, needs to be based on country-by-country efforts and tailored to the specific conditions involved. The estimates of the flow of foreign volunteers to the Islamic state are – to put it mildly – uncertain, but a recent estimate in the Washington Post still illustrates the dangers of assuming that a common approach can work.

<u>Country</u>	<u>Number</u>
Tunisia	3,000
Saudi Arabia	2,500
Jordan	2,090
Morocco	1,500
Russia	800
United Kingdom	488
France	412
Turkey	400
Pakistan	330
Belgium	296
Australia	250
Iraq	247
Netherlands	152
US	130
Yemen	110
China	100