

The First Inspector General Report on the Fight Against ISIL: A Public Relations Exercise without Meaningful Transparency

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The United States has faced a major crisis in Syria since 2011, and has been contending with the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq since the summer of 2014. It has been conducting operations in Iraq since March 2014, and formally announced a coalition and bombing campaign against ISIL in August of 2014. During that time, the United States has done little to explain its strategy or the impact of its activities except to issue data on the size and targets of its sorties, summaries of U.S. aid spending and activity in Syria, some highly questionable maps of areas where ISIL is said to have retreated, but which sharply exaggerate the level of retreat by basing the areas shown on the maximum level of forward ISIL activity.

On March 31, the United States publically announced the creation of a new Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations, and issued its [first quarterly report](#) on Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR).

The report deserves careful attention from anyone concerned with both U.S. operations in Iraq and Syria, and the broader U.S. campaign against terrorism, extremism, and instability in the Middle East. To put it bluntly, it seems to be far more of a public relations exercise than a serious attempt at reporting on nature and success of Operation Inherent Resolve.

Key Problems and Shortfalls

The report highlights some very real progress within the Iraqi government, but does not address its ongoing problems in dealing with Sunnis and Kurds in any detail, it does not mention Iran, it does not talk about cooperation with any Arab state, it does not mention problems with Turkey, and it does not address other extremist threats like the Al Nusra Front.

It does not discuss ISIL and other terrorist attacks outside the area occupied by ISIL, it does not discuss problems with Shi'ite militias, it does not highlight the coordination problems in dealing with the Iraqi government forces and pesh merga, and does not even mention the past goal of establishing a Sunni National Guard.

No effort is made to discuss the broader problems in Iraq stability and planning for some form of Syrian recovery.

No mention is even made of the Assad regime.

Specific Areas of Weakness and Omission

The report talks blandly about a U.S. strategy that hinges on “functioning federalism,” and ignores the government’s level of corruption, ability to provide effective governance, and problems in budgeting, and budget execution. (p. 21-22)

It highlights four goals set by General Allen, but does not provide a meaningful assessment of progress in meeting any of them (p. 23):

- **clearing component**—Iraqi security forces or the forces of the local Popular Mobilization Committee remove ISIL fighters from a town.

- **security and policing component**—deals with crime and provides general security so life can begin to return to normal.
- **restoration of local governance**—made more difficult because many officials are in exile, were killed, or have cooperated with ISIL.
- **provision of essential services**—includes meeting immediate needs and short-term restoration of services, such as health, water, electricity, and rebuilding critical infrastructure.

The sections on stability efforts highlight the goals and program, but do not assess the problems to be addressed or success to date beyond discussing the budget problems caused by a decline in oil revenues. (p. 24-25).

It describe four key military goals for denying ISIL a safe haven and does not provide a summary of progress to date in dealing with any of them (p. 25):

“In coordination with coalition partners, the U.S. military is conducting operations under OIR to meet the following strategic objectives to degrade and defeat ISIL in Iraq and Syria:

- Conduct a systematic campaign of airstrikes against these terrorists.
- Work with the Iraqi government, expand efforts beyond protecting [U.S. personnel] and humanitarian missions [to hit] ISIL targets as Iraqi forces go on offense.
- Take direct military action against ISIL terrorists in Syria and in Iraq.
- Degrade ISIL’s leadership, logistical and operational capability, and deny it sanctuary and resources to plan, prepare, and execute attacks.”

It only describes military effectiveness in the following terms (p. 26):

- “At a total cost of \$1.83 billion, DoD reports that, as of March 2015, nearly 3,000 airstrikes had been conducted in both Iraq and Syria as part of military operations coordinated among 14 coalition countries. Approximately 1,600 strikes have targeted ISIL positions in Iraq since August 8, 2014, and more than 1,200 have targeted ISIL in Syria since December 23, 2014. According to DoD, these strikes damaged or destroyed more than 150 oil and gas facilities, 441 ISIL staging areas, and nearly 1,700 buildings, among hundreds of other targets.”

It does not assess what impact this effort has had on ISIL and any strategic effects.

It repeats the kind of map (p. 27) that seems designed to exaggerate the level of ISIS retreat (p. 26), although with some important qualifications:

- "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’s (ISIL) frontlines in much of northern and central Iraq have been pushed back since August 2014. ISIL can no longer operate freely in roughly 25 to 30 percent of populated areas of Iraqi territory where it once could. These areas translate into approximately 13,000 to 17,000 square kilometers (or 5,000 to 6,500 square miles). However, because of the dynamic nature of the conflict in Iraq and Syria, this estimate could increase or decrease depending on daily fluctuations in the battle lines. ISIL’s area of influence in Syria remains largely unchanged, with its gains in As Suwayda’, Damascus Countryside, and Homs Provinces offset by losses in Halab and Al Hasakah Provinces.”

There is no assessment of the successes and problems in developing effective Iraqi forces. The sections on building partner capability do little more than describe U.S. goals and the size of U.S. effort (p. 28-29):

- “DoD reported that FY 2015 ITEF funds will be used to train and equip 12 brigades at four training sites in Iraq, including 9 Iraqi Security Forces brigades and 3 Kurdish *Peshmerga* brigades. According to DoD, approximately 3,000 U.S. military personnel were working in Iraq as of March 2015. About half were assigned to train, equip, and advise Iraqi forces. Trainers began working with local partners last summer. DoD requested \$0.7 billion for the ITEF in FY 2016 to continue the train and equip mission in

Iraq next year.”

There is no meaningful assessment of the success of the U.S. train and assist effort to date, tensions between government and Kurdish forces, Sunni-Shi'ite tensions, and problems in supporting the U.S. training effort – all of which have been repeatedly highlighted in media reports (p. 30-31).

There is no meaningful discussion of the U.S. strategy in Syria or for training Syrian rebel forces. The report simply states that:

“Of the \$1.3 billion in CTPF funding made available to DoD in FY 2015, \$500 million was allocated for the training and equipping mission in Syria.⁹³ DoD reported that the first group of Syrians will begin their training in April. The program aims to train vetted recruits to provide the following outcomes:

- Defend themselves and the Syrian people from ISIL attacks.
- Secure areas under opposition control.
- Eventually empower trainees to go on the offensive against ISIL.
- Promote the conditions for a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in Syria.
- DoD requested \$0.6 billion for the STEF in FY 2016 to continue training and equipping appropriately vetted Syrian opposition forces, especially from areas most threatened by ISIL.⁹⁵ According to DoD, several coalition partners, including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, and the United Kingdom are providing support”

The report talks about enhancing intelligence collection, but does not describe any progress, problems, or successes (p. 31).

The report provides a summary of ISIL's fund raising efforts under the heading of “Disrupting ISIL's Finances,” but fails to seriously address any successes in limiting them. (p. 31-33) It states that:

“Reducing ISIL's revenue from oil and assets it has plundered. In 2014, ISIL may have earned as much as several million dollars per week, or several hundred million in total, from the sale of oil and oil products to local smugglers who, in turn, sell to regional consumers, including the Assad regime in Syria. The U.S. government actively engages with regional and industry partners to secure cooperation in limiting the trade of these oil and related products. It also continues to map out ISIL's oil-related activities and degrade ISIL's ability to profit from fields and other energy infrastructure it has captured.

Disrupting trade in looted cultural property in Iraq and Syria. ISIL manages and profits from industrial-scale looting at important sites it controls in Iraq and Syria, including archaeological sites and museums. The U.S. government championed United Nations Security Council Resolution 2199, which creates a ban on illegally removed cultural property from Iraq and Syria, and engages with the United Nations, key governments, and other stakeholders to prevent the illegal trade in these goods.

Limiting ISIL's ability to extort local populations. According to Treasury, in 2014, ISIL likely gained access to an estimated \$500 million from seizing control of state-owned banks in northern and western Iraq. In addition, ISIL has assumed control over the accounts of the Shia, Christians, and Yezidis; and possibly forced Sunnis to pay ISIL 10% of their cash withdrawals. ISIL also extorts money in connection with daily transactions ranging from fuel and vehicle movement in ISIL-held territories to school fees for children. The U.S. government is working to limit ISIL's ability to transact extorted monies through the Iraqi, Syrian, and international banking systems by preventing ISIL's use of local bank branches.

Stemming ISIL's gains from kidnapping for ransom. Treasury reported that, in 2014, ISIL collected an estimated \$20 million in ransoms for kidnapped victims. According to Treasury, the U.S. government is increasing its efforts to encourage a worldwide adoption of “no-concessions”

policies, the practice of not paying ransoms or making other concessions to terrorist groups. The U.S. government has encouraged governments to increase efforts to prevent their nationals from becoming victims of kidnapping for ransom. DoS reported that the U.S. government also presses foreign partners to abide by their UN Security Council obligations to ensure that such ransom payments are not made available to ISIL for its benefit.

Disrupting the flow of external donations to the group. According to Treasury, foreign donations represented an important but comparatively smaller source of revenue for ISIL in 2014. However, externally raised funds are used frequently to finance the travel of extremists to Syria and Iraq. This pool of international supporters is a source from which ISIL receives both physical and some monetary support. Treasury reported that, to prevent ISIL from raising funds from donors abroad, the U.S. government will continue to identify its financial supporters and target them for sanctions.

Enabling sanctions and prosecutions of ISIL financiers. The U.S. government uses its own authorities and works with coalition partners to implement domestic and multilateral sanctions, pursue prosecutions, and take military action.¹⁰⁹ As of March 31, 2015, Treasury had sanctioned two high-profile individuals associated with ISIL—a financial facilitator who arranged for a \$2 million donation from the Gulf and a senior military commander. Both were based in Syria, soliciting donations, procuring military equipment, and recruiting foreign terrorist fighters for ISIL.”

There is no assessment of the successes and problems in actually halting the flow of foreign fighters or of the current size and capability of such fighters (p. 34-35).

There is a long section on protecting the homeland (p. 35-36) with no indication of problems or progress. It simply repeats the Administration’s goals.

The section on aid repeats the summary data on the scale of Syria’s problems and level of U.S. spending but does not address any of the critical issues in actually distributing aid described in UN and NGO reporting (p. 37-40).

Looking Towards the Future

The report does discuss ways of improving the oversight activities at the end, but again provides no specifics. If it becomes the model for future reporting, it will remain largely a pointless exercise in publicizing the Administration’s goals and policies with none of the substantive transparency the President has promised.

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