

The Uncertain U.S. “Game Changers” in the ISIS, Iraq, and Syria War

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For all the current focus on Iran, the war we are actually fighting in the Middle East is a complex struggle that includes defeating ISIL (ISIS, the Islamic State, or Da’esh) and other violent Islamic extremist elements in Syria and Iraq, finding some way out of the broader civil war in Syria that restores stability and give it hope for the future, and creating some form of stability in – or out of – Iraq that brings order to that country.

“Game Changers, the Real War, and Meaningful Strategic Success

It is easy to talk about “game changers” coming out of Turkey’s willingness to offer the United States added basing rights at Incirlik or Assad’s weakening position in Syria. A real “game changer,” however, is not simply a change in the way the game is played, it is a change that brings success and victory. In war, a meaningful “game changer” is not a shift in tactics, allies, or the character of the fighting. It is a change that has enough strategic impact to bring a successful form of conflict termination. And, so far, it is unclear that we are playing the right game, much less winning it.

This war cannot be defined as a struggle against “terrorism,” a form of counterterrorism, or part of a broader conflict or “war” against violent Islamic extremism. One of the most dangerous aspects of the U.S. approach to this conflict has been the tendency to focus on ISIL to the exclusion of the other extremist elements involved in the fighting, to the fact that no approach can succeed that does not bring stability to Syria and Iraq, and that stability must have a form that is acceptable to Syria and Iraq’s neighbors – particularly Iran, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Arab Gulf states.

What Does Some form of Real “Game Changer, Victory, or Strategic Success Require?

A meaningful form of “victory” must – over time – deal with the real-world complexity of the struggle we tend to hopelessly over-simplify in focusing on ISIL. ISIL is only one element of the war, and in some ways one of the easier elements to deal with. At the same time, the total destruction of ISIL as an entity will still leave other strong Islamist extremist elements in place, do nothing to heal the tensions between Sunnis, Shi’ites and Alawites, and will fail to address growing divisions between Kurd and Arab in both Syria and Iraq.

In Syria, any real strategic success means creating some form of governance, civil order, and economy that can lead to unity or some new structure of states that meet the needs of Alawites, Sunnis, and Kurds. It also means some form of nation-building that can deal with over 7 million displaced Syrians inside Syria and 4 million refugees, and an economy with

an unclear path for development, and that is now only a third to half the size of Syria's economy at the time the Syrian civil war began in 2011.

In Iraq, any real strategic success requires the creation of a different form of governance, civil order, and economy that can lead to unity or some new structure of states that meet the needs of Shi'ites, Sunnis, and Kurds. It also requires major progress in nation building to deal with the growing sectarian and ethnic separation in Iraq's cities and provinces, and at 3 million displaced Iraqis. It means finding ways to reform an economy that has been torn by war and crisis since the Iraq-Iran war began in 1980, and has never found a productive way to use its limited oil wealth to create balanced development and employment.

It is critical to focus on the real world impact of any proposals for some form of federalism, and especially any change in the structure of Syria or Iraq as states. The issue is not simply to find ways of limiting sectarian and ethnic contact and conflict. It is to find political solutions that provide lasting local and national security, that are economically viable and support recovery and development, that take account of the needs for housing and education, and take into account critical water, infrastructure, port, and transportation issues in what are principally large desert environments.

It is easy to talk about federalism or the creation of new de jure or de facto states. It is far harder to find practical options that do not create even more divisions within Islam and problems for minorities. Similarly, there is little value in buying limited progress in short-term stability at the cost of institutionalizing de facto sectarian and ethnic segregation and permanent second class citizen status for those who are not in the majority and try to remain in their homes and businesses. The IDP and refugee movements in Iraq since 2003, and Syria since 2011, add to these problems and could create major economic and local divisions in the areas where they are concentrated.

At the same time, strategic success means taking account of the role and needs of other powers. Any solution to the Kurdish problem requires some form of federalism or special status for the Kurds in at least Syria and Iraq, a peaceful resolution of the Kurdish issue in Turkey, and possibly new rights for the Kurds in Iran.

The resolution of the tensions and violence between Sunni, Shiites and Alawites affects Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, and Iran – as well as the forces shaping the broader rise of violence and extremism within Islam. These are also struggles that can feed new forms of Arab conflict with Israel, and spill over into Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia. More broadly, they also involve Russia's support of Assad, and the nuclear agreement with Iran—to the point where talk of some broader rapprochement with Iran growing out of the nuclear issue may be meaningless if Iranian and Sunni Arab relations continue to deteriorate over Iraq and Syria.

Peering Through the Fog of War

So far, neither the Obama Administration nor the Congress have provided meaningful transparency as to whether the United States has some strategy to deal with this range of issues. If anything, American politics have focused on partisan divisions and left a fog of war that no one can easily penetrate.

The Growing Impact of Turkey

- The so-called Turkish "game changer" of offering new basing rights in Incirlik does offer some tactical advantages in dealing with ISIL targets in Syria, but this scarcely offers decisive advantages in the air, and offers no clear advantages on the ground. Moreover, all of one day after the basing rights announcement, and Turkey began to attacks ISIL, Turkey broke with the PKK, Turkish fighting with its own Kurds resumed, and Turkey attacked PKK targets in Iraq.
- This raised serious questions as to how this will affect Erdogan's willingness to deal with the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and how Turkey's actions will affect the success the United States has had in supporting military action by Syria's Kurds whose Syrian Democratic Union Party (PYD), and People's Protection Unit and YPG militias, have links to Turkey's Kurds in the PKK.
- The United States also seems to have agreed to work with Turkey to create an informal no-fly zone in Syria near the Turkish border north of Aleppo. The *Washington Post* reports that this area would push the Islamic State out of a "68-mile-long area west of the Euphrates River and reaching into the province of Aleppo that would then come under the control of the Syrian opposition... The zone now open for U.S. strikes stretches east from Azaz to Jarablus, on the Euphrates. According to Turkish media accounts, it will extend southward to include ISIL bases in Dabiq and Manbij and possibly the town of al-Bab, on the outskirts of Aleppo, but will not include Aleppo itself."
- It is unclear, however, when this area will be created, how this will operate, what role Turkish ground forces will play if any, whether it affects all Syrian aircraft including helicopters, who it will protect to do what, whether it will affect Syrian ground force movements, and/or how it will change outside support for Syrian rebel factions that are not part of ISIL but are now dominated by Islamists that include the Al Nusra Front which is tied to Al Qaeda.
- It is also unclear how the United States will be able to continue to work with the Syrian Kurds in the PYD, and its protection units and militias if Turkey creates a major new round of fighting with its Kurds. It is the Syrian Kurds – not Arab rebels – that have been the most effective forces fighting with the United States against ISIL in Syria. As an article by Anne Barnard and Michael Gordon in the *New York Times* notes, "The United States has yet to disclose which Syrian insurgent forces it will enlist in the effort, and the deal shunts aside the Syrian Kurdish Y.P.G. militias that have lately been the United States' main partners in fighting the Islamic State in Syria, but whom Turkey considers enemies."

The U.S. Strategic Vacuum in Syria

- The United States has seen the Syrian rebel factions it actually supported with arms driven out of the country, the more moderate Syrian political exiles like the Syrian National Council – and the surviving elements of the Free Syrian Army -- marginalized to near impotence, and Syria increasingly divided into three parts:

(i) A shrinking pro Assad/Alawite-led faction supported by Iran and Hezbollah in densely populated areas that include Damascus and Syria's coastal areas.

(ii) A growing Sunni Arab Islamist force – dominated by a coalition of Islamist movements called the "Army of Conquest" – in other major but less densely populated areas in Central-Western Syria whose key military element is the Al Nusra Front. This force has support from Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE – and evidently Turkey – but negligible ties to Syria's "moderate" government in exile.

(iii) ISIL's so-called extremist 'Caliphate' in Syria's sparsely populated East and in Western Iraq.

- The United States so far has only recruited 60 volunteers for the Syrian volunteer force that is to be trained in Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which has a goal of training 5,000 a year. No meaningful explanation has ever been given of what the United States would accomplish if it did succeed in training 5,000 moderate rebels a year.
- At the same time, the United States has another CIA-trained force and an undefined role in creating a Syrian Kurdish forces with links to the Iraqi Kurds that seems to be larger, have ties to the Sunni Arab Islamist forces in the more populated areas in Central-Western Syria, and is coordinating aid to them in some ways with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. No meaningful unclassified data seem to be available on this U.S. effort.
- The United States has steadily stepped up its air campaign in 2015. BBC reporting shows much higher strike rates in Iraq and Syria in April-July but as of July 2, 2015, but BBC maps show that the U.S.-led air strike effort had still concentrated on tactical targets like Kobane, Hassakeh, and tactical targets in Iraq like Fallujah, Baiji, Mount Sinjar, and the Mosul Dam area; not on a systematic effort to destroy the structure of ISIL.
- AFCENT reporting is more reliable but also does not distinguish between Syria and Iraq, and only provides a crude measure of total activity with no indication of effects. These data show that U.S. strike sorties rose from 6,981 in August-December 2014 to 11,061 in January through end June 2015, and strike sorties with actual weapons releases rose from 1,411 in August-December 2014 to 2,764 in January through end June 2015, and the number of weapons released rose from 5,886 to 11,045. Average number of weapons released per month rose from 1,177 to 1,841. The number IS&R sorties nearly doubled from 2,164 to 4,122, and improvements in tactical positions on the ground eliminated the need for airdrops of supplies,
- The official Department of Defense unclassified data made no real attempt to assess the strategic impact of U.S.-led airstrikes, did not distinguish between their impact on targets in Syria and Iraq, and used target categories that were so vague as to be tactically meaningless. It did report, however, that the air strikes had damaged or destroyed 98 tanks, 325 HMMWVs, 472 staging areas, 2,045 buildings, 1,859 fighting positions, 154 oil infrastructure and 2,702 other targets. This is a total of

7,655 as of June 22, 2015 versus 6,278 for 2015. 2015 but such figures provide no meaningful insights in terms of actual military progress than the abortive body counts some U.S. officials issued earlier. In fact, they are little more than statistical noise.

- The United States has never clearly articulated a strategy for negotiating some form of outcome in Syria or defined what outcome it is seeking. It now seems to be waiting on a combination of Assad's growing weakness, the increases in non-ISIL rebel strength, and its efforts to weaken ISIL to create conditions under which the Syrian factions would agree to some post-Assad negotiated structure that Russia and Iran could accept, but it is unclear that it has any way to be proactive in shaping such an outcome, or why and how the opposing sides could recover.
- In Lebanon, the United States has acted to help strengthen the Lebanese Army Forces (LAF) in their efforts to conduct Lebanese border defense and internal stability and counter-terrorism operations. This, coupled with a UK focus on strengthening LAF border forces, has reduced the possibility that the conflict in Syria could further degrade already-weak Lebanese stability and governance. However, the United States has not addressed the broader issue of how to deal with Hezbollah's presence in Syria, or Iranian efforts to support its Lebanese ally in propping up Assad forces.
- The United States has been a major aid donor to the refugees and IDPs in Syria, but it is unclear it has any strategy for dealing with the longer-term impact of such massive displacement of the population.
- The United States has small elements in the State Department that can focus on some kind of post-conflict recovery for Syria, but it is unclear that they are doing so. The UN has shown a capacity to aid in negotiations but has been a dismal failure in coordinating and shaping stability and recovery efforts. The World Bank has shown core competence in this area, but it is unclear that it is coordinating any effort with the United States or vice versa.

The U.S. Strategic Vacuum in Iraq

- The progress in the air campaign in Iraq has already been touched upon in the discussion of Syria. The United States had made progress in killing some key ISIL and other extremist leaders, destroying heavy weapons, limiting movement, destroying ISIL's ability to export petroleum, and other ISIL capabilities, but it has not provided any details beyond broad comments.
- It is clear that the U.S. air strikes can provide effective close air support in emergencies and Iraqi offensives, but this effectiveness is clearly tied to the effectiveness of Iraqi ground forces and progress in restructuring a force that former Prime Minister Maliki used to suppress Sunni and other opposition, and allowed to deteriorate into a corrupt and sectarian mess, remains uncertain.
- The United States has reported steady increases in the number of U.S. military personnel in Iraq, and that it now has training terms that aid both the Kurdish forces and Iraqi military. It also reported in June 2015 that it was deploying 450 more troops – including some 50 advisors to aid Sunni tribes at a new base at Al

Taqquadum, an Iraqi post near the town of Habbaniya, and the Iraqi 8th Division forces in eastern Anbar.

- Once these 450 troops deploy, this would raise the official level of U.S. troops – less Special Forces and other mission elements – to 3,500. The Department of Defense has not provided a detailed breakout of their functions and deployments, or impact to date, but the *New York Times* and other source have reported that the President is open to adding troops to new Iraqi run bases or “lily pads” and further train and assist troops.
- The United States has made more progress in training troops in Iraq than in Syria. It reported in July 2015 that some 3,000 U.S.-trained troops – or roughly two brigades worth – were taking positions around Ramadi in preparation for an effort to recover the city. This was part of a force of roughly 5,000 troops and police – including some 500 Sunni fighters trained by Iraqi – that faced an ISIL force of some 1,000 to 2,000.
- The total number of Iraqi troops trained as of April 2015, however, did not seem to exceed 4,600, and some counts were as low as 3,600. Secretary Carter reported a figure of 7,000 that had completed or were in training in mid-June 2015. The United States had set goals as high as 30,000 for the end of 2015, but it was far from clear such totals were practical, and figures of 24,000 or lower seemed possible.
- The United States still formally refuses to deploy advisors forward with Iraqi combat troops, and keeps its advisors with the rear and away from combat. U.S. special forces do, however, work with Canadian Special Forces – some of which are deployed forward. The United States has placed itself in the odd position of trying to work around the limited risk that its own forward advisors will come into combat by having Canadians take on the burden.
- The United States has not made any plan public to show that it can create the Sunni National Guard forces that it originally called for, or for the overall development of provincial national guard forces. It has not advanced any overall public plan for development of the Iraqi ground and aid forces, addressed the problem of creating effective police forces and a rule of law, or any tentative schedule to help Iraq liberate Mosul and Nineveh.
- The United States is speeding up initial transfers of the F-16 to Iraq, but has not announced clear plans for the broader development of its air forces and air defenses. The possibility of more Iranian aircraft transfers and Russian sales remains an issue.
- U.S. support of Kurdish forces seems to be compartmented from U.S. efforts to improve the Iraqi government forces. The United States does not seem to have a plan for dealing with the fact that the KRG and central government have not resolved their financial differences, there are still major differences over the area the KRG should occupy and governance, the practical problems of creating some stable form of federalism have not been addressed, and the Kurds now occupy Kirkuk and the oil fields around it.

- The United States does not seem to have a strategy to help Iraq address the problem of creating plans for liberating Anbar and Nineveh, acting to provide for stabilization, recovery, and for creating of a political structure that will preserve Iraqi unity through some form of guarantees or federalism for the Iraq's Sunnis. It has set broad priorities, but it seems to focus its action on the fight against ISIL.
- U.S. military relations with Iran remain uncertain, and most Iraqi Shi'ite militias remain hostile to the United States and a source of potential conflict with Iraq's Sunnis, or of major problems in their treatment of the population in Sunni areas they liberate. It is not clear that the nuclear agreement will have an impact of how Iran treats U.S. influence in Iraq or its efforts to use its Al Quds force and IRGC to seek a dominant security influence and exclude and discredit the United States. The United States has denied that it is cooperating with Iran on a formal level and has not made any strategy public for dealing with Iran.
- Iraq still faces serious problems in dealing with its Arab neighbors. It is unclear the United States has any clear strategy for helping to reduce these tensions.
- The United States does seem to be encouraging the Iraqi government to maintain national unity – and supporting key figures Prime Minister Haider al-Badi and Speaker Salim al Jabouri in their efforts to create bridges between Sunni and Shi'ite. It is not clear, however, that the United States has a clear strategy for helping Iraq to achieve some form of stable new structure of governance and politics that can resolve the differences between Sunni and Shi'ite and Arab and Kurd.
- More broadly, it is unclear that the United States has a strategy or plans to provide major aid to Iraq in improving the quality of its governance, the realism of its economic development plans, reducing corruption, and dealing with the overall key civil problems it must address to achieve any lasting form of stability.
- It is unclear that the United States has addressed the level of problems in Iraq's current budget and ability to provide government services; the legacy of past failures to address the problems in its state sector and agriculture, and the instability cause by a combination of youth unemployment and underemployment and over-reliance on the petroleum sector and de facto state subsidies.

The U.S Strategic Silence over its Partnership with key Arab States

- The lack of any meaningful public statements about its strategy for dealing with Iran in Syria and Iraq is compounded by the lack of any declared strategy for working with its Arab allies like Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait. It seems clear that the United States is now cooperating with both Turkey and Arab states in dealing with a wider range of rebel movements in Syria – some of which are Islamist. It is not clear what this cooperation entails in Syria, and serious questions exist about how well the United States is cooperating with its Arab allies in Iraq.
- There also seems to be a real possibility that the United States is quietly moving towards tacitly backing Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Turkey in their support of the Islamist "Army of Conquest" in Syria and – as David Ignatius has touched

upon in the *Washington Post* – encouraging a split by the Al Nusra Front from Al Qaeda. This would be a major shift in U.S. strategy, and one with far more potential impact than basing air strikes out of Incirlik.

Mission Impossible or Merely Mission Improbable?

There are no good or easy options for the United States, or for the states in the region. It also seems likely that progress will at best be incremental, and play out over at least a decade. The beginning of any successful effort, however, is to honestly address the scale and complexity of the problems involved. A lack of good options also is not a reason to not set priorities and create the best plans possible.

At present the United States not only does not seem to have anything like real “game changers,” it does not seem to be playing key parts of the game.

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