

Looking Beyond the Tragedy in Paris: Still No Clear Strategy and No Public Measures of Effectiveness for Dealing with ISIS, Iraq, and Syria

Anthony H. Cordesman

It is time to look beyond the tragedy of Paris and the immediate threat of terrorism, and take a hard look at the lack of any meaningful public strategy for the broader fight in Iraq and Syria, and any meaningful measures of progress and effectiveness.

It is easy to make vague generalizations, and President Obama has now done this ever since the Syrian civil war reached a crisis level in 2012, and ISIS scored its first major advances in Iraq in late 2013. On November 16th, President Obama gave such a speech that defended U.S. strategy in Iraq and Syria. He stated no change was necessary and summarized U.S. strategy as follows:¹

...we have a comprehensive strategy using all elements of our power -- military, intelligence, economic, development, and the strength of our communities. With have always understood that this would be a long-term campaign. There will be setbacks and there will be successes. The terrible events in Paris were a terrible and sickening setback. Even as we grieve with our French friends, however, we can't lose sight that there has been progress being made.

On the military front, our coalition is intensifying our airstrikes -- more than 8,000 to date. We're taking out ISIL leaders, commanders, their killers. We've seen that when we have an effective partner on the ground, ISIL can and is pushed back. So local forces in Iraq, backed by coalition airpower, recently liberated Sinjar. Iraqi forces are fighting to take back Ramadi. In Syria, ISIL has been pushed back from much of the border region with Turkey. We've stepped up our support of opposition forces who are working to cut off supply lines to ISIL's strongholds in and around Raqqa. So, in short, both in Iraq and Syria, ISIL controls less territory than it did before.

... We have a military strategy that is putting enormous pressure on ISIL through airstrikes; that has put assistance and training on the ground with Iraqi forces; we're now working with Syrian forces as well to squeeze ISIL, cut off their supply lines. We've been coordinating internationally to reduce their financing capabilities, the oil that they're trying to ship outside. We are taking strikes against high-value targets -- including, most recently, against the individual who was on the video executing civilians who had already been captured, as well as the head of ISIL in Libya. So it's not just in Iraq and Syria.

And so, on the military front, we are continuing to accelerate what we do. As we find additional partners on the ground that are effective, we work with them more closely. I've already authorized additional Special Forces on the ground who are going to be able to improve that coordination.

... And on the diplomatic front, we've been consistently working to try to get all the parties together to recognize that there is a moderate opposition inside of Syria that can form the basis for a transition government, and to reach out not only to our friends but also to the Russians and the Iranians who are on the other side of this equation to explain to them that ultimately an organization like ISIL is the greatest danger to them, as well as to us.

So there will be an intensification of the strategy that we put forward, but the strategy that we are putting forward is the strategy that ultimately is going to work. But as I said from the start, it's going to take time.

Vague Statements Focused on ISIS are Not a Strategy

The practical problem with these statements is that they were really just one more step in the administration's non-strategy of creeping incrementalism.² They implied that there had been far more progress in defeating ISIS than had actually occurred, and only addressed the broadest trends in the current fight against ISIS. They did not provide any clear picture of the real world lack of progress in creating effective local forces on the ground, of how effective coalition airpower had been and could be in the future, or of the massive problems the United States had encountered by relying on Iraqi government and Arab rebel forces. He did not touch upon how and when a liberation of ISIS-occupied areas could actually take place, or give any hint as to how the United States planned to ensure successful recovery and reintegration of these areas in Iraq and Syria.

More broadly, the President at best addressed only a third of the issues a U.S. strategy must address. He did not address any of the broader sectarian and ethnic divisions in Syria and Iraq that have led to civil war or near civil war – Sunni versus Shi'ite/Alawite and Arab versus Kurd. He did not address the fact it was their status as failed states in terms of politics, governance, economics, and dealing with population pressures that created the situation ISIS exploited.

He did not address the problems of bringing some form of stability or security to either Iraq or Syria —much less both. He did not address the role of the Hezbollah or Iran, problems with Turkey, the different goals of Arab states, or the tensions between Arab and Kurd. He did not address the problems raised rebuilding a Syria with more than half its population as refugees or internally displaced persons, how to resolve the fact that the main war in Syria is between the Assad forces and Arab rebels and not with ISIS, or the fact many of these Arab rebels are part of other Islamist extremist forces like the Al Nusra Front.

He did not address the deep divisions in Iraq, its weak governance, the growing role of Iran, the problems created by Shi'ite militias, the fact the expansion of Kurdish controlled areas leaves a legacy of future tension or conflict with the Arabs, the fact that Iraq's oil wealth cannot support its people or economic development, or the fact it must make major changes in its security forces, governance, economic, and politics.

The weeks since that speech have seen major clashes with Russia that make it even more unlikely that there can be any international accord on Syria, and have made it even more clear than ever that the United States lacks any clear strategy for the wars it is fighting in Iraq and Syria. They have served as a warning that fighting Islamic extremism means dealing with both its causes and the overall mix of such movements and not just ISIS. They have shown that the fight against ISIS must deal with both Iraq and Syria, and it cannot be separate from a regional strategy that deals with the broader problems in Iraq, Turkey, and the Arab states.

No Plan, Strategy, or Meaningful Measures of Effectiveness for the Land Campaign in the War(s) Against ISIS

When it comes to the land campaign, the President is almost certainly right in criticizing many of his critics for making broad suggestions they cannot really define or turn into

meaningful options and plans. Simply calling for a “no fly” zone without defining it, and getting into the how, when, why and contingency risks is vacuous strategic nonsense. So are vague calls for deploying U.S. ground forces with an equal lack of specifics, and “which, where, when, and how.”

As the President stated in the same speech,³

And what’s been interesting is, in the aftermath of Paris, as I listen to those who suggest something else needs to be done, typically the things they suggest need to be done are things we are already doing. The one exception is that there have been a few who suggested that we should put large numbers of U.S. troops on the ground.

And keep in mind that we have the finest military in the world and we have the finest military minds in the world, and I’ve been meeting with them intensively for years now, discussing these various options, and it is not just my view but the view of my closest military and civilian advisors that that would be a mistake -- not because our military could not march into Mosul or Raqqa or Ramadi and temporarily clear out ISIL, but because we would see a repetition of what we’ve seen before, which is, if you do not have local populations that are committed to inclusive governance and who are pushing back against ideological extremes, that they resurface -- unless we’re prepared to have a permanent occupation of these countries.

And let’s assume that we were to send 50,000 troops into Syria. What happens when there’s a terrorist attack generated from Yemen? Do we then send more troops into there? Or Libya, perhaps? Or if there’s a terrorist network that’s operating anywhere else -- in North Africa, or in Southeast Asia?

So a strategy has to be one that can be sustained. And the strategy that we’re pursuing, which focuses on going after targets, limiting wherever possible the capabilities of ISIL on the ground -- systematically going after their leadership, their infrastructure, strengthening Shia -- or strengthening Syrian and Iraqi forces and Kurdish forces that are prepared to fight them, cutting off their borders and squeezing the space in which they can operate until ultimately we’re able to defeat them -- that’s the strategy we’re going to have to pursue.

And we will continue to generate more partners for that strategy. And there are going to be some things that we try that don’t work; there will be some strategies we try that do work. And when we find strategies that work, we will double down on those.

The problem is that the President has never been more specific in real world terms than his critics, never provided credible details on progress and effectiveness in creating local forces in Iraq or Syria, talked publically about the risk-benefits of a stronger and forward deployed train and assist mission. He had never really announced a meaningful public strategy for the land campaign that is the most critical aspect of even a campaign directed solely at ISIS.

Failing to Address the Lack of Progress in Creating Iraqi and Syrian Local Forces

President Obama has never announced any plan for going from using air attacks to degrade ISIS to carrying out a successful land campaign to liberate and occupy all of the areas ISIS now occupies. Nearly two years after ISIS first emerged as a major threat by seizing parts of Western Iraq, the Administration has never issued any meaningful plan to create effective Iraqi government and Arab rebel forces, has never issued a public assessment of their relative capability, and never reported in any detail on the nature and success of the train and assist effort in aiding given Sunni rebel and Kurdish groups in Syria; or the range of different Shi’ite Arab, Sunni

Arab, and Kurdish fighters in six rear areas in Iraq: Besmaya, Baghdad, Taji, Al-Taqqaddum, Erbil, and Al Asad.

The administration has never provided any clear strategy or plan for showing how the wars in Syria and Iraq can be fought in ways that will defeat ISIS in both countries, or discussed what will happen to the ISIS fighters if the “caliphate” is destroyed. He has never addressed the problems raised by other Islamist extremist movements like the Al Nusra Front, or address what will happen in Mosul and the many other areas that are “liberated” from ISIS.

If anything, the occasional hints about the effectiveness of Iraqi government and Arab rebel forces in the briefings given in the Pentagon seem to indicate that they are even weaker and less effective than the largely negative assessment made in later 2013 and early 2014. The only two signs of progress in the local land forces that will be critical to any real liberation movement seem to be in the various Kurdish forces, and in Arab rebel elements that the United States originally did not back and have been supported largely by our Arab allies.

No one in the administration has ever explained what will keep Iraq’s Shi’ite militias from being a critical problem, or how the Iraqi government can take over, if ISIS loses control of Western Iraq. No one has explained why any major Arab rebel force will focus on ISIS versus Assad, or who will take control of the liberated areas in Syria, or what will happen then. The United States has treated ISIS as if it was alone in the desert, a military campaign could deal with all the ISIS fighters that will survive and disperse, and protecting civilians is important in conducting air strikes, but can be ignored when it comes to the land campaign and recovery in any successful aftermath.

Meaningless to Misleading Data on Body Counts, Territory Regained, and Land Fighting

The official data on the strategic impact of the ground campaign are even worse. The United States has never publically tied its slow build up of train and assist personnel to any specifics as to what elements of Iraqi and Syria forces were becoming more effective or where and how they showed they were more effective in combat.

Worse, senior Administration officials have sometimes issued vague Vietnam style body count data for the number of rebels killed, but only for the U.S. air campaign, and these seem to be figures that conceal vast levels of uncertainty and provide point estimates that no one in either the U.S. intelligence community or the military privately seem willing to endorse.

They do not really relate at all to progress in the land war, and sometimes have been so high (“more than 10,000 to 20,000 ISIS rebels”) as to border on the absurd. This is particularly true when the same Pentagon sources that announced the 20,000 figure in October 2015 stated that, “The overall force, the first official said, remains about where it was when the bombing started: 20,000 to 30,000 fighters.”⁴

The few tangible claims made about gains in the land war seem equally lacking in credibility. Ever since April 2015, the Department of Defense has shown what is at best a misleading map claiming that the,⁵

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

This map is shown in **Figure One**, and several things about it approach the theater of the absurd:

- It has not been updated since April 2015, and remained on the DoD web site as of November 3, 2015.⁶
- It does not show the very real gains that the Syrian Kurds and elements of the Arab rebel forces have made in Northern Syria and along the border with Turkey.
- Large areas of the map are unpopulated. The map does not reflect real areas of control, and much of it covers empty desert.
- The map's parameters are chosen as if the temporary advance of a few ISIS forces mark real areas of control, In short, it exaggerates ISIS gains to exaggerate the scale of the area recovered from ISIS.
- It does not cover Western Syria where the most serious fighting between ISIS and the Arab rebel forces and Syrian Kurds has taken place.
- It does not highlight the lack of any progress to date by the key Arab rebel forces the U.S. has sponsored in Syria.
- It does not show that the zones of the fighting in Syria are divided into Assad regime, Arab rebel, Kurdish, and ISIS zones and implies a unified resistance to ISIS in a country torn apart by civil war and where the Assad regime has caused the vast majority of civilian casualties, refugees, internally displaced persons and damage to the economy and civilian facilities.
- It does not show the similar differences between the zones of control of Iraqi Kurds, the Iraqi central government, Shi'ite militia, Sunni tribal, and ISIS forces. It does not reflect the full scale of Iraqi Kurdish gains, or the dismal lack of progress by the Iraqi central government, Shi'ite militia, Sunni tribal forces.

A wide range of far better assessments of the real world areas occupied by ISIS, and the progress in the fighting, is available on the web sites of NGOs like the Institute for the Study of War or in the *Long War Journal*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, Reuters, BBC, IHS Conflict Monitor, etc. Some of this work – particularly by the *New York Times* – also highlights the most critical dimension of the war from the viewpoint of U.S. strategy: the lack of incremental progress in Iraq – which the United States has given clear priority – except for the Kurds. This is matched in part by the fact the most critical fighting in Syria has so far been between the Assad regime and the Arab rebel movements other than ISIS.

It is also important to point out that the lack of meaningful progress reporting on the land war by the U.S. government fails to address the Kurdish areas in Syria and Iraq where U.S. support has helped make major gains against ISIS, and the risk that Kurdish gains have made in terms of future tensions between Kurds and Arabs if ISIS is defeated.

It is these gains that U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor, Anthony J. Blinken, described at the Manama Security Conference on October 31, 2015,⁷

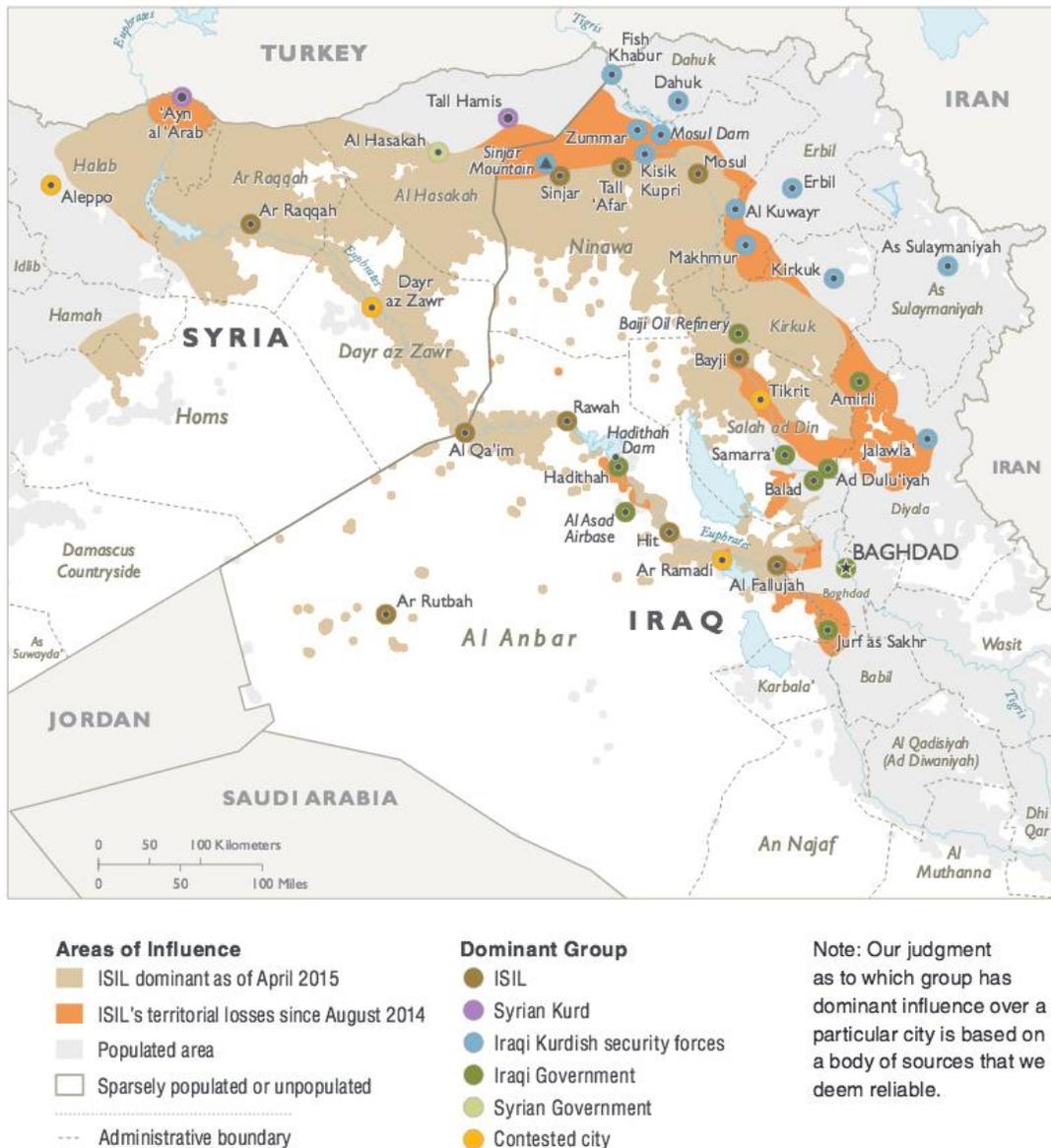
We have also joined with Arab states and dozens of other partners across the globe in a coalition to counter and ultimately defeat Daesh. Our military campaign is paired with comprehensive efforts to disrupt the flow of foreign fighters, counter Daesh's narrative of nihilism, and curtail the flow of financing.

Fourteen months ago, this coalition didn't exist. In the short time since, it has brought today 65 countries, launched more than 7,700 airstrikes, forced Daesh to change how it conducts its military operations, impeded its command and control, confronted its propaganda machine, and deprived it of 30% of the territory in Iraq that it held just a year ago.

From the critical border town of Kobani, Syria to Tikrit, Iraq, we have liberated many communities and enabled many to finally return home. In northern Syria, the coalition has secured 85 percent of the Turkish-Syrian border, and we're enhancing our air campaign and efforts on the ground to help drive Daesh out of the remaining 70-mile stretch that it controls—and so closing off its most vital supply line for foreign fighters and materiel. We also stepping up support to moderate opposition fighters to help them consolidate the gains that they have made begin to put pressure on Al Raqqa—Daesh's self-proclaimed capital.

Blinken's remarks did not address the fact that almost all of these gains were Kurdish gains that took place at the expense of Arab control. Claiming even a temporary short term *real* gain may be better than mapping ones that never really happened, but it has serious limits. It also again highlights the most critical limit to the overall structure of U.S. strategy: the lack of any broader plan for bringing stability to either Syria or Iraq. It is all too possible that such gains may ultimately lead to serious new problems between the Kurds and the Arabs and Turkey.

Figure One: Iraq and Syria: ISIL's Reduced Operating Areas as of April 2015



Source: http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2014/0814_iraq/20150410_ISIL_Map_Unclass_Approved.pdf

Internal Debates over the Effectiveness of U.S. Efforts

It is also all too clear that there is no consensus about what is happening on the ground within the U.S. intelligence community. As reporting by *The Hill*, CNN, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* have reported, USCENTCOM is now under investigation for intelligence reports that exaggerate success – repeating problems that became critical when USCENTCOM intelligence failed to assess the growing strength of the Taliban and weakness of the Afghan government during the Afghan complex.⁸

Worse, the investigation seems to have been turned over to the Inspector General in the Department of Defense – an Inspector General which was working with the Inspector Generals of State and USAID to produce totally vacuous and incompetent assessments of the progress of the war on their own.⁹

It is striking that for all the Republican criticism of the administration's lack of strategy in Congress, the key committees in both the Senate and House seem to have forgotten a key lesson of every war from Vietnam onwards. Commands and the Pentagon cannot be trusted to report on themselves: the political pressures to exaggerate success or ignore failure are simply too great – a lesson made all too clear by the very real success of outside efforts like the Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction (SIGAR) and the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR). So far, the two Armed Service Committees are all partisan bark with no specifics or bite.

Finding Metrics Even Worse and More Dishonest than the Vietnam Body Count: The Lack of a clear Strategy for the Air Campaign

There is more public data on the size of the air campaign against ISIS, but it either only provide tenuous data on effectiveness, or is little more than misleading nonsense.

Sortie Rates and Munitions Releases: Activity Are Not Measures of Effectiveness in Terms of Impact on ISIS

The Pentagon has released data on the number of sorties and strikes, which are summarized in **Figure Two**. The U.S. led coalition had flown a total of 8,289 strikes as of November 19th - with 5,432 in Iraq and 2,857 in Syria. The United States had dominated these strikes and executed 6,471 in Iraq and Syria (3,768 Iraq/2703 Syria). The rest of the coalition had conducted 1,818 strikes (1,664 Iraq/154 Syria).

A total of eight countries had flown strikes against targets in Iraq and seven against targets in Syria. The strikes in Iraq were conducted by nine different coalition countries: The United States, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Jordan, The Netherlands, and the UK. The coalition effort in Syria had involved strikes by the United States, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, France, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and UAE.

These strikes were supported by a massive U.S. led intelligence surveillance, and reconnaissance capability, U.S. and allied refueling and air transport capabilities, and base security and support efforts. To put this effort in perspective, the coalition had flown a total of 57,301 sorties of all kinds by November 14th – with well over 80,000 refuelings, some 13,000 tanker sorties, airlifting over 30,000 passengers, around 8,200 airdrops, and moving some 65,000 short tons of cargo since the start of 2015.

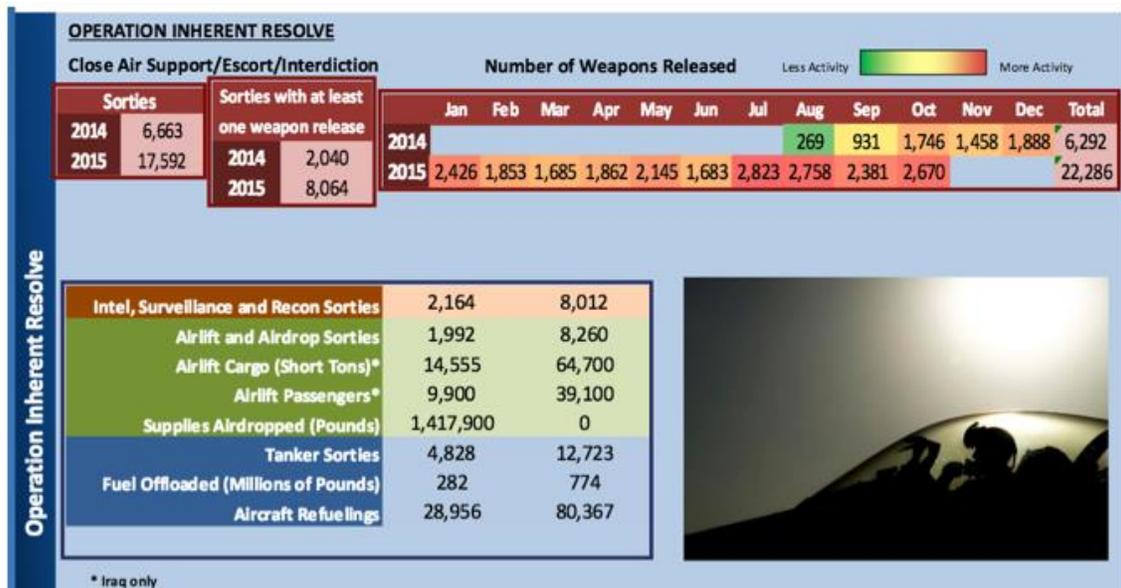
The effort cost the U.S. \$5 billion in direct expenditures by Oct. 31, 2015, since kinetic operations began on Aug. 8, 2014, is \$5 billion, and the average daily cost was \$11 million for 450 days of operations.

These numbers, however, say nothing about the effectiveness of this effort, the air strategy involved, or how the air campaign strategy supports an air-land strategy – if one actually exists. It also does not explain the problems in trying to use airpower against an experience enemy that can disperse and use human shields. These are key considerations.

The Coalition had flown 17,592 strike sorties supported by 8,012 intelligence surveillance, and reconnaissance (IS&R) sorties in Iraq and Syria as of October 30th. The problems in keeping civilian casualties to a minimum, and the problems in assessing targets in Syria and being certain civilians would be protected as much as possible, were so severe that only 31% percent of the total of 25,964 strike and IS&R combat sorties were actually able to release a weapon in the first 10 months of 2015.

Figure Two: Coalition Air Strike and Other Sorties and Munitions Releases: August 8, 2014 to October 31, 2015

(Combined Forces Air Component Commander 2010-2015 Airpower Statistics)



Source: http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2014/0814_iraq/docs/31_October_2015.pdf

Damaged Destroyed Data Even More Meaningless than Body Counts

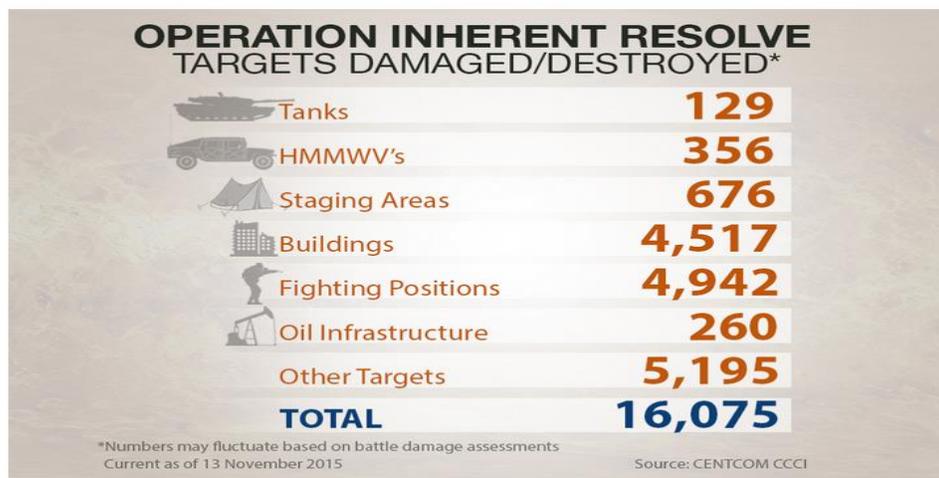
The only other specifics on the effectiveness of U.S. and Coalition airpower to date consist of asides during the press briefings that talk about daily air activity or “progress” in vague generalities, or a table of regularly updated, but meaningless count of targets destroyed and damaged to date.

These on Targets Damaged/Destroyed issued by the Department -- as of November 13, 2015 – are shown in **Figure Three**. The problem is that even the title “damaged/destroyed” can mean anything from token damage to serious impact. Unless the data are supported by a detailed narrative explanation of both the level and importance of the damage, and its effect on the enemy and the course of the fighting, they are little more than vacuous spin from the start.

The categories used to describe targets have no inherent meaning in terms of their effect on ISIS forces, and some approach the nonsense level. Some of the more specific data -- like that on tanks and oil infrastructure -- largely date back months and never show the impact of the losses. Most categories are so vague as to be meaningless: 676 “staging areas,” 4,512 “buildings,” 4,942 “fighting positions,” and 5,195 “other targets” mean exactly what?

A total of 15,330 of 16,075 targets in **Figure Three** are described in terms that really can only be described as statistical rubbish. They turn the classic description of pointless tactical activity in counterinsurgency from “whack a mole” into “whack a sand castle.”

Figure Three: Coalition Air Strike Targets Damaged/Destroyed as of November 13, 2015



Source: http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve

No Land-Air Effectiveness Data

The other key problem is that there is still no clear link between such metrics and any overall strategy for the land-air battle. The United States does seem to be linking its limited increase of the Special Forces working with the Kurds and Arab rebels in Northern Syria with an increase in air strikes, and the use of attack aircraft like the A-10 from Incirlik and other bases in Turkey. It is striking, however, that its public narrative has never seriously addressed its actions in either Iraq or Syria in terms of joint warfare or attempted to provide any air-land measures of effectiveness.

The Need for a Broader Strategy for Defeating ISIS and Post-ISIS Security and Stability

It is more than four years since the start of upheavals in Syria and three years since the beginning of one of the world's worst civil wars. It is nearly four years since U.S. forces left Iraq, and nearly two years since ISIS became a major military threat in both Syria and Iraq. So far, the Obama administration's efforts have done little more than show that inadequate resources produce inadequate results.

It may be too late for the Obama Administration to change, but if it does not at least make a major new beginning, its legacy may well be that the Administration could talk a fight but not execute one. Worse, it is all too likely that the security situation in Iraq, Syria, and the region will continue to steadily deteriorate through mid-2017 – the earliest a new Administration could hope to have a major impact. The last two years are all too clear a warning that the humanitarian cost of two more years of ineffective action will be all too high.

The Impact of U.S. Efforts to Date

So far, U.S. military efforts have at best partially contained ISIS, done nothing to reduce the growing internal divisions and violence in either Syria or Iraq, left Syria open to Russian intervention, and failed to properly integrate US security efforts effectively with those of Turkey and U.S. Arab allies.

U.S. military efforts have proved to be so reactive that events have consistently outpaced every new increment in U.S. military activity, and these efforts have at best address only part of the strategic challenge –leaving Iraqi and Syria politics and governance to fracture, and corruption, the economy, and the impact of population pressures and the youth “bulge” to grow worse in both states.

If there are merits to creeping incrementalism, they largely consist of negatives. Creeping incrementalism is no worse than the strategies and actions of any of Iraq and Syria's neighbors, it is less threatening to Syria's people than that of Russia and Iran, and has been limited more by the internal divisions in Iraq and Syria than by the shortfalls in U.S. efforts.

No Fly Zones

At the same time, the United States should not rush into taking actions that will not achieve its objectives. President Obama is correct in stating that any call for options must be specific enough to examine as real world actions. This is particularly true of undefined calls for the deployment of substantial numbers of U.S. ground troops or “no fly” zones.

The problem with vague calls for No Fly zones include:

- Defining “no fly” to indicate its size and function, whether it precludes ground action by Assad forces, includes rotary wing aircraft, and what level of action would be taken in response to a violation and by what country.
- The limited number of areas where such zones are credible. There is only a small zone along the Turkish border that is not occupied by Kurdish forces and areas in Jordan are empty desert.

- The problem of clashing with Russia.
- The lack of surplus facilities to support refugees, finding ways to prevent moves across the nearby border, and finding ways to ensure suitable supply.
- The high level of destruction in areas near the Turkish border that already exists.
- Who would pay for the zone?
- How various Arab rebel factions would be affected, which could enter the zone, and its military or demilitarized character.
- The fact some 7-6 million to 8 million Syrian internally displaced persons (IDPs) now exist and the limited absorption capability of any such zone.

Deploying U.S. Ground Troops

The problems with equally vague calls for deploying U.S. ground forces include deploying large numbers of U.S. ground forces into deeply divided Arab states in the face of Iranian hostility, and in the middle of a major struggle for the future of Islam. Such actions are no more likely to be successful in the future than they were in Iraq. Moreover, ISIS is scarcely the only problem in deploying U.S. ground forces even if one ignores the basing, transport, support, and domestic political problems involved.

Other problems in deploying U.S. ground forces include:

- Iranian and Russian hostility,
- Arab support will at best be uncertain.
- Immediate tensions with Sunni Islamist extremists,
- Impact on Arab-Kurdish tensions,
- Turkey has its own goals and objectives, and is more concerned with Assad than ISIS,
- Significant numbers of Arabs – including all of our allies -- see Assad as the principal threat in Syria, and would focus on using a no fly zone against him rather than ISIS.
- Sunni and Shi'ite tensions are a critical issue in Iraq as Sunni Alawite tensions are in Syria,
- The U.S. would almost certainly have to deal with the problem of liberating populated Sunni areas, dealing with civil recovery and any Shi'ite abuses of the population, and then deal with the legacy of the expansion of Kurdish areas of control in Arab areas.

There simply does not seem to be a mix of cost-benefits that is worth the risk.

This does not mean, however, that the United States cannot do far more in other areas, and that there are not specific proposals and options that are worth examining.

Shaping a Strategy for Air-Land Operations in Both Iraq and Syria

The United States needs to articulate a meaningful overall security strategy for air-land operations, for both Iraq and Syria, and for cooperating with its allies in the region. It is all too clear that the “Iraq first” strategy the United States initially attempted has failed. Russian intervention alone has forced the United States to face a reality that it has partly attempted to deny in ways that have separated it from its allies, and ignored the fact that no defeat of ISIS in Iraq alone is a meaningful strategic goal. Moreover, the United States cannot continue to try to bomb the desert back into the Stone Age – an unpopulated desert is already there – and ignore the lack of progress in creating effective allies on the ground.

The United States should not abandon the search for a diplomatic solution to Syria or dialogue with Russia and Iran, but it also should have no illusions about the probability of success or that even some successful arrangement could produce anything like a viable government or lasting stability. Any compromise that keeps Assad will lead to ongoing internal power struggles, “Free Syrian” political and military elements that have no real status, and the mix of Arab rebel forces is simply not going to accept compromise solutions and government imposed from the outside on any lasting basis.

The United States is almost certainly going to have to make a clear choice between backing Arab rebels and Kurds, and joining fully with Arab allies in doing so, and accepting some form of Assad rule or ceasefire and separation of Syria. It cannot simply ignore the growing impact of a Russian presence and step up of Iranian presence. This, in turn, means facing the fact that any defeat of ISIS in Iraq will mean dealing with Iranian and Russian efforts in Iraq as well.

Treating Strategic Communications as a Critical Part of United States Operations

The United States needs far better strategic communications to explain such a strategy credibly and publically to the American people, the Congress, and its allies. It needs to establish a clear level of conditionality for its military and aid efforts, but also to treat Iraq and its regional allies as real partners. It needs to accept the fact that the most it can hope for in dealing with Russia and Iran is a troubled coexistence and confront them as necessary.

One step in making such a new beginning would be for the administration to make good on its promises of transparency and to provide a clear picture of what U.S. plans to help defeat ISIS *and bring security to Iraq and Syria* really are and what level of progress has actually been made.

It is one thing to talk about transparency and quite another to provide it. Providing classified and unclassified monthly or quarterly reports to Congress that really address the security situation in net assessment terms, provided realistic picture of the size of the U.S. effort, provided realistic costs, and discussed United States and allied military progress in terms of realistic metrics would be a beginning. It would also show whether or not the United States really had a meaningful strategy and one that relied on proven

experience rather than future hope.

The United States needs to use public reporting, public statements, and credible public metrics of effectiveness, to both reassure and pressure its allies: in Iraq, among Syrian rebels, and in neighboring states. Failing to openly address the problems in dealing with host country governments and factions, and in dealing with allies, may be “diplomatic” but it also deprives the United States of leverage and makes it the target of blame.

A failure to openly set conditions for U.S. support has so far failed to put the necessary degree of pressure on the states and factions the United States is seeking to aid, and highlights the degree to which their failures to act are responsible for failure. Openly addressing the negative roles of Iran and Russia is equally important. They are not going to drift into becoming strategic partners, they are going to continue to exploit every weakness they can find.

Creating A Meaningful Train and Assist Mission in Iraq

More tangibly, the United States needs to size and structure a mix of “train and assist” efforts that have a chance of real success. The good news is that ISIS is not a particularly strong military force, and has only some 20,000 to 33,000 fighters – many with little training and only light weapons.

While the details are unclear, the assessment of Iraq forces made for General Dunford during his October visit to Iraq seem to have cut the number of divisions the United States hoped to rebuild in the short to medium term, and raised even more questions about the need for a more effective Iraqi command structure, better intelligence coordination, more timely and effective resupply and reinforcement, and eliminating Iraqi political and Iranian interference in the chain of command.

It seems clear that even if Iraqi government forces finally do liberate Ramadi, there will be little left, and that it will not set any precedent for clearing Ninewa or liberating Mosul unless ISIS collapses from within or alienates the Iraqi Sunni Arab population enough to revolt. They at best will require massive amounts of Coalition air support, and possibly carefully focused and limited commando raids by U.S. and other Special Forces equivalents on key ISIS headquarters, other command, and support facilities.

These assessments also seem to have raised serious questions about the effectiveness and restraint of Iraqi Shi'ite militias when operating outside Shi'ite areas, the pace of the build-up of credible Sunni tribal forces, and the ability to finance and sustain Pesh Merga forces in the face of massive funding problems and internal political struggles in the KRG.¹⁰

As for Iraqi Kurdish forces, they now face massive financing problems, occupy new disputed areas like Kirkuk that create a legacy of future tension with the Arabs, and cannot lead an effort to liberate Ninewa. Reports of 5,000 effective Sunni tribal forces in Anbar seem grossly exaggerated, and so do near-term goals of raising this number to 15,000-20,000.

The present six sites the United States uses in the rear do have value in helping forces recover, re-equip, and conduct formal training. These centers also allow the United States

to play a role in training Kurdish and Sunni tribal forces, as well as Iraqi government forces. These centers exist at Besmaya, Baghdad, Taji, Al-Taqqaddum, Erbil and Al Asad.

However, creating effective combat units requires forward-deployed U.S. combat trainers and support with actual combat experience and that focus on creating effective fighting leaders and units, not simply generating forces. It means providing on the scene expertise that can evaluate who can and cannot lead, to provide meaningful intelligence on combat capability, to provide credible expertise in calling for and targeting air support, and making requests for resupply and reinforcement. The numbers of such advisors deployed with each major combat unit can be relatively small. The issue is quality and not quantity.

If the United States is to have an effective train and assist mission, it must deploy train and assist teams forward with the combat elements in the Iraqi government forces, in the Sunni militias it is trying to create, and with the Iraqi Pesh Merga.

Providing Adequate support for the Arab Rebel, Kurdish, and Turcoman Forces in Syria

The U.S. efforts to create separate “moderate” Syrian Arab forces to only fight ISIS have imploded. The other Arab rebel forces are deeply divided, include extremist elements as bad as ISIS, and focus on Assad. The coordination of U.S. efforts to build up Syrian Arab forces with the efforts of Turkey and Arab allies still seems poor and uncertain, and the United States is forced to rely on Syrian Kurds in ways that could leave another legacy of Arab-Kurdish tension or fighting.

Deploying a limited number of Special Forces forward in Syria is only a faltering start in making either set of forces effective against ISIS, and does nothing to address the sectarian and ethnic problems in both Iraq and Syria.

If the United States is to have an effective train and assist mission, it must do more than risk 50 Special Forces. It must deploy train and assist teams forward with and with key Arab rebel elements in Syria as well as Syrian Kurds in the same way it needs to deploy them with Iraqi forces.

The United States has to work with rebel forces that do present risks in terms of their stability, history, Islamist ties, and probable actions if the rebels win. It will have to work with its Arab allies and Turkey to decide which factions it can work with, make it clear that it is not choosing sides on a sectarian or ethnic basis, and put real pressure on its Arab allies and Turkey as to how they fund, arm, and assist the various factions in Iraq and Syria. In the process, the United States will also have to be more realistic about such factions.

Most of the key fighters and factions in both Syria and Iraq have been involved in civil power struggles or open civil warfare long enough to be polarized along sectarian and ethnic lines, have a questionable past or clear history of humanitarian abuses, and/or have ties to other states and movements that the United States has good reason to dislike or distrust. By and large, the innocent are the ineffective. The problem is not to find a small minority that can be vetted and controlled; it is to make hard choices among the large

numbers of rebels those who can actually fight. This means the United States must often support the almost good, rather than the clearly bad.

The United States will also have to accept the risk of increased tension with Russia and Iran. It does not need to openly confront Iran in Syria or Iraq, but it needs to make it clear that it will take action if Iran interferes, support the action of Iraq's more extreme militias, or puts its advisors, volunteers, and Hezbollah forces where they further divide Iraq and Syria or interfere with United States military action. Quietly targeting is better than either noisy diplomatic objections or passive inaction.

The United States will also have to deploy advisors forward in ways that will allow it to give Arab rebel forces, Kurdish, and Turcoman forces in Syria advanced "fourth generation" anti-tank and man-portable surface-to-air missiles. The rebels need "equalizers" and such weapons transfers are a key way to win influence over given rebel forces and inspire other rebels to join them. These weapons will need to be tightly rationed, and issued and controlled by Special Forces and other United States/Coalition personnel. This illustrates the fact the United States has long-needed to create such systems that are specially designed for transfer to forces with uncertain alignments and stability, and that have with special security codes, time/expiration locks, and IFF systems to ease the security and control problem.

Using Air Power Effectively

If the United States is to use combat air power effectively, it cannot be on the basis of waiting for Godot. The United States now seems to be waiting for the mysterious appearance of effective Iraqi ground forces that can help create Iraqi unity as well as defeat ISIS to try to use air power decisively in Iraq, and it is simply unclear what the goal is in using U.S. airpower in Syria – particularly now that the United States faces a Russian effort that largely attacks every rebel element other than ISIS and backs Assad.

The United States needs to make several major changes in the way it uses airpower:

- Create an effective, precision strategic bombing campaign against ISIS and other extremist factions like the Al Nusra Front. Scale up the target numbers and mix to make it far more difficult for ISIS to survive and function.
- Provide a mix of forward air controllers, train and assist personnel, and IS&R assets, that allows the United States to fly major increases in the close air support and interdiction missions it flies in support of all the government, Sunni, and Kurdish elements Iraqi ground forces. Provide the same support to Syrian Arab and Kurdish rebels in ISIS-dominated areas where Assad forces are not present.
- Develop a clearly defined set of air tactics to attack urban and built-up areas that make better trade-offs between military effectiveness and the risk of civilian casualties and collateral damage, and allow better close air support to advancing Iraqi and Syria forces in attack built-up areas occupied by ISIS.
- Confront both the Assad regime and Russia by flying such missions in support of key "moderate" rebel factions in the areas where Assad forces are present. Provide them with a carefully forward-controlled number of short-range air defenses to fire at Syrian combat aircraft and helicopters, and low flying Russian

aircraft.

- Consider setting a “red line” for Syrian helicopters and combat aircraft that attack civilian targets. Creating a threat to create a limited “no fly” zone like the threat to respond to Assad’s use of chemical weapons that will not be enforced if Assad stops air attacks on civilians.
- Create a joint air security area along the Turkish border that would strike at ISIS or other extremist movement across the border and create a “safety zone” on the Syrian side that would be used to attack incoming aircraft or drones before they reached Turkish territory.
- Fully evaluate real world options to deny Syria the ability to use its attack fighters and helicopters in a way that does not require a form of no-fly zone of the kind that relies on somehow transforming a massively combat damaged area in a narrow band along Syria’s border with Turkey to somehow provide a secure area for rebels and/or refugees. Examine options for limiting all Syrian air activity to limited airspace over the areas directly under Assad regime control, or at least forcing the Assad regime to stop the use of barrel bombs by shooting down such delivery systems.
- As suggested earlier, tie these efforts to efforts on the ground to giving Arab rebel forces, Kurdish, and Turcoman forces in Syria advanced “fourth generation” man-portable surface-to-air missiles, issued and controlled by Special Forces and other United States/Coalition personnel. Create such systems with special security codes, time/expiration locks, and IFF systems to ease the security and control problem.

Dealing with Russia

The United States should not abandon efforts to work with Russia, but should not be passive in accepting its military build-up in Syria. It should carefully examine the following options:

- Responding to the Russian build-up of air defense missiles, and deployment of the S-400 – which has a nominal maximum range of 400 kilometers (248 miles) by redeploying the Patriot to Turkey, considering options for Patriot deployment to Jordan, and working with Arab Gulf allies to provide matching Patriot air defense deployments to their bases where needed. Consider deploying AWACS and ELINT aircraft to enhance the mission, and equipping Coalition and other allied forces with more advanced countermeasures and anti-radiation and other anti-SAM strike systems.
- Carrying out a systematic regional review of air combat capabilities, and of air-to-air weaponry and avionics. Show our allies we are responding to the Russian presence and are ready to give them an “edge.” The United States must respond to Russian power projection of systems like the Sukhoi Su-30SM, Sukhoi Su-34 fighter-bomber, and Su-27SM3 Flanker air superiority fighter, and Vympel R-73 high off-boresight dogfighting missile and semi-active radar homing Vympel R-27R1 or R-27ER1 air-to-air missiles.¹¹

- More generally, addressing the broader Russian creation of “fortress air bases” in Europe that mix new Russian fighter types with heavy ground-based missile defenses. Russia is demonstrating a new kind of power projection, matched by deploying missile ships and using cruise missiles. The United States needs to demonstrate that it has similar capabilities, work with its allies to couple their airpower to ground-based defenses, and reevaluate air base defense in terms of cruise missile and precision-guided, conventionally armed, ballistic missiles – both Russian and Iranian.

Clearly linking the scale of U.S. transfers of advanced man-portable and light surface-to-air missiles to the Syria rebels, Kurds, and Turcomans to Russia air activity against them.

Looking Beyond Security to Grand Strategy

Finally, no defeat of ISIS in Iraq or Syria will matter if it simply leaves two failed and divided states where civil conflicts, Islamist extremist movements and forces, and sectarian and ethnic conflicts ensure that ISIS is followed by other Islamist violence, and both states continue to fight low – or higher – levels of civil war.

The United States must address the issues in grand strategy raised at the start of this analysis, and decide what its future goals for Syria and Iraq really are, create real world plans to try to achieve such goals, and decide what types and levels of aid will help bring recovery and development. Defeating ISIS will do little to bring regional security and stability if it is not tied to efforts to deal with the broader sectarian and ethnic tensions in Iraq and Syria, and to efforts to help the leaders in both states make reforms in politics, governance, and economics that can bring recovery and broader development.

Many aspects of the sectarian and ethnic tensions within Iraq and Syria have grown far worse during the course of the fighting in each country since 2011, and make any lasting form of stability and security even harder to achieve. If these issues are not addressed now, there is a serious risk that ISIS may only be the prelude to far worse problems.

In Iraq’s case, prolonged fighting may end in dividing Arab Sunnis and Shi’ites to the point where unity is impossible. It has already left a legacy of tension and conflicting territorial goals between Arab and Kurd that will divide Iraq along ethnic lines as well as sectarian ones. Sectarian segregation is a growing problem in Arab areas, and the country is increasingly divided into separate economies: The Sunni, ISIS areas in the West, the Kurdish economy in the KRG, the mixed agricultural economy in the East and north of Baghdad, the mixed urban economy around Baghdad, and the largely Shi’ite petroleum economy in the Southeast.

Iraq needs far more than military assistance, anti-corruption measures, or some simplistic approach to federalism. It needs a central government that responds to its sectarian and ethnic divisions in a functional way, and whose leaders and legislators actually represent given constituencies rather than party lists. It needs to agree on a meaningful way of sharing the nation’s oil wealth, and to agree on reforms of its government, state-owned enterprise sectors, and agricultural sectors that will be paced at rates that encourage job creation and stability

Only Iraqis can ultimately shape and agree on such plans, but they need help in forming them and they need it as soon as possible. Here, the United States has already shown it

lacks core competencies within USAID to conduct such planning, just as the UN and UNAMA have failed in Afghanistan. The World Bank, however, does seem to have such capabilities and a major U.S. effort to support such an aid effort in support of Iraq could help Iraqi political leaders without imposing an uncertain U.S. effort.

In Syria's case, the problem is vastly complicated by the fact more than half the population is either internally displaced persons or refugees and the massive levels of damage done by the civil war. It is also the sheer lack of any credible moderate political center or faction that is a credible source of effective governance and economic reconstruction and recovery. Syria is now so divided and so lacking in unity and effective leadership that its only options now seem to be a paralyzing form of ceasefire, negotiations that cannot produce a stable lasting outcome even if the principles agree, or a form of burn out that can only lead to a "peace" of the vanished and the dead. Defeating ISIS cannot deal with these problems.

Real progress depends on a level of Syrian initiative, leadership, and cooperation from within – problems even more serious than in Iraq. It cannot take place under Assad, but it is unclear how Syria's factions can agree or who in any faction has the political ability, capability for governance, and economic planning capability to propose a program that even offers real hope. Unlike Iraq, Syria has no real petroleum wealth to fall back upon, and this means it will need both more help in planning than Iraq and far more aid.

Once again, the United States cannot succeed in "nation building" or "nation rebuilding" when the leaders and peoples of a given state fail to unify around such goals. Moreover, Iraq and Syria's Arab neighbors have as much – or more – responsibility to help both countries as the United States does.

So far, however, the Obama administration has not even articulated a clear set of options for helping Iraq and Syria deal with their broader problems. It has not sought some effort to find solutions within the UN, IMF, World Bank, or other international institutions. No one to date in the Obama administration has shown that there is any overall U.S. strategy that ties the U.S. efforts to defeat ISIS to a credible plan to oust Assad, to bring some form of stability and unity/federalism to Syria and Iraq, rebuild them, and to move them towards development.

The practical question is whether the Obama Administration can make a serious start in addressing these broader issues during its remaining time in office -- even if it is only to create a UN or World Bank effort that could propose solutions and reform and offer some tangible form of hope. Ultimately, there is no meaningful military strategy that is not tied to grand strategy in civil-military terms. From this perspective, both ISIS and Assad are far more the symptoms than the disease.

¹ White House, Press Conference by President Obama -- Antalya, Turkey, Kaya Palazzo Resort Antalya, Turkey, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/press-conference-president-obama-antalya-turkey>.

² For a detailed history, see Anthony H. Cordesman, *Creeping Incrementalism: U.S. Strategy in Iraq and Syria from 2011 to 2015*, CSIS, Burke Chair, November 9, 2015, http://csis.org/files/publication/151109_Cordesman_Incrementalism_iraq_syria.pdf.

³ White House, Press Conference by President Obama -- Antalya, Turkey, Kaya Palazzo Resort Antalya, Turkey, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/16/press-conference-president-obama-antalya-turkey>.

⁴ See <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/22/politics/us-officials-say-6000-isis-fighters-killed-in-battles/>; <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/06/06/team-obama-s-b-s-isis-body-count.html>; <http://time.com/3925248/isis-islamic-state-ashton-carter/>; <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/us-isis-fighters-killed/410599/>; <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/iraq-war-on-terror/rise-of-isis/what-an-estimate-of-10000-isis-fighters-killed-doesnt-tell-us/>; and <http://www.defenseone.com/news/2015/10/isis-putin-syria-army-congress-ausa/122734/>.

⁵

http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2014/0814_iraq/20150410_ISIL_Map_Unclass_Approved.pdf.

⁶

http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2014/0814_iraq/20150410_ISIL_Map_Unclass_Approved.pdf.

⁷ Antony Blinken, "US Policy and Regional Security," [The IISS Manama Dialogue](https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama%20dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2015-0220/plenary1-bb97/blinken-77f5), The Regional Security Summit, IISS, <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/manama%20dialogue/archive/manama-dialogue-2015-0220/plenary1-bb97/blinken-77f5>.

⁸ For recent reporting, see Matt Apuzzo, Mark Mazzetti, and Michael S. Schmidt, "Pentagon Expands Inquiry Into Intelligence on ISIS Surge," *New York Times*, November 21, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/us/politics/military-reviews-us-response-to-isis-rise.html?_r=0),

⁹ Anthony H. Cordesman, "A Public Relations Exercise without Meaningful Transparency: The First Quarterly Report of the New Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations on Operation Inherent Resolve," Burke Chair, CSIS, May 1, 2015, <https://csis.org/publication/public-relations-exercise-without-meaningful-transparency>.

¹⁰ <http://mebriefing.com/?p=2017>; <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/oct/20/top-us-military-officer-arrives-for-talks-in-iraq/?page=all>; <http://cdn.defenseone.com/defenseone/interstitial.html?v=2.1.1&rf=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.defenseone.com%2Fpolitics%2F2015%2F10%2Fdunford-us-will-rethink-its-iraq-presence-if-russia-goes%2F123157%2F>; <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/21/world/middleeast/joint-chiefs-of-staff-iraq-isis.html>; <http://www.defense.gov/News-Article-View/Article/624981/dunford-sees-progress-challenges-in-anti-isis-campaign>; . <http://www.armytimes.com/>.

¹¹ Dave Majumder, "Next Up for Syria: Even More Lethal Russian Military Hardware," *The National Interest*, November 30, 2015, <http://www.nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/next-syria-even-more-lethal-russian-military-hardware-14467>.