

The Campaign Against the Islamic State: Key Issues and Demands for Action from the Administration and Congress

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If there is any one lesson of the Afghan and Iraq Wars, it is that it is far easier to begin a conflict than to manage it well and achieve a meaningful form of victory. The President's announcement of a strategy for seeking to degrade and destroy the Islamic State — and de facto Congressional acceptance of the need to fight a new conflict — has now committed the United States to a high risk, low-level war of indefinite duration.

Winning that war will require persistence, resources, effective planning and management, and sustained domestic and international political support. The Obama Administration now needs to show that it will both commit the necessary resources, and manage them effectively. It needs to show that it is doing its best to address the key risks it has accepted in going to war. It needs to provide an honest picture of the course of the fighting and its impact on the stability and security of the region.

This means that the Administration must show that it recognizes the problems in dealing with the threat, in dealing with an extremely uncertain “host country” partner like Iraq, and in coping with lasting instability in Syria. It must show that it has a coherent policy for dealing with Iran, and that it has done its best create an effective alliance with other regional powers. It also needs to show that it has recognized some of the key failings in the way the United States conducted the Afghan and Iraq Wars, and minimize the extent to which the United States is a threat to itself.

The U.S. Congress, too, needs to be far more competent and responsible than it has been in dealing the Afghan and Iraq Wars. It needs to do far more than provide some form of formal support and funding for the President's strategy in dealing with the Islamic State. It needs to regularly address whether that strategy is effectively resourced and assess its level of success. Congress needs to examine the quality and effectiveness of civil-military plans and programs, and how the Administration adapts to risks and problems it confronts. It needs to ensure that the Administration provides an effective accounting of the cost of the war.

To do this, the Congress must demand both full transparency in the Executive Branch's reporting to Congress and as much transparency as possible on reporting on progress in the war, to the media and to the American people.

The Need for Transparency, Accountability, and Integrity

One of the grim lessons of Vietnam, the Afghan War, and the previous conflict in Iraq is the extent to which various elements of the U.S. government can lose sight of the realities of war, and “spin” the real course of the war. It is a warning of the extent to which very different Administrations could omit key data and trends from reporting to Congress and the public, create false images of host nation allied cooperation, disguise a critical lack of effective resources, and disguise an equally critical lack of coordination between civil and military efforts and key elements of U.S. intelligence.

There is a need for operational security and to avoid public disclosures that threaten success and U.S. and allied forces. There is a need for diplomatic secrecy in dealing with host countries and other states. These needs, however, must be fully justified and this time, the Congress should insist that we keep over-classification, puff and spin, and lies by omission to a minimum.

Our wars from Vietnam on have shown that security and over-classification have been systematically used to disguise, in both military and civil efforts, a lack of coordination with the U.S. effort and with allies, problems, overspending and waste, a lack of effective plans, and a lack of meaningful measures of effectiveness.

These abuses of security and over-classification are all too apparent in the lack of credible current reporting on the war in Afghanistan. ISAF has ceased to provide any meaningful metrics or trend analysis on the war. The Department of Defense issues a semi-annual report that is usually six months out of date, and does not provide any clear plan for transition. The State Department and USAID do not provide any credible reporting at all. Roughly half a century later, the press briefings and “follies” of Vietnam look almost good by comparison.

The end result of such abuses has been to disguise mistakes that had resulted in critical failures to deal with the complexity of both wars, and led to vast waste and total costs approaching or exceeding \$1.8 trillion dollars. The result has been unnecessary casualties, immense strain on the U.S. military, a loss of allied and global confidence, and three wars the United States has either lost or, at best, clearly failed to “win.”

The U.S. military and the U.S. public deserve far more, and it is all too clear that transparency, accountability, and integrity will require consistent congressional pressure and action. In fact, these needs are already all too clear from what the Administration has not said to the Congress and the American people about its strategy for dealing with the Islamic State, and its ability to deal with the new types of risk that are inherent in dealing with the Iraqi government, Syrian rebels, and uncertain allies.

Air Power and Effective Force

The three most immediate challenges to U.S. success do not, however, come from the Islamic State or from our allies. They come from the uncertainties surrounding our actual willingness to provide the necessary resources, combat capabilities, and mission capabilities necessary to implement the strategy we have just announced.

The first key area is the level of airpower, unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs), cruise missiles, and enabling assets the United States will commit. Our allies can provide useful demonstrations of solidarity in these areas, but the United States cannot come close to leading from behind. Some 95% or more of the air and missile power – and the specialized

intelligence and targeting assets, damage assessment capability necessary to make effective use of that air and missile power – must come from the United States.

Almost all, if not virtually all, of the deep strike and strategic attacks deep into Iraqi air space and in Syria will also have to come from the United States. As yet, however, the Administration has so far failed to show it is committed to this level of effort. This is not only true of strike power, but the willingness to maintain a level of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability that can identify and selectively attack steadily better dispersed Islamic State military forces, key equipment and cadres will have to be provided by the United States.

The Administration needs to show now that it will really commit all of the complex mix of airpower, UCAVs, cruise missiles, and enabling assets that are needed. It needs to show it has credible capability and plans to act decisively. It needs to show that it can then report regularly to Congress, the American people, and its allies on the effectiveness of its efforts in meaningful terms, rather than simply report sortie numbers or a few successful strikes against leaders.

The United States needs to show in broad terms that it can mix decisive force with careful restraint. If the United States is to rely on other uncertain power for ground forces, it cannot afford to try to correct for doing too little too early by then trying to do too much too late.

Situational awareness and effective command and control will be vital at both the political and military level. Actually implementing rules of engagement that minimize civilian casualties and collateral damage as the Islamic state steadily increases its use of human shields and embedding in populated areas will be critical, as will the ability to show in real time that the United States has not used excessive force or produced excessive innocent casualties as both the Islamic State and other critics of the United States make this a key part of their strategic communications and propaganda.

Forward Advisors and Special Forces

The second key area is whether the United States will commit the limited kinds of ground forces we actually need, or make a political commitment to avoid very limited forms of ground combat regardless of the cost and risk.

There are good reasons not to commit major U.S. combat units on the ground. One reason is the total lack of domestic U.S. support. The broader problem is that inserting enough to cover a vast space in Iraq, the uncertainties as to what then happens in Syria, the loss of area expertise and language skills, and thrusting largely Christian, non-Arab forces into the middle of Islamic sectarian civil wars is a recipe for disaster. The Iraq of 2014 is not the Iraq of 2010, and focusing on the combat power of U.S. ground troops in total indifference to the realities of the sectarian and ethnic divisions in Iraq and Syria would be just plain stupid.

At the same time, so would be restricting ground forces to training and equipping combat forces in the rear, and focusing “force generation” rather than providing the training and advisory effort necessary to build warfighting effectiveness. As we are already learning the hard way in Afghanistan, there are reasons why U.S. commanders feel that weak, newly formed, and inexperienced forces need forward advisors to be embedded at the combat unit level.

These embedded advisory teams – usually ones where Special Forces and Ranger type elements with area expertise are present in small cadres – are critical to helping inexperienced combat leaders, making effective use of enablers and closely support, stiffening weaker units, and quietly identifying the allied combat leaders that can lead and those that cannot.

This means Congress must counter and clarify press reports that they have decided to limit the U.S. ground pressure to training, equipping, and enabling in the rear. Congress needs to hear from the Chairman of the JCS, Chief of Staff of the Army, Commandant of the Marine Corps, Commander of USCENTCOM, and new Commander of US Special Forces exactly what their advice was on this issue – not only for Iraqi government forces, but for the new Iraqi Sunni National Guard, the Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga, and the Syrian rebel forces the U.S. plans to support.

It is true that such a presence means risk of capture, betrayal, and casualties. Forward advisory roles inevitably do involve some very low level of combat. A mantra that focuses on eliminating all such risks and every element of ground combat, however, is the kind of political mantra that can lose this war. As our previous wars of this kind have shown all too clearly, generating forces does not make many warfighters, corruption and politicized promotion require changes in field command, and having expert advisors with area and language expertise deployed forward is critical.

Providing and Managing U.S. Resources and Money

The third key area exposes a fundamental flaw in the way the United States now resources its wars. It is a grim reflection on the fiscal irresponsibility of two Administrations – as well as the leadership of both Houses of Congress and all its critical committees – that the U.S. government has never even announced the cost of either the war in Iraq or Afghanistan, much less provided any detailed picture of how the money it has spent has been used and with what effectiveness.

The closest either the executive or legislative branches have come to basic fiscal responsibility is a now dated set of guesstimates by Amy Belasco of the Congressional Research Service, and the retroactive partial costings provided by the Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction (SIGIR) and the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

None of these sources have attempted to justify the overall level of spending and its impact, and it is mildly amusing that for all the pressure on federal spending, neither any member of Congress nor any major media source seems to have publically pointed out this lack of data or investigated how the OCO account has been spent, and with what effect.

The campaign against the Islamic State *should* be far cheaper, and the ground, basing, and support efforts *should* be financed in large part of Iraq's oil money. There should be an integrated civil-military plan for resource the conflict. There should be near real time accounting for the flow of money. There should be clear checks on contractors and host country corruption and overspending, controls to prevent the massive waste on unneeded and overambitious projects in the Iraq and Afghan wars, meaningful measures of effectiveness, and key warnings of where the money and resources are *not* adequate. Aside from limited and largely retroactive examinations by SIGIR and SIGAR, however, no real

progress was made in any of these areas by either the Bush or Obama Administrations, or any element of Congress.

One immediate step to correct this situation would be to create a new Special Inspector General or expand the role of SIGAR (SIGIR is disbanded) to cover this fighting. It would have to focus on future trends and effectiveness measures, not simply past abuses and waste.

Another step would be for Congress to legislate quarterly reporting to ensure real accountability, demand reporting of plans and measures of effectiveness, and demand integrated civil-military reporting by war and armed intervention rather than the mindless farce of lumping all wars together under the OCO account, and then reporting separately in nearly unintelligible ways by department and agency.

As for the cost of such reporting, both SIGIR and SIGAR have already shown that it is far cheaper to properly resource and manage the use of money than simply throw it at a war and then watch massive amounts vanish into waste, fraud, and abuse.

Iraqi Unity and Civil Progress

Iraq, however, is a “host nation” that is an equally important challenge. In a matter of days and weeks, the level of Iraqi unity and political and civil progress will be as critical to success as the level and quality of U.S. efforts. The United States can seriously degrade the Islamic State with air strikes, but cannot possibly destroy it.

Iraqi ground forces can play a major role in supplementing airpower, but any tactical victories will not bring stability unless Arab Shi’ite, Arab Sunni, Kurd, and the remnants of Iraq’s minorities can be brought together into some voluntary form of political unity, more honest and effective governance, sharing of the nation’s petroleum wealth, and more towards economic and social recovery.

Reporting on such progress – *or the lack of it* – is critical. Not flatly lying and exaggerating progress – as the State Department and USAID attempted to do with the Iraqi “maturity project” in the last war is also critical. Showing the degree to which the central government can win Sunni Arab support in areas under Islamic State influence, reduce the breaches between Arab and Kurd, get the support of Arab neighbors, and create new and more stable relations with Turkey is also critical.

So is setting up a U.S. civil-military advisory effort – tied to serious plans rather than issuing PowerPoint forests of empty concepts. The United States will also need to admit the State Department and USAID’s lack of core competence in economic planning, and bring in the World Bank to help create a meaningful economic recovery and development plan. Working with UNAMI could also play a key role.

The United States cannot fight and win this war by denying that some aspects of national building will be critical, although the weight of effort must fall on Iraq. The war against the Islamic State can scarcely be won by political unity and civil progress alone, but it cannot possibly be won without it. Moreover, one of the grim lessons of American incompetence is the degree to which the U.S. military can revert from focus on the political and the military dimensions of war to tactical outcomes, and U.S. civil efforts revert to empty and ineffective project aid and ignore the war. This is an area where transparency is an essential check on U.S. self-destructiveness.

Arm and Train Iraq

If – and only if – the right political progress takes place, creating effective Iraqi forces will be critical. Putting U.S. advisors forward will only be part of such an effort. There needs to be a clear plan, budget, accountability, and measures of effectiveness for recreating the national Iraqi forces that Maliki did so much to undermine and destroy.

This means focusing on making the best units more effective first, building up others over time, and disbanding corrupt and abusive force elements. It also means building up the Sunni “national guard” and peshmerga forces as both fighting elements and guarantees of security that can help pull the nation back together.

The Administration needs to provide Congressional and public plans, progress reports, and measures of effectiveness in these areas. It also needs to show it is providing all the resources needed, that an effective and reasonably honest Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior are being developed, that contractor efforts are being tightly controlled, and Iraq pays for most such efforts.

These plans also need to be specific enough so they do not repeat two critical problems in the U.S. force generation efforts in the Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq Wars.

- First, trying to force Iraqi forces to transform and do it our way at high cost, with high technology, and in ways that do not suit Iraq culture – rather than helping them to do it effectively their way.
- And second, trying to transform the justice system and police at the same time and in ways that Iraqis will not accept.

There may be a need to build up the paramilitary capabilities of the police, but the United States should not again try push Iraq into trying to convert its entire justice system in an evidence based system, or adopt approaches to policing that may suit a peaceful West, but can never work in today’s divided, wartime Iraq.

Syrian Unity and Civil Progress

Syria brings up another aspect of the U.S. strategy that needs to be at least tacitly dealt with on an honest basis. No aspect of the current U.S. strategy has a credible hope of uniting Syria’s Assad-Alawite dominated enclave in Western Syria and the feuding rebel factions in its East. There currently is no credible civil-military plan for Syria and no near-term prospect of doing more than provide aid to deal with Syria’s refugees and humanitarian disasters.

While no one so far has been honest enough to admit it, the current U.S. strategy is based on the reality that unless the Assad regime collapses for internal reasons, the Islamic State can be only degraded by air attacks and Iraqi ground action.

The Islamic State can only be destroyed on the ground in Syria by a mix of hostile rebel movements that will often be composed of rival Jihadists that are only marginally better. Moderate rebel elements can be strengthened but there is no near-term probability that they can dominate even the rebel-held east.

A combination of airpower and Iraqi ground forces is at least an uncertain possibility in Iraq, but Syria will remain an enduring mess. The United States, its allies, the region, and the world

will have to live with the reality that some form of Jihadism and violent Islamist extremism will persist regardless of what happens to the Islamic State. Moreover, they must be prepared to live with the fact that Jihadism and violent Islamist extremism will remain a far broader problem throughout the region.

Arm and Train Syria

This, however, is also why the United States needs to work with Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and any other Arab partner to try to create conditions that can change this grim, near-term reality over time. Diplomacy and peace efforts should be part of this effort, although Syria's Sunni majority cannot live with Assad and Assad shows little willingness to compromise and leave. As for Russia, Iran and the Hezbollah, they are what they are, and they are unlikely to change in the near-term.

The best option is to have the patience to seriously train and properly resource moderate Syrian rebel factions like the Free Syrian Army in spite of their limits. It is also to fully fund and support moderate political elements in the hope that they can have a steadily larger impact over time.

This requires more than statements of good intentions and concepts. In fact, last week's speech is the last speech of this kind that President Obama should ever give. There needs to be the same kind of clear plan, budget, accountability, and measures of effectiveness for creating more effective Syrian rebel forces that is needed to create change in Iraq. And once again, enough public transparency and accountability are critical. "Security" must cease to be a cloak for "spin," inaction and ineffectiveness.

Allied Efforts

There needs to be real honesty and transparency about the role of each major ally. It may be too soon for clear plans and definitive commitments. Key Arab states are likely to limit their role until – *and if* – they come to believe they can trust to United States to really act and the Iraqi government to change. The Arab states are also still too divided to show real unity in dealing with violent Jihadism in general.

European powers will play a limited role, but only that. The key European power is Turkey. It is a major regional power in terms of the ability to shut down the flow of trade, money, foreign volunteers, and other aspects of the lifelines that sustain the Islamic State. It seems unlikely, however, that Turkey will act decisively given its own internal political tensions, problems with the Kurds, trade with the Islamic State, problems with the United States, and existing problems in the south.

So far, there will be a need for much stronger allied efforts over time if the other elements of the campaign against the Islamic State are to succeed. As the reincarnation of Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia into ISIS/ISIL and the Islamic State has already shown, no amount of military success can be enough. Jihadism and violent Islamist extremism can only be fully defeated at the religious and ideological level, and this can only be done by Muslims, Muslim states, and – in this case – by states with strong Arab identities.

Once again, the Congress should insist on reporting that honestly and transparently highlight allied failures and successes. If the United States is really going to become steadily more

dependent on security partners, it must become steadily clearer as to who is a real partner and who is a problem.

Time, Persistence, Underlying Causes, and Strategic Justification

Finally, the Administration, the Congress, and the American people need to face the reality that the Islamic State is only one case in an Islamic world and MENA region filled with other cases and with far more cases to come. The United States needs a far broader strategy and one that looks beyond terrorism and the shock of 9/11 to face a far broader strategic challenge.

The underlying causes in failed leadership and authoritarianism, inadequate governance and corruption, demographics and a massive youth bulge and unemployment problem in the various Arab Development Reports have all gotten worse since the upheavals that began in 2011. The religious and ideological struggles that interact with these underlying causes now spread from the Philippines to Morocco, and from Sub-Saharan Africa to the Islamic portions of Russia and China.

Once again, the Islamic State is only one battle in the fight for the future of Islam and the stability of Islamic countries. If the United States is to succeed in creating anything like a broader pattern of stability, secure the flow of world petroleum exports, and secure its own role in the global economy, it must create a far broader structure for working work with its Muslim and other allies, and building on the lesson learned from dealing with the Islamic State to fight a far longer war.

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