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On the Brink

Managing the ISIS Threat in Iraq

By Brian Katulis, Hardin Lang, and Vikram Singh   June 17, 2014

In 2005, the Center for American Progress called for the strategic redeployment of U.S. troops out of Iraq.[1] This comprehensive strategy combined the withdrawal of combat troops by a certain date with a deeper regional, diplomatic, and security engagement strategy to address the increased sectarian divisions in Iraq and across the region that threatened U.S. interests. The withdrawal of U.S. combat troops was necessary to create an incentive for Iraqis to take control of their own affairs: Iraq had become dependent on an endless supply of American ground troops for its security. The way forward for Iraq was and continues to be an inclusive democracy that fully respects the rights of all Iraqi communities, providing a voice for Sunnis and Kurds in the political process and in government.

The failure of Iraqi leaders, including Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, to build an inclusive political system has enabled the current startling advances of militants across Iraq led by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS. The jihadi militant group is so brutal that even Al Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri disowned it.[2] ISIS has exploited discontent with the Shia-led national government among Iraq's Sunni population and has been able to rally some elements of Iraq's Sunni tribes, as well as Sunni armed groups linked to the former regime of Saddam Hussein.[3] As a result, ISIS was able to quickly seize towns across northern and central Iraq while the U.S.-trained and equipped security forces, weakened by Maliki's politicization of their leadership and exclusion of Sunnis, melted away.[4] Iraq is back on the brink of all-out sectarian civil war.

In Syria, ISIS has battled the Syrian government, moderate opposition forces to President Bashar al-Assad's government, and Al Qaeda's affiliate the Nusra Front, and it is a major force in the disintegration of the Syrian state. ISIS's actions in Iraq this past week provoked a swift reaction from Iraq's fragmented powers: Kurdish Peshmerga forces seized the oil-rich city of Kirkuk; Shia militias mobilized in the streets after an initial call to arms from the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani; and Iraq's neighbors have already started to mobilize, with Iran's Revolutionary Guard reportedly moving forces into Iraq.[5] Turkey, which has seen dozens of its citizens detained by ISIS, faces substantial threats from the extremist group and could reengage in cross-border military operations in Iraq as it did over the past decade.

In the past three years, the entire Middle East has slipped into a period of fragmentation, radicalization, and competition, as detailed in CAP's new report "U.S. Middle East Policy at a Time of Regional Fragmentation and Competition" that was released on June 16.[6] The rise of non-state actors such as ISIS is part of an overall trend affecting every country in the region. Some of this is due to the 2003 Iraq War, which ended a U.S. strategy of dual containment of Iraq and Iran and unleashed terrible forces. Instead of leading to a wave of democracy and freedom, the Iraq War opened the door to Iran's rising influence, made Iraq a hotbed of Shia-Sunni sectarian tensions, and facilitated the fragmentation of Islamist political forces within the Sunni camp.

Amid wider regional disintegration, especially the civil war in Syria, those forces of chaos and conflict have grown dominant. The United States is now confronted with a series of bad options. The expansion of a group such as ISIS threatens to collapse Iraq and to destabilize the Gulf Arab states, Jordan, and southern Turkey—all key allies of the United States. Shia militias responding to ISIS threaten to tear the fabric of Iraq apart, spilling into other countries and enabling the most substantial safe haven for extremists since pre-2001 Afghanistan. ISIS provides, feeds, and sustains terrorists who could launch attacks against Western Europe and the U.S. homeland, especially with the influx of foreign fighters—including from Europe and the Unites States—who have joined the ISIS-led jihad.[7]

After more than a decade of extended U.S. military deployments and costly counterinsurgency efforts, the United States needs to find a new pathway that employs a more targeted use of force in coordination with reliable partners in the region. The United States must use all elements of statecraft to get countries in the region to stop engaging in policies that undermine long-term stability and start taking steps to respond to the crushing social, economic, and demographic trends that are affecting every country in the region.

Recommendations for a path forward

In this complicated and quickly evolving situation, the United States needs to be clear about core U.S. objectives:

• Weaken ISIS to prevent it from controlling substantial territory in Iraq from which it can become a threat to the region, our allies, or the U.S. homeland.

• Reduce threats of growing sectarian conflict sparking a wider regional war.

• Safeguard reliable and capable partners such as Jordan, Turkey, and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

To advance these objectives, the United States should take five steps, none of which require the reintroduction of U.S. combat troops.

1. Condition additional U.S. assistance to Iraq on government reform and action to incorporate and empower moderate Sunnis

The United States has a major security and military cooperation package in place with Iraq's government to provide a pipeline of arms and hundreds of military advisors worth $13.225 billion in 2013 and 2014 alone.[8] The United States has maintained a presence of more than 5,500 diplomats, intelligence professionals, military advisors, and defense contractors to support Iraq. In total, the United States and Iraq have plans in place for a major arming and equipping program that could top $25 billion total arms sales if fully implemented, including 140 M1A1 tanks, 36 F-16 combat aircraft, the Integrated Air Defense System, and Apache attack helicopters.[9]

Prime Minister Maliki's sectarian policies squandered the sacrifices of Americans by not producing an inclusive government. President Barack Obama has rightly called for assurance that the Iraqi government will take actions to unify the country and reduce sectarian tensions. All further aid—beyond some actions directly aimed at degrading ISIS and humanitarian assistance for those displaced by the crisis—should be conditioned on a unified, cross-sectarian response by Baghdad and commitment to greater regional autonomy and inclusive governance. Maliki wasted the opportunity to bring Sunnis who fought against Al Qaeda in Iraq into his government and security forces and refused to sign an agreement with the United States that would have helped maintain greater American support for a transition. Today, the United States should not get drawn into sectarian clashes that can only accelerate the fragmentation of the country.

2. Inoculate against a regional war and crack down on regional support for ISIS

The United States should engage in a regional full-court press involving top military, intelligence, and diplomatic officials to persuade relevant regional stakeholders— Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and even Iran—to step back from actions in Iraq and Syria that could lead to a wider regional war. The United States remains the dominant military force throughout the region, and it continues to provide overall stability in a region that remains the top oil producer for the world. Even after the United States redeployed its military forces from Iraq at the end of 2011, it maintained a strong military presence in the Gulf region, with more than 35,000 troops deployed to help maintain stability in the region.[10]

Last month, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel gathered all of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC—including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman. He secured a general commitment to work together to enhance regional security, including overall measures to limit ISIS.[11] One area in which these countries should take more action is cracking down on private financing that flows from some Gulf countries to terrorist groups such as ISIS—and the United States should increase its Treasury and Justice Department efforts to cut those financial links.

3. Mobilize regional stakeholders through diplomacy to push for a political solution

The United States should lead an intensive diplomatic effort to develop a shared strategy and coordinated approach to pull Iraq back from the brink of civil war. Between 2006 and 2008, the United States participated in diplomatic discussions involving all of Iraq's neighbors—including Iran—to help decrease the violence in Iraq.[12] Now is the time for countries with influence over the Iraqi government, Iraq's religious class, and the various ethnic and sectarian communities to push for a resolution to the crisis that moves Iraq beyond Prime Minister Maliki's zero-sum sectarian politics. As part of the reported direct dialogue between the United States and Iran, the United States should emphasize that the sort of majoritarian politics Iran has encouraged in Iraq have directly contributed to the current security environment and will continue to pose a direct threat to Iran if they do not work to reign in Maliki's excesses.[13]

4. Reinforce reliable and capable partners in the region

The United States should reinforce key regional partners such as Jordan, which is already coping with the challenges of the Syrian civil war and its attendant refugee outflow. Additional security and intelligence coordination and operations with Jordan, Turkey, and the Kurdistan Regional Government are essential, along with humanitarian assistance to help care for those displaced by the crisis. These partners have intelligence and capabilities that the United States should leverage to degrade the threat from ISIS. They should also be early beneficiaries of additional resources from the Counterterrorism Partnership Fund proposed by President Obama at West Point last month to bolster regional partner efforts to combat terrorism.[14] Any effort to degrade and defeat ISIS as a security threat and a political and ideological force will require a comprehensive counter-radicalization strategy to blunt the growing popular appeal of radical Islam, including the surge in Salafi jihadism throughout the region. The United States should focus assistance on regional partners that are willing to undertake reform efforts that can build more inclusive societies and that will undermine the ideology of extremists over time.

5. Prepare for limited counterterrorism operations against ISIS, including possible air strikes

It is clear that ISIS poses an immediate threat to Iraq and a possible terrorist threat to the United States and its allies. In Iraq, the United States should prepare for limited use of U.S.—and if possible allied—air power on ISIS targets to degrade their ability to further destabilize the country and to protect U.S. interests, including the protection of thousands of American citizens working for the United States inside Iraq. Strikes need to be rooted in good intelligence on the ground and will require prepositioning of some additional military assets in the region, including armed drones and personnel to advise the Iraqi government. Their utility will be in helping to slow the advance of ISIS and providing some time and space for Iraqis to regroup, but they will not turn the tide on their own. This kind of support is similar to what the U.S. Air Force did with regional allies throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s conducting Operation Northern Watch to ensure the Kurds could operate free of threats by Saddam Hussein's forces.[15]

Action against ISIS in Iraq alone will likely push the problem back across the border into Syria, where ISIS controls large swaths of ungoverned territory. This possibility requires more robust efforts to train and equip the moderate Syrian opposition forces that have shown a willingness and ability to fight ISIS and Assad, something CAP has called for previously.[16] The administration and Congress should make this the first test of President Obama's Counterterrorism Partnership Fund, using resources already dedicated to Overseas Contingency Operations. Details about vetting, the location for training, and the types of equipment necessary should be worked out rapidly.

In the event that ISIS comes to pose a credible and direct threat to the United States, Washington should be prepared to undertake limited air strikes against ISIS targets inside Syria. This would be similar to the air strikes against Al Qaeda and its affiliates in ungoverned spaces elsewhere in the world. Any strikes against ISIS in Syria would need to be driven by clear, actionable intelligence against a target that poses a credible and direct threat. Given that several hundred European and even some U.S. passport holders have joined ISIS, these preparations should be taken now. As always, the president retains the authority to respond in self-defense to an imminent threat to the United States.

The Iraq War itself and its poor execution destabilized the region and facilitated greater Sunni-Shia conflict within Iraq. The United States should not undertake military action lightly and should be wary of unintended consequences. But not all military action is the same. Ground troops or invasions to control a country are very different from limited air strikes or targeted assistance to help push back terrorist extremists. Extremist terrorist groups controlling large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria from which they could ultimately attack American interests or allies are worthy of a limited, effective response, including limited air strikes.

Authors

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Endnotes

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