



Recalibrating the Anti-ISIS Strategy

The Need for a More Coherent Political Strategy

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Introduction and summary

More than a year after the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, conducted a blitzkrieg takeover of Iraqi and Syrian territory, the international campaign to degrade and defeat the group has seen mixed results. Events of the past year have made clear what President Barack Obama warned at the outset: This campaign will be a multi-year effort that will be complicated by continued volatility across the Middle East. The next U.S. president will inherit the ISIS threat. But before the transition to a new administration, the United States should strengthen its strategy by acknowledging and responding to the fundamentally political nature of this long-term regional struggle.

Last summer, the Obama administration began building a sound policy framework to combat ISIS. The president effectively leveraged U.S. military support to encourage Iraqis to usher in a new, more inclusive government and assembled an impressive coalition of 60 global and regional powers willing to fight ISIS together.¹ The administration launched targeted military operations and implemented security cooperation initiatives to build the capacity of forces in the region to counter ISIS.² These military steps were necessary to start to arrest the rising tide of ISIS. Moreover, the Obama administration made the correct decision against sending large numbers of U.S. ground troops back to Iraq in an open-ended commitment. While the U.S. military is the finest fighting force in the world, it cannot resolve the fundamental domestic and regional political problems underlying the current crisis.

The important military steps that are being taken in the U.S.-led effort to defeat ISIS remain hampered by the failure to fully integrate the anti-ISIS military strategy into wider political strategy. This has been demonstrated in an unclear policy for Syria, weak and fragmented partners on the ground in Iraq, and inadequate coordination among members of the anti-ISIS coalition. Recent events have underscored these weaknesses and point to the need to make adjustments in strategy and implementation.

In mid-May, despite military progress against ISIS in certain parts of Iraq, the terrorist group seized Ramadi, the capital of Anbar Province.³ Across the border in Syria, ISIS has seized Palmyra in the country's west while suffering setbacks against Syrian Kurds to the north. Equally disturbing, ISIS has gone viral beyond Syria and Iraq: Affiliates have surfaced in Libya and Yemen; both Boko Haram in Nigeria and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Egypt have pledged allegiance; and attacks attributed to ISIS followers have occurred as far away as Afghanistan.⁴ Within the region, U.S. partners in the fight against ISIS remain fixated on their own competitions for power.⁵

Moreover, many Middle Eastern members of the anti-ISIS coalition view Iran—not ISIS—as the dominant threat in the region. The nuclear talks with Iran have heightened that threat perception among many of the key regional players. The fact that Saudi Arabia initiated yet another military campaign in Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels just months after the launch of the anti-ISIS coalition campaign highlights the competing priorities of key countries in the region.⁶ A possible Iran nuclear deal will likely further deepen the sense of insecurity that many countries in the region feel about Iran and the destabilizing role it has played in the region.

These divisions and the recent setbacks in Iraq and Syria have led many to question the Obama administration's strategy to counter ISIS. Some critics question the premise of relying on local and regional partners to lead the fight on the ground. Instead, they call for the deployment of U.S. ground troops back to Iraq and the region.⁷ Others argue that the Iraqi state is no longer viable and that the policy should support the fragmentation of Iraq into Kurdish, Sunni, and Shia states.⁸ Without question, it is time to make adjustments to the strategy. But thousands of American combat troops cannot fix the political problems of Iraq or the region, and supporting the fragmentation of existing nation states carries as much or greater risk to U.S. interests.

To degrade and ultimately defeat ISIS, the Obama administration and its coalition partners should take the following three major steps to ensure that their military campaign and counterterrorism efforts are better integrated in support of a wider political strategy:

- Strengthen political and military coordination within the anti-ISIS coalition to prepare for a long-term regional campaign.

- Help Iraqis build a political framework in which Sunni Arabs have a real stake in their country's future.
- Set a clear policy in Syria that integrates training, equipping, and negotiating efforts to de-escalate the crisis in Syria.

As it moves forward, the Obama administration and the U.S. Congress should work together to build a new national consensus on the proper legal authorization for the use of military force, or AUMF, in this campaign. It has been nearly one year since the United States launched airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, but these efforts are being conducted under a legal framework that was developed more than a decade ago to fight Al Qaeda and has questionable relevance to the task at hand.⁹

ISIS has seized on local Sunni Arab grievances and taken advantage of the regional political vacuum that has emerged since 2011. To truly defeat ISIS, this vacuum must be filled with a new regional framework that offers greater justice, less corruption, and more responsive governments and economic systems. The process of building those systems will take years and will be the overwhelming responsibility of the region. If the United States has learned one thing in the past decade in the Middle East, it is that it cannot do these things on its own. But without any sense of a new political order on the horizon, groups such as ISIS will continue to exploit the popular grievances among the disempowered of the region to advance their own brutal ideologies. However, the Obama administration can take critical steps now to recalibrate its strategy to better mobilize and support the region in this endeavor.

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