



# Recalibrating the Anti-ISIS Strategy

## The Need for a More Coherent Political Strategy

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Hardin Lang, Peter Juul, and Mokhtar Awad

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Center for American Progress



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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.<sup>1</sup> The administration launched targeted military operations and implemented security cooperation initiatives to build the capacity of forces in the region to counter ISIS.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> Within the region, U.S. partners in the fight against ISIS remain fixated on their own competitions for power.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.

# Assessing the anti-ISIS campaign one year after the fall of Mosul

Recent events in both Iraq and Syria give cause for concern. For months, the Iraqis and the coalition made slow but steady progress, eroding ISIS control in the north and center of the country. But in late May, the Iraqi Security Forces, or ISF, suffered a major defeat in Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province. The fall of Ramadi resulted in calls in Washington for the reintroduction of tens of thousands of U.S. combat troops into Iraq. But these proposals ignore what are at heart political problems: The collapse in Ramadi reflected the weakness of Iraqi security institutions and politics that remain largely a zero-sum sectarian affair.<sup>10</sup>

While there is no doubt that Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has been more inclusive in his leadership than his predecessor, he continues to perform a precarious political balancing act that limits Sunni participation. Any concessions he offers to Sunnis are often seen as a slight to the Shia, and progress toward reconciliation has been slow. The net result is a Sunni Arab population that continues to lack a real stake in Iraq's future. Late last year, U.S. officials proposed a national guard concept to incorporate local Sunni fighters into Iraq's security forces,<sup>11</sup> but this proposal remains stalled in Iraq's parliament.<sup>12</sup> Nor is it clear that these measures go far enough to ensure Sunni Arabs that they will have a substantive and secure role in the future of the country.<sup>13</sup>

What's more, coalition train-and-equip efforts have yet to produce the desired results. While the Defense Department planned to train and equip as many as 24,000 Iraqi Security Forces personnel by fall 2015, by mid-June, coalition troops had only trained about 9,000 security personnel.<sup>14</sup> After the fall of Ramadi, President Obama ordered an additional 450 U.S. troops to Anbar Province—half to work with regular Iraqi Security Forces and half to work with local Sunni fighters. These new advisors could be the first of a set of what are termed “lily pad” bases spread across Iraq to better advise, train, and equip Iraqi fighters in the fight against ISIS.<sup>15</sup>

This state of affairs has led some to argue that the Iraqi state is no longer viable and that it is time for the United States to cut its losses. It's true that the indicators are not good: the most effective fighting forces in the country are not controlled by the central government in Baghdad, and the number of Iraqis who believe in their country's future is rapidly dwindling. In the end, the forces rending Iraq apart may prove too powerful to contain. Iraq may in fact need to decentralize, but outright dissolution would bring only greater instability and begs the question of who would then lead the fight to liberate Iraq's Sunni Arab heartland from ISIS.

Across the Iraqi border in Syria, the fight against ISIS continues to suffer from the lack of a wider strategy to end the civil war. Momentum has shifted back and forth between the warring parties repeatedly. But two recent events suggest that the pendulum is swinging away from the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and toward forces arrayed against it. A few days after the fall of Ramadi, ISIS scored a significant victory by capturing the city of Palmyra and its historic ruins—a strategic boost that gives ISIS control over vital supply routes.<sup>16</sup> This success followed the capture of the provincial capital of Idlib and most of the province in northern Syria by a rebel coalition spearheaded by Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra—also known as the Nusra Front—and backed by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar.<sup>17</sup> Opposition forces also continue to push against Assad on the southern front closer to Damascus.<sup>18</sup>

Although it is far from clear that the fall of Palmyra and Idlib mark the beginning of the end for Assad, long-term trend lines are not in his favor. Regime manpower is once again running low,<sup>19</sup> and conscription has eroded Assad's support among his constituents.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Hezbollah's roughly 5,000 fighters appear deployed to protect Hezbollah's interests in Syria—not to help the regime on the frontlines<sup>21</sup>—and Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps soldiers who were deployed to Syria have reportedly pulled back to Damascus.<sup>22</sup> Iraqi Shia militias withdrew from Syria in the wake of last summer's ISIS offensive into Iraq, depriving the Assad regime of as many as 8,000 fighters, although there are recent indications that a significant number of Iraqi Shia militia members have returned to the fight in Syria.<sup>23</sup>

It remains unclear who will benefit from Assad's growing weakness. Victories against Assad in Idlib were the result of new cooperation between Saudi Arabia and its old rivals Qatar and Turkey to build a more potent coalition of non-ISIS Syrian rebel groups. But the ranks of this coalition are filled with Salafist fighters—some of whom speak favorably of the Taliban as a model and cooperate with Jabhat al-Nusra, the official Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group.<sup>24</sup>

This progress stands in contrast with the agonizingly slow U.S.-led program to train and equip a new Syrian force to fight ISIS. The first Syrians entered the program only at the beginning of May 2015, with some 90 recruits starting their training.<sup>25</sup> Recruitment is also reportedly proving difficult, with only 1,500 of some 6,000 volunteers meeting U.S. standards for the anti-ISIS force.<sup>26</sup>

More promisingly, Syrian Kurdish fighters—the People’s Protection Units, or YPG—have made significant gains against ISIS with the help of Free Syrian Army units and coalition airpower. The YPG captured the town of Tel Abyad in mid-June, along with the main supply route from ISIS-held territory to the outside world.<sup>27</sup> If the YPG holds Tel Abyad, it will have denied ISIS access to border crossings with Turkey.

At the regional level, Special Presidential Envoy Gen. John Allen and his team have made important progress over the past eight months in building a coalition of more than 60 states to fight ISIS.<sup>28</sup> Coalition members have mobilized along five lines of effort essential to the ultimate defeat of ISIS: building partner capacity; staunching the flow of foreign fighters; stopping ISIS funding and financing; providing humanitarian relief; and countering ISIS’ public narrative. Each of these lines of effort has a working group led by coalition members. For example, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Italy chair the terror finance working group.<sup>29</sup> But conflicting national interests in the region have prevented the coalition from focusing squarely on the ISIS threat.

Many Sunni Arab members of the coalition—most notably the Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia see—have seen the specter of growing Iranian regional influence as a greater threat than ISIS. They view Syria and Iraq primarily as arenas for geopolitical competition with what they see as a rising Iran. In Syria, this leads some Gulf countries to continue to prioritize the defeat of Assad over efforts to combat ISIS. In Iraq, these same actors have minimized their investment in the face of growing Iranian influence. Sunni communities on both sides of the border find that they are caught in the middle of a regional tug of war. Fear of an Iranian hand in Yemen led the Saudis to mobilize a parallel coalition against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels; this coalition is now more than one month into a bombing campaign and seems unlikely to achieve its objectives.

Amid this shadow war, ISIS has expanded its political reach beyond Iraq and Syria. Existing terrorist groups Boko Haram in Nigeria and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Egypt have publicly declared allegiance to ISIS. In Libya, ISIS facilitated the amal-

gamation of decaying jihadi groups in North Africa.<sup>30</sup> ISIS has claimed terrorist attacks in Yemen and Shia communities in eastern Saudi Arabia in recent months and has been blamed for major terrorist attacks in Afghanistan as well.<sup>31</sup>

The geographic dispersal of the threats posed by ISIS and other violent extremist groups has placed increased strains on the military, diplomatic, and intelligence resources that the United States has available to address this problem. The United States and some European allies are providing security assistance to help local governments battle these groups, but these efforts have not been assimilated into the counter-ISIS coalition framework. Indeed, it is easy to forget the multiple coalition lines of effort—from countering the flow of foreign fighters to disrupting ISIS finances to countering ISIS’ messaging. In many of these non-military areas, there is a need for the United States and its partners to take a more assertive role. Ensuring that coalition’s members are all on the same page and effectively prioritizing and following through on commitments will enable the coalition to more effectively combat the threat posed by ISIS affiliates, rather than dealing with them on a piecemeal and ad hoc basis. Without greater coalition unity of political and military purpose in both Iraq and Syria, the campaign against ISIS—when combined with ISIS’ own actions—runs the risk of accelerating the fragmentation of both countries. Neither the Middle East nor U.S. interests in the region can afford the even greater destabilization this fragmentation would bring about.

Across the Middle East, ISIS and other extremist groups have taken advantage of the political and social instability that has spread across the region since 2011. This broader instability is rooted largely in the lack of political legitimacy of many governments in the region; governments that have proven unable to respond to the basic demands of their populations. As a consequence, large numbers of people in the region have a strong sense of grievance against the current political order. ISIS and other extremist groups exploit this lack of legitimacy. But the alternative they offer is a barbaric ideology imposed by force. Unfortunately, the reality is that ISIS and similar groups brutally fill the vacuums that have emerged throughout the region over the past four years.

# Recalibrating the anti-ISIS strategy

ISIS will only be effectively degraded and defeated with the full acknowledgment and coordinated response to ISIS as a political challenge to the region and, in particular, to Iraq and Syria. Recognizing the political challenge posed by ISIS requires the participation of leaders in the region and an effective coalition framework. But coalition members have organized themselves into separate teams fighting different campaigns in two artificial theaters—Iraq and Syria. Their lines of operation remain isolated from one another and stove-piped. Last summer, ISIS tore down the borders between Iraq and Syria, and the challenges in both countries are interlinked. But the U.S.-led coalition strategy has not yet adapted to this new reality and instead often treats Syria and Iraq as separate challenges.

It is critical that key regional partners pull more of the campaign's weight, but they must do so in a way that produces constructive outcomes as a part of a more comprehensive effort. And while recent events on the ground in Iraq and Syria, as well as the viral spread of the ISIS brand, require adjustments to the strategy, the most important shifts will be aimed at delivering on the non-military and political elements that have been under-emphasized and under-utilized. In recalibrating the anti-ISIS strategy, coalition members should look to take the following steps.

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## 1. Strengthen political and military coordination within the anti-ISIS coalition for a long-term campaign

The sheer breadth of the counter-ISIS coalition membership is impressive. The five coalition working groups meet on a regular basis and most have developed metrics to evaluate progress. But coalition members have yet to harness the full measure of their collective resources. In order to do so, they must take the following steps.

## Unify the campaign into a single theater

The United States and its partners have divided the fight against ISIS into multiple theaters based on the various national interests of the coalition's members. The United States, Canada, and Jordan are the only countries to have conducted air strikes against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria—although the British government is publicly mulling the expansion of its military operations to Syria as well.<sup>32</sup> Arab partners have hit ISIS targets in Syria but not Iraq, while traditional U.S. allies from Europe and Asia have hit ISIS in Iraq but not Syria.

On the ground, the situation is reversed; the United States and partners from Europe and Asia have prioritized working with and building up Iraqi ground forces in parallel with Iranian efforts. In Syria, Turkey and partner nations from the Gulf have focused on bringing pressure to bear against the Assad regime by mobilizing a coalition of largely Salafi jihadi fighters. U.S. efforts on the ground in Syria wait for the Pentagon train-and-equip program to arrive. Meanwhile, ISIS maneuvers in a single geographic theater unencumbered by the political and diplomatic considerations with which the coalition must contend.

To properly confront ISIS, the U.S.-led coalition should break the stovepipe and engage ISIS-controlled territory as a single theater at a regional level. In Iraq, this will require the Gulf states to step up their efforts to support both the Iraqi government and local Sunni Arabs to fight back against ISIS. In Syria, the United States, Turkey, and the Gulf states should integrate their efforts to both train and support a Syrian opposition that excludes the worst actors. As the Pentagon's train-and-equip program begins to field fighters, the latter should be deployed in coordination with operations from the air and on the ground on the Iraqi side of the border against ISIS to the extent possible.

## Follow through with regional partners to bolster regional ownership and responsibility

First and foremost, ISIS is a challenge to the region and a symptom of the tensions racking the Middle East. The United States can organize and help lead the response, but the region must own the solution. The Obama administration regularly convenes regional actors, but follow-through has been lacking at times. In February 2015, the White House successfully convened leading partners at a major summit for a discussion of how to confront the long-term challenge of

violent extremism.<sup>33</sup> While the summit was well attended, the dialogue often appeared untethered from the urgent extremist threat of the moment, ISIS, and the global coalition assembled to confront it. Regional partners privately complained that they had little idea about what they were supposed to do next.

### Establish a framework to combat ISIS affiliates

When confronting ISIS affiliates outside Syria and Iraq, the United States and its coalition partners should work with local partners to combat affiliates such as Boko Haram. In some cases—most notably Libya—viable local partners with sufficient capacity do not exist. But in others, there are partners that can work to contain and defeat ISIS affiliates. So far, these efforts have been ad hoc, but the United States can develop a broader strategic framework for fighting ISIS affiliates by assisting local partners.

The United States and its coalition partners should create geographic areas of responsibility for combating ISIS affiliates. Appointing lead countries for specific problem areas—akin to country leads for the coalition’s five working groups—could help create a more cohesive strategy to fight ISIS and its affiliates. At the same time, the coalition should prepare for the possible emergence of new ISIS affiliates. Intelligence agencies should coordinate to assess where the next ISIS affiliate is likely to turn up to aid policymakers in developing contingency plans and anticipatory responses. The coalition and the intelligence community must have the means to assess whether an ISIS affiliate is a true security threat or simply a criminal gang in search of recognition or legitimacy.

### Mobilize the anti-ISIS coalition donors to adequately fund humanitarian relief operations

The civil wars in Iraq and Syria have resulted in 13.3 million people being displaced; 9.4 million of them have been internally displaced. The latter account for nearly one-quarter of the total global internally displaced persons population.<sup>34</sup> Syrian refugees equal one-quarter of the overall population of Lebanon.<sup>35</sup> But funding remains in short supply, and since 2012, humanitarian relief efforts have fallen some \$9.85 billion short of U.N. requirements.<sup>36</sup> The United States is by far the largest donor, spending nearly \$3.7 billion on Syria’s humanitarian crisis. By contrast, the six energy-rich states of the Gulf Cooperation Council have contributed a combined \$2.03 billion to humanitarian relief efforts.<sup>37</sup>

The counter-ISIS coalition should mobilize its members to help overcome donor fatigue. At the regional level, Gulf states with a stake in the security of countries such as Jordan and Lebanon should be encouraged to invest more in humanitarian relief efforts. In Syria, just more than one-quarter of the budget for the U.N. strategic response plan has been funded.<sup>38</sup> Donors should also find ways to support smaller, more nimble local Syrian relief organizations that can access communities in conflict.<sup>39</sup> In Iraq, coalition donor countries should be able to close the relatively smaller gap of \$481 million for the U.N. Iraq strategic response plan.<sup>40</sup>

### Empower Gen. Allen or another senior leaders to have authority for U.S. and coalition efforts

If coalition members are to integrate their efforts, the United States must lead by example. Gen. Allen leads the international coalition from the U.S. State Department. At the Pentagon, Central Command is charged with the military effort in Iraq, and Maj. Gen. Michael Nagata, who is in charge of special operations of Central Command, is tasked with the effort to train and equip nationalist Syrian opposition fighters.<sup>41</sup> If the United States is truly leading a coalition in a war against ISIS, it is time for the U.S. government to organize itself accordingly by appointing a single commander to lead the effort. Only then can the United States expect other coalition members to truly synchronize their efforts behind a unified campaign plan.

### Use the counter-ISIS coalition to start discussing a more sustainable regional security cooperation framework for the Middle East

The short-term imperatives of combating ISIS in Iraq and Syria open up space to discuss a potential long-term regional security framework. A recent proposal by Egypt and backed by key Gulf states to create an integrated Arab stabilization force demonstrates that actors in the region are willing—in theory at least—to do more to advance their own interests instead of relying on the United States. The United States should use the framework of the counter-ISIS coalition to explore opportunities to work with such a force to produce longer-term stability in the region.

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## 2. Help Iraqis build a political framework to give Sunni Arabs a real stake in the future of the country

The military campaign in Iraq has made important inroads against ISIS and inflicted heavy casualties among its ranks. The Iraqi military effort has also suffered some significant setbacks, most recently in Ramadi, and raised sectarian concerns over the role of Iranian-sponsored Shia militia. But perhaps the campaign's biggest failure to date is political. Efforts to beat ISIS on the battlefield must empower Sunni Arabs and must be accompanied by measures that give them a real stake in Iraq's future.

### Arm the Sunni Arab tribes

Any successful effort to defeat ISIS in Anbar province will empower willing Sunni Arab tribes and local armed groups to once again push Al Qaeda out of Iraq's successors. The United States should increase its assistance to these local Sunni groups. The Iraqi government has made important progress in facilitating the flow of weapons and other resources to the Kurdish peshmerga in the north. Baghdad now needs to play the same role for local Sunni Arab forces in western Iraq. The United States might also consider proposals from some in Iraq's Sunni community to form joint committees to facilitate the disbursal of weapons.<sup>42</sup> These joint committees would include representatives from the central government, regional government, tribes, and members of the U.S.-led coalition, and they would work in each of the Iraqi provinces where ISIS is contesting control. Already, half of the 450 additional troops that President Obama has ordered to Iraq are slated to work with local Sunni forces in Anbar Province, as well as Iraqi military troops. Some 500 Sunni tribal fighters have already reported to the new lily pad base at Al Taqaddum for training alongside 300 provincial police recruits.<sup>43</sup> If successful, this new effort could be replicated elsewhere in Iraq.

### Hold the government in Baghdad accountable for its commitments

Prime Minister Abadi has been a welcome change to his predecessor and, as the Center for American Progress has argued, continues to deserve U.S. support.<sup>44</sup> Abadi's government has committed itself to taking important steps to give Iraq's Sunni communities a stake in power-sharing within the framework of an inclusive Iraqi national government. These steps include laws to establish a national guard

and to repeal elements of de-Baathification laws—edicts aimed at Saddam-era party members. Drafts of these laws have been stuck in the Iraqi parliament. However, Abadi's government has failed to pay the local police in major cities such as Ramadi. The Iraqi government needs to meet its obligations if it is to be part of the solution and not part of the problem.

The Pentagon has announced that it is considering the deployment of additional advisors to establish lily pads of support for Iraqi forces in strategic locations outside Baghdad.<sup>45</sup> The United States should make it clear that these additional deployments will be linked to meeting specific benchmarks regarding de-Baathification, the formation of the national guard, and other steps to reach out to Iraqi's Sunni Arab communities.

### Leverage U.S. airpower and other critical support to get the right sectarian mix in the Anbar counteroffensive

The defeat of Iraqi Security Forces in Ramadi is in danger of eroding key lessons learned from the battle for Tikrit. During the latter, Shia militia supported by Iran were unable to defeat ISIS. It wasn't until the United States leveraged requests for airpower that the tide turned and put Prime Minister Abadi and the ISF temporarily back in the driver's seat in Tikrit. As a result, Iranian-backed Shia militias pulled out as the Iraqi military—backed by coalition airpower—successfully retook the city.

The reality may be that the Shia militia is a necessary part of the military force that retakes Ramadi, but the ISF and Sunni Arab fighters must play a leadership and frontline role in any liberation effort. As it stands now, too many Sunni Arabs see ISIS as their only champions. The wrong sectarian mix will doom a counteroffensive to long-term political disaster. To ensure against that outcome, the United States should continue to condition the provision of airpower and other essential military support on ISF leadership in the fight on the ground.

### Mobilize the Gulf states to support the Sunni Arabs

Some Gulf countries appear willing to provide tribes and other Sunni Arab communities with the means to defend themselves. In an important and welcome step, Saudi Arabia is moving to reopen its embassy in Baghdad.<sup>46</sup> This assistance should be channeled through the central government, and the framework of the counter-

ISIS coalition as direct regional support to the tribes would likely further undercut relations between Baghdad and the Gulf capitals. The United States should strongly advise the Iraqi government to accept this assistance, since political and material support from the Gulf could play an important role in empowering Iraq's Sunni Arabs to take on ISIS.

U.S. diplomats should make the case that failing to assist the Iraqi government and Iraqi Sunni Arabs against ISIS only gives Iran more opportunities to extend its influence in Iraq. The best way for Gulf states concerned about Iran's influence in Iraq is to not isolate Baghdad, but to engage it and the Sunni Arab communities fighting ISIS. The more secure the Iraqi government is the less likely it is to rely on Iranian support.

### Push for greater decentralization in governance

Going forward, Iraq's Sunni Arabs must be reassured that they will not be subjected to the whims of a Shia Islamist-dominated government in Baghdad. Iraq's national guard concept is a good first step, but it is unlikely to be sufficient. Some form of decentralization that gives Sunni Arab-majority provinces greater say over local issues may help ease the political reintegration of Sunni Arabs. Many of these areas have already been effectively cut off from Baghdad's control by the conflict with ISIS, and it may be wise to formalize this decentralization.

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### 3. Set a clear policy in Syria that integrates training, equipping, and negotiating efforts

The lack of a clear Syria policy is the weakest link in the Obama administration's effort to degrade ISIS. The Syrian civil war has created the vacuum in which the terrorist organization and other extremist forces have thrived. It is hard to see how ISIS can be defeated in the long run if the Syrian civil war continues to rage with no conceivable end on the horizon. An effective strategy would see the United States and its coalition partners use their anti-ISIS efforts as leverage against the Assad regime to de-escalate the conflict as a whole.

## Revise and accelerate the train-and-equip program and build command and control

The Obama administration should adjust its strategy in executing the train-and-equip program for Syrian rebels. Slow progress has been accompanied by a lack of clarity as to how the opposition force will execute its stated objectives against ISIS. The current program calls for a force of 15,000 troops to be trained over a period of three years.<sup>47</sup> For many critics, the program is a case of too little, too late. This concern is not without merit: only 180 recruits have started training so far.<sup>48</sup> If the program is to succeed, two new steps should be considered.

First, a larger and faster training effort may be necessary. The program must also prioritize the creation of an effective U.S.-trained, Syrian-staffed command and control structure for the new opposition force. The United Kingdom has already joined the effort, and other coalition members should be encouraged to do so as well.

Second, new anti-ISIS forces must also be linked with some form of local Syrian political opposition in the communities where these forces will operate. Without these ties, the legitimacy of the new force will suffer in the eyes of the local population. As CAP noted in a 2014 report, the formal opposition in exile is now too removed from events on the ground to play this role. Vigorous outreach to the network of activists who remain in country should be undertaken in advance of deploying the new force, and the new force should be trained to reach out to local leaders in the areas they operate. Planning should begin now to help stabilize communities eventually liberated from ISIS.

## Better coordination with regional partners

Right now, the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are working at cross-purposes when it comes to Syria. These regional states are once again mobilizing their own radical proxy fighters against the Assad regime with little commitment to confronting ISIS or consideration of the long-term consequences. A more focused U.S. investment in the Syrian opposition should give the United States a stronger voice to demand greater unity of effort from the Gulf states and Turkey.<sup>49</sup> The United States should use the framework of a more integrated counter-ISIS coalition to leverage this increased support into agreed upon priorities for partners on the ground in Syria.

In addition, both Jordan and Turkey have talked recently about establishing safe zones on the ground in northern and southern Syria.<sup>50</sup> Both potential operations will likely require U.S. air support to deter the Assad regime from interfering with them, which will in turn require greater coordination between the United States and Jordan and Turkey. This coordination will likely prove easier with Jordan, since its rumored incursion appears more in sync with American strategic objectives in Syria. But it will probably be more difficult with Turkey because its objective in establishing a safe zone is to counter what Ankara sees as Syrian Kurdish ambitions—the same Syrian Kurds that have proven to be the most effective opponents of ISIS on the ground in Syria.<sup>51</sup>

### Prepare for the limited use of airpower against the Assad regime to protect anti-ISIS forces

The Obama administration has been reluctant to use airpower against the Assad regime for good reasons. But the decision to train and equip Syrian opposition units changes the calculus. Syrian President Assad has specifically said that he will attack a new U.S.-trained anti-ISIS force once introduced onto the battlefield.<sup>52</sup> These units will therefore not only need to confront ISIS, but also defend themselves from the Assad regime. The United States and coalition allies should support these anti-ISIS forces from the air against the Assad regime as they take the field.

This support should be provided to opposition forces deployed against ISIS, and American and other coalition aircraft should be prepared to defend themselves if engaged by Assad regime forces. Such measures would not differ appreciably from what the coalition was prepared to do in self-defense when it first hit ISIS targets in Syria in September 2014.<sup>53</sup> If the United States is unwilling to defend these units, it begs the question of why they are being trained in the first place.

### Revive diplomatic efforts to de-escalate Syria's civil war

Efforts to bring an end to the Syrian civil war through international diplomacy have proven fruitless thus far. However, there are signs that President Assad's long-term position may not be as strong as previously thought. A credible threat by the U.S.-led coalition to use airpower against the regime to defend newly trained and equipped Syrian units offers the best remaining opportunity to persuade Assad and his backers to return to the negotiating table.

Before that threat is issued, however, the United States should start laying the necessary diplomatic groundwork for it to be successful. Washington has to make clear to its regional partners—most notably Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar—that it remains committed to a negotiated settlement to the civil war. Similarly, the United States should also reassure Iran and Russia that it is not seeking to remove President Assad by force. Through this process, the United States should aim to re-establish a contact group of international stakeholders involved in the Syrian conflict.

# Conclusion

The campaign to counter ISIS will be a multi-year effort. As the anniversary of the first year of this effort approaches this summer, it is time for the United States to make adjustments to better integrate the political and military elements of its overall strategy. Nonetheless, the overarching framework for its strategy, which has a regional and international coalition at its core, is the correct one.

Rushing thousands of U.S. troops to one particular corner of Iraq or another to combat ISIS will not resolve what are ultimately political problems in Iraq, Syria, and the region as a whole. Instead, the United States should take steps to produce a more structured regional response to this threat. It should adjust its efforts in Iraq in light of the past few months of experience and continue to seek to work with the central government in Baghdad. But at the same time, the United States should also develop a range of new contingency plans if the Iraqi government falls short in its efforts to counter ISIS and build a new, inclusive political order.

Syria is the weakest link in the anti-ISIS strategy, and the United States needs to bring together the different components of its effort in a more integrated fashion. U.S. airstrikes against ISIS, its train-and-equip program, and its diplomatic plans to achieve a political settlement to the civil war in Syria should all be closely coordinated.

Ultimately, the threat posed by ISIS will be defeated only when a new political framework and order is presented in the region—one that offers greater justice, less corruption, and more responsive governments and economic systems. The process of building those systems will take years, and the burden for doing so will be on the region. If the United States has learned one thing in the past decade in the Middle East, it's that it cannot do these things alone. But without any sense of a new political order in the region on the horizon, groups such as ISIS will continue to exploit the popular grievances among the region's disempowered to advance their own murderous ideology.

# Methodology

This report is based on Center for American Progress interviews with U.S. officials involved in the anti-ISIS campaign and field interviews. CAP researchers conducted field interviews with Syrian rebels, political opposition members, Assad regime loyalists, Iraqi government officials, and Sunni and Kurdish officials in Turkey, Lebanon, and Iraq.

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## About the authors

**Hardin Lang** is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress, where he focuses on U.S. national security and multilateral affairs, Middle East policy, and the role of Islamists in the region. He comes to CAP with 18 years of experience in peacekeeping, peacebuilding, and stabilization, including a 12-year career with the United Nations. Most recently, Lang was a senior fellow in the international security program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

**Mokhtar Awad** is a Research Associate with the National Security and International Policy team at the Center for American Progress. His work focuses on Islamist groups, Middle Eastern politics, and U.S. foreign policy toward the region. Prior to joining CAP, he was a junior fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He has been published in *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Post*, and is the author of “The Salafi Dawa of Alexandria: The Politics of A Religious Movement,” in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*.

**Peter Juul** is a Policy Analyst at the Center for American Progress with a focus on U.S. policy in the Middle East and South Asia. A seven year CAP veteran, Juul holds an undergraduate degree in international relations and political science from Carleton College in his native Minnesota and a master’s degree in security studies from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University. He is the co-author of *Serving America’s Veterans*, a reference book on veteran’s affairs, and has published commentary in *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, and the *Foreign Policy* blog network. He has also appeared on radio and television news programs, including Alhurra and Al Jazeera English.

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