



# After the Paris Attacks

## Defeating ISIS and Preserving American Values

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Last week's horrific massacre in Paris was the latest example of an emerging foreign policy of terror from the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS.<sup>1</sup> Coming soon after the downing of a Russian plane over Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and multiple suicide bombings in Beirut, the murder of hundreds of innocent people outside its main area of operations in Iraq and Syria is not new. But the attacks in Paris represent the first time ISIS has successfully spread its terror beyond the Middle East and done so under direction of leaders operating within ISIS-held territory in Syria. The group has moved beyond motivated sympathizers and lone-wolf self-starters to centralized control and is now acting to sow terror worldwide. ISIS has spread virally across Muslim-majority societies from North Africa to South Asia. It has gone from establishing a sanctuary in Iraq and Syria to posing a direct and urgent threat to international peace and security.

The United States must lead in the global response to reassess strategies and redouble international efforts to defeat ISIS. Countries far beyond Iraq and Syria again face a fundamental question: Can governments keep their people safe from terror attacks while not abandoning the values that set them apart from those who commit these brutal acts? While the answer to this question must be yes, the Paris attacks quickly sparked deeply troubling, retrograde anti-Muslim rhetoric and anti-immigrant policy proposals from political leaders in the United States and Europe. This rhetoric and the policies that could flow from it undermine U.S. national security interests, make the fight against terrorist groups more difficult, and contradict American values.

Job number one is keeping Americans safe. Instead of succumbing to fear, the United States needs to refocus on defeating ISIS by stepping up the offensive against ISIS and its apocalyptic ideology by going after its strongholds, as well as its networks and cells outside of Iraq and Syria.

Unfortunately, within the broad international coalition arrayed against ISIS, defeat of the terrorist army has been most countries' second priority at best. Russia and Iran have prioritized support of their proxies in the Middle East, while America's regional

partners have focused on countering Iranian influence in places such as Yemen. Moreover, the forces that America supports on the ground in both Iraq and Syria remain focused more on enhancing their own positions than fighting ISIS. Europe, which has been reeling from the pressure of waves of refugees linked to the conflict with ISIS, has up until now been unwilling to take a leading role in the effort against ISIS, while at the same time believing that American leaders are looking for others to take on a larger role. This has changed. With ISIS's recent attacks against Lebanese, Russians over Egypt, Turks, French, and others from around the world, the defeat of ISIS should now be a top priority for all. And America should lead the effort.

Since 2014, the Center for American Progress has advocated for a robust, American-led response to the atrocities of ISIS. In September 2014, CAP recommended that the United States build a foundation of regional collective action to confront ISIS.<sup>2</sup> In July, CAP recommended a recalibration of the Obama administration's anti-ISIS strategy to focus on strengthening political and military cooperation between anti-ISIS partners, stronger political and military efforts in both Iraq and Syria, and substantially increased humanitarian support for refugees in the region.<sup>3</sup>

President Barack Obama has made clear over the past few weeks that the United States is intensifying its war effort against ISIS. Several high-level leaders have been killed in just the past month and ISIS's grip on territory and strategic resources such as oil have been diminished. But given the sudden acceleration of the terrorist group's international action, more fundamental changes will be required to organize the global coalition and link military action to diplomatic efforts.

The president is right to say progress has been made in the fight against ISIS, but the Paris attacks have created an atmosphere of fear and concern about what happens next. The United States must demonstrably show that it is leading the effort to defeat ISIS. No other nation can fill this role. There is a need for the American people and others around the world to know that the United States will redouble its efforts in the war against ISIS, Al Qaeda, and other terrorist organizations.

This does not require a large-scale, U.S.-led ground operation. But it will take more U.S. and coalition military and intelligence resources. Updating the U.S. anti-ISIS strategy in the wake of the Paris attacks should focus on the following goals:

- Increasing the tempo and scale of operations to degrade ISIS and other terrorist groups and ensure that they cannot maintain sanctuary from which to plan attacks
- Leveraging increased military action to advance a political solution in Syria's civil war that can begin to provide some stability, open a path for the Syrian people to have transition beyond President Bashar al-Assad's brutal reign, and allow the international community to focus on ISIS

- Supporting the government of Iraq and Iraqi Kurds' efforts to retake territory held by ISIS
- Limiting instability from spreading to neighbors such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey and weakening ISIS footholds farther afield in places such as Libya and Afghanistan

The United States must lead the international effort by taking the following steps:

- Giving the fight against ISIS the same kind of national security priority at home that the administration gave to the successful effort to take on the leadership of Al Qaeda
- Stepping up the global air campaign against ISIS and use of special operations forces to support the Syrian opposition and Syrian Kurds
- Bolstering allies' position in the Vienna talks with further military resolve and supporting the development of plans by the Syrian opposition that could lead to a transition from Assad
- Accelerating support for Iraqi Kurds and the Iraqi government, including greater close air support and casualty evacuation capabilities
- Calling for an Chapter VII resolution against ISIS at the United Nations
- Establishing an increased role for NATO against ISIS both in Syria and Iraq, either via an Article 5 declaration or with greater NATO integration of allied command and control for planning and operations
- Encouraging the development of the long-delayed Arab League military force that can play a substantial role in the fight
- Further increasing intelligence cooperation with allies and ensuring adequate resources for the U.S. intelligence community
- Proactively degrading ISIS sanctuary and networks beyond Syria and Iraq through law enforcement, military, and diplomatic means
- Sustaining the international focus led by the United States on countering violent extremism
- Passing a new authorization for the use of military force, or AUMF, and confirming key national security officials
- Staying true to fundamental American values, particularly with respect to the responsibility to accept refugees and to reject anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies

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## Syria: Greater opposition support and pressure on ISIS

In Syria, the U.S. objective is to provide enough pressure to force a successful political process between the regime and the opposition while at the same time degrading and eventually destroying ISIS capabilities in the country. Accordingly, the United States should expand and escalate the coalition air campaign against ISIS in Syria and increase support to effective partners, namely the Kurds and Arab groups that are willing and able to fight ISIS.

To a certain extent, this expansion was already underway even before the Paris attacks.<sup>4</sup> But after Paris, coalition military planners should continue to widen the scope of ISIS targets in Syria. Enhancements such as the deployment of 50 U.S. special operations forces to the Kurdish cantons of Syria are good initial steps.<sup>5</sup> Additional military assistance to both the Kurds and the new Syrian Democratic Forces coalition would be helpful and would likely require the deployment of additional U.S. special operations forces on the ground.

Equally important, the United States should expand its political dialogue with the main Syrian Kurdish party—the Democratic Union Party, or PYD—to discourage its worst impulses and to encourage the group to build a pluralistic model in the territory it controls and contribute to an inclusive and unified Syria down the road.<sup>6</sup> Working with neighbors, particularly Jordan and Turkey, the United States should discuss the possibility of creating safe zones or buffers that would give some sanctuary to opposition Syrian fighters and civilians. Such zones should be protected by a combination of coalition and regional special forces; regular military forces; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and air support.

The United States can build on the new commitment of the French to participate substantially in the air campaign in Syria and should test Russian willingness to combat ISIS from the air in the wake of the attack on the Russian airliner in Egypt. The goal of an expanded, integrated air campaign in Syria should be not only to contain ISIS but also to further degrade ISIS sanctuary. U.S. strikes against oil infrastructure in recent days should be built upon, with more action against key ISIS infrastructure and sources of revenue.<sup>7</sup>

The United States should leverage such stepped-up military engagement in Syria to pursue a diplomatic solution to Syria's civil war. Recent diplomatic talks in Vienna brought all the key international stakeholders together for the first time. These talks have set a start date for a political transition—January 1, 2016—with a deadline for elections within 18 months.<sup>8</sup> While an important first step, continuous engagement and pressure will be required to enforce the terms of any agreement. This pressure will only work with a more robust military commitment from the United States and its allies in the wake of the Paris attacks.

It is widely accepted that a political settlement is the only way to alleviate the humanitarian suffering of Syrian civilians, reduce refugee flows, and turn up the pressure on ISIS. Syrians are fleeing the brutality of both ISIS and the Assad regime, and they will not return to Syria without an end to the fighting. Many will not return without Assad's departure.<sup>9</sup> Until those conditions are met, the United States should increase both the number of Syrian refugees it is willing to receive and the assistance it provides to countries such as Jordan and Lebanon that host large numbers of Syrian refugees as part of the effort to advance a diplomatic process.

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## Iraq: Taking back ISIS territory

Although ISIS's center of gravity is in Syria, pushing the terrorist army out of Iraq could deal it a significant political and military blow and is more achievable in the near term. Unlike in Syria, the anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq possesses relatively capable official partners on the ground in the Iraqi security forces and Kurdish peshmerga. The latter demonstrated their military ability by retaking Sinjar with coalition air support last week. The coalition can and should apply greater military pressure on ISIS in Iraq as it enhances its efforts in Syria.

As a first step, American and coalition military advisers could be authorized to move down to lower-level Iraqi and Kurdish units and closer to the front lines than currently allowed.<sup>10</sup> In addition to increasing the risks they face, this move would in turn entail increasing the number of U.S. and coalition personnel deployed to Iraq. The United States and other coalition partners should also be prepared to offer additional support—such as medical evacuation and increased close air support—to Iraqi and Kurdish forces.

The United States and its coalition partners have to navigate a complicated Iraqi political environment. Iraq's bitter, sectarian politics allowed the ISIS threat to metastasize in the first place. Despite the loss of a quarter of its territory to ISIS, the Iraqi political environment will still not allow the United States or other coalition members to have an overly large and direct military role fighting ISIS. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi faces strong opposition from Iranian-backed political factions that possess their own militias and resist even limited U.S. support. If Abadi can engineer it, the United States should be willing to deploy additional special operations forces to conduct target strikes in Iraq both with and independent of Iraqi forces. Because Iraq's sectarian conflicts have not taken a back seat to the fight against ISIS, U.S. and coalition policymakers need to be prepared to limit their support and press Iraq toward an inclusive political order that has room for disaffected Sunnis. Pressure should include even greater assistance to the Kurds if Iraqi leaders remain ambivalent about stepping up the anti-ISIS fight.

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## NATO and the United Nations

French President François Hollande rightly stated that the Paris attacks were an “act of war.”<sup>11</sup> He has invoked Article 42.7 of the Treaty on European Union, which calls for provision of mutual assistance to an EU member that suffers an armed attack.<sup>12</sup> Thus far, France is not seeking more formal assistance from NATO, and it is not likely that France will call for consultations under Article 4 and invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which states that an armed attack against any NATO member is an attack against all NATO members.<sup>13</sup> But if attacks such as those in Paris and Ankara continue, such a move by one of the NATO member states becomes more likely and could provide some significant benefit to the anti-ISIS coalition.

There are arguments for and against such a move. It would require reworking the large coalition that is already active against ISIS and guaranteeing major increases in military capabilities. NATO members are already making significant contributions to the fight. Yet a formal NATO role could spur further contributions, reinforce countries’ commitment to sustain their efforts, and provide a strong signal of resolve by the world’s greatest military alliance that would help in the negotiation process to end Syria’s civil war.

At a minimum, NATO involvement in the campaign against ISIS would, if fully implemented, provide a clearer command-and-control structure to give the anti-ISIS coalition’s military efforts greater coherence and direction. A NATO joint command with a clear leader and robust civil-military plan could oversee and conduct operations in Syria and Iraq—and possibly elsewhere—with both NATO member states and non-NATO coalition partners such as the United Arab Emirates and Jordan. If Article 5 is invoked, NATO would take such a plan to the U.N. Security Council. Although formal NATO involvement might antagonize Russian President Vladimir Putin, this is actually the best opportunity to both press Putin with a show of NATO solidarity and encourage Russia to take a more cooperative role focused on defeating ISIS in addition to defending its Syrian proxy.

NATO should also invite greater involvement of the Arab League, including the Arab League military force that was announced with much fanfare in March 2015 but has yet to materialize.<sup>14</sup> Infighting among Arab League members has produced gridlock that they can scarcely afford with ISIS on the march across the region and actively infiltrating Arab states. The time to mobilize an Arab force is now. With or without an Article 5 declaration, NATO should offer logistical and technical assistance to forces drawn from the Arab League for efforts against ISIS in the region.

With ISIS murdering French and Russian people in large numbers over such a short period, the United States should signal that it would consider offering support to a joint French and Russian U.N. resolution under Chapter VII of the U.N. Charter if it focuses on ISIS and gives space to anti-Assad forces, not just to the Assad regime. The United

Nations has an important role to play in bringing together the international community to fight against ISIS. The United States should call on the U.N. Security Council to pass a Chapter VII resolution. If the purpose of these resolutions is to declare a unified approach to confront those who threaten peace, then the United States should call for consideration of a resolution focused on defeating ISIS. Using the United Nations would complement a NATO role and have the advantage of broadening the fight.

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### An anti-ISIS campaign outside Iraq and Syria

ISIS has picked up terrorist affiliates from as far away as Nigeria and Afghanistan. These affiliates may be responsible for attacks such as the downing of the Russian airliner over the Sinai Peninsula, and they certainly play a role in destabilizing countries across the Middle East. Although ISIS retains pretensions to statehood, it has also branched out into an international terror network akin to Al Qaeda with land, not just sanctuary.

Only by depriving it of its home base in Iraq and Syria can ISIS's terror network ultimately be defeated. But until that day, the United States and the rest of the anti-ISIS coalition should also aim to blunt ISIS expansion and bolster local anti-extremist partners and front-line states. A key component of this effort should be increased intelligence sharing, perhaps through a new intelligence fusion center established under the NATO umbrella and devoted to disrupting the ISIS terror network. Continued targeting of key ISIS leaders and proxies involved in international terrorism either directly or through allies and local partners needs to continue and likely expand to sustain pressure.<sup>15</sup> Such targeted strikes do not provide a long-term solution, but they will be key to disrupting the ability of ISIS to plan attacks such as those in Paris.

While adjusting for the specific circumstances in different countries, U.S. efforts to disrupt ISIS in other nations may include more precision strikes—such as the one recently carried out in Libya<sup>16</sup>—and intelligence sharing, as well as security assistance, foreign internal defense operations, and support for irregular surrogates. In terms of targeting and support to local partners, ISIS's most dangerous proxies in Libya and Sinai should receive the greatest focus. But the United States and its coalition partners should also pay attention to the rise of extremism in vulnerable countries such as Tunisia. These nations should receive greater military and nonmilitary assistance to enable them to build stable societies and withstand terrorist challenges before they face a crisis.

This can be a delicate balance. At the same time, such action would support efforts to counter ISIS, the United States should encourage long-standing partners such as Egypt to refrain from counterproductive, oppressive measures that help create an environment in which extremism can flourish. There should also be a renewed effort to improve the counterterrorism capabilities of the Egyptian security services by shifting the focus of U.S. security assistance to Cairo from large-scale conventional systems to counterterror



capabilities. Combating ISIS in Libya will really start only with a unified Libyan force created under some kind of political agreement. America's diplomatic efforts should therefore focus on Libyan political reconciliation.

The United States needs to work with Muslims, particularly in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, to battle radicalism. We need to develop strategies that are unique to the problems confronting vulnerable nations. Targeting Muslims or nations with large Muslim populations for persecution will only alienate potential partners in the war against ISIS. On the other hand, using tailored development tools that focus on job creation, economic development, good governance, and fighting corruption can create allies in this effort. If we stereotype all Muslims as bad, we create enemies. If we understand that most Muslims are also victims in the battle against ISIS and other terrorist organizations, we can enlist allies.

The battle against ISIS will not be won overnight. If the United States and its allies are to prevail, it will be a long-term effort. Part of that process must address root causes. The Obama administration has undertaken efforts to counter violent extremism, but more must be done. Calling on friends and allies to help counter violent extremism through conferences such as those convened by President Obama in Washington and New York is not enough. A focused approach that tailors programs to specific problems in communities and nations—whether the issues are economic, social, political, or all of the above—has to be a priority. This includes working with allies on how they are handling problems at home, particularly individuals who are leaving to join ISIS in Syria. It also means taking a hard look at former ISIS fighters who return from Syria. Throwing these travelers in jail without trying to gather intelligence about why they went and what they saw could squander a possible resource in the fight against ISIS.

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### American values: A powerful weapon against ISIS

While there is a lethal dimension to the fight against terrorist groups, there has to be a nonlethal front as well. Policymakers need to use development tools to assist countries and communities under pressure from the overlapping conflicts in the region. In particular, U.S. and international efforts to support the United Nations and the front-line states receiving refugees should be substantially increased.

The United States has been the clear leader in providing foreign assistance to countries affected by the Syrian crisis, but it can do more. In addition to providing additional bilateral assistance, U.S. leaders should call on other major economies, including China and Russia, to substantially raise their levels of support. As of now, these two major powers combined have provided roughly the same amount of assistance as Ireland.<sup>17</sup> There is no reason that the united efforts of the global community should not fully fund the requirements of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, in responding to the humanitarian crisis in and around Syria.



One area in which the United States clearly is not a leader is accepting refugees who are fleeing the violence wrought by ISIS and other actors in Syria. Front-line states such as Jordan and Lebanon have millions of Syrian refugees living within their borders. The population of Lebanon is now 25 percent refugees. Turkey has some 2 million refugees living in camps and Turkish communities.<sup>18</sup> European countries have absorbed hundreds of thousands of refugees, with the totals growing by the thousands each day. Germany alone will reach 800,000 to 1 million refugees next year.<sup>19</sup> The United States, on the other hand, has taken in barely more than 2,000 Syrian refugees since the crisis began. This paltry figure belies the great history and tradition of America welcoming refugees from crisis zones; for example, the United States previously resettled nearly 120,000 Vietnamese, 400,000 Eastern Europeans, and 650,000 Cubans.<sup>20</sup>

There are risks associated with bringing large numbers of Syrian refugees into the United States, just as there were risks that bad actors in communist Vietnam and Cuba would attempt to infiltrate the United States through the refugee process. The United States managed those refugee inflows with almost no negative impact on national security. The United States can do it again now with Syrians. In fact, there is a rigorous vetting process already in place, including multiple security screenings, background checks, and face-to-face interviews.<sup>21</sup> Biometric and biographical data are collected from refugees on the ground in front-line states and tracked throughout the process; extensive background checks and interviews are conducted in the field before refugees ever touch U.S. soil. This is the most rigorous process ever employed for any group of refugees or for any category of people entering the United States.

We can always look for ways to improve the screening process. By moving more elements of the U.S. process for vetting refugees into the affected region along with UNHCR operations, processing could be improved and accelerated. The United States should be doing more to accept Syrian refugees, not less. The dislocation in states bordering Syria that are dealing with millions of refugees is only growing. Hundreds of thousands are now leaving Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey in a desperate attempt to reach safer shores in Europe. The strain that has placed on countries large and small is immense and is an incredibly divisive political issue that could complicate strong and united European participation in the broader campaign against ISIS. The United States can deal with the refugee challenge now, or we can deal with it later when it will probably be much worse.

ISIS is pursuing a deliberate and open strategy to polarize the world and drive Muslims toward radicalization by provoking Western societies into rash actions that alienate their populations of Muslim heritage. Hateful rhetoric against all Muslims, including explicit statements establishing a religious test in American policy, is not only morally repugnant and factually inaccurate, it also plays right into the hands of extremists.

American Muslims are diverse—comprised of different ethnicities and races, immigrants and native-born people, young and old, converts and those born into the faith—and are among the strongest assets in America’s arsenal in its fight against ISIS and its abhorrent ideology. America’s values of religious pluralism, interfaith cooperation, and civic engagement directly counter the messages of hate and intolerance of ISIS. This most vile of terrorist organizations wants a clash of civilizations between two neatly divided opposing camps. The United States should not oblige.

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## Renew push for modified ISIS AUMF

The above recommendations require a long-term U.S. military and allied commitment to actions against ISIS in multiple countries and merit a new authorization for the use of military force against ISIS and its growing network. President Obama’s request that Congress specifically authorize the armed conflict with ISIS in Iraq and Syria has gone nowhere. His original proposal was crafted with the experience and lessons learned from more than a decade of wars against Al Qaeda and Iraq.<sup>22</sup> It contained a limitation on large-scale ground invasion and a sunset provision that required reauthorization after three years. These limitations satisfied no one in Congress. They were too strong for most Republicans and too weak for many Democrats. And since the president had made clear he believes that he already possesses the statutory authority to fight ISIS under a previous congressional war authorization,<sup>23</sup> Congress’ failure to act carried little political risk.

The Paris attacks may have changed that calculus and could present an opportunity for President Obama to once again demand that Congress get off the sidelines in this fight and specifically authorize the conflict with ISIS. President Obama might need to modify his original proposal in order to obtain congressional approval given current congressional leadership. Specifically, he would need to drop the ground forces limitation and modify his sunset provision to one that would still force Congress to reconsider the authority at regular intervals but would not end the authorization if Congress fails to act.

A new authorization that includes a mechanism for Congress to periodically reconsider the mandate would provide better oversight and be an improvement over the status quo. An updated AUMF along these lines would provide more accountability for the public without putting the military campaign at the mercy of congressional deadlock and dysfunction.

Finally, Congress must also confirm key administration officials who can play an essential role in this fight, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development administrator and the U.S. Treasury Department undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence.<sup>24</sup> The administration cannot do its job effectively without the personnel it needs to carry out the mission to defeat ISIS. Those who are unnecessarily holding up the confirmation process are undermining national security.

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## Conclusion

The fight against ISIS now requires strong American leadership to rally the international community to adapt its strategy as ISIS has shifted its own actions to strike beyond Syria and Iraq. Greater pressure must be brought to bear on ISIS in the territory it controls in Iraq and Syria. A formal structure must be implemented to better organize and prioritize the activities of the 60-plus nation coalition aligned against ISIS. New emphasis must be placed on securing a negotiated resolution to the conflict between the Assad regime and the moderate opposition in Syria to enable complete strategic alignment of all the parties against ISIS. And a renewed urgency must be placed on dealing with the human challenges and costs spilling out of Syria and Iraq.

ISIS has shown that it can strike a major Western city and spread fear and terror around the globe. But it will not win this fight. It is weak, and the United States and other nations allied against ISIS are strong. In America, our strength in this battle comes not only from our military power, but also from our values, our diversity, and our basic humanity. Abandoning those core principles will only prolong this war.

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