

The DEFEAT of ISIS



Implementing Stability in Iraq and Syria

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The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) first captured American attention in January 2014 when its militants burst out of Syria to seize the Iraqi city of Fallujah, which US soldiers and marines had fought so hard to free in 2004. Just a few days later ISIS captured the Syrian city of Raqqa, which became its capital. At this point President Obama was still deriding it as the “JV team,” hardly comparable to the varsity squad, al-Qaeda. It became harder to dismiss ISIS when in June 2014 it conquered Mosul, Iraq’s second-largest city, and proclaimed an Islamic State under its “caliph,” Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

With ISIS executing American hostages, threatening to massacre Yazidis trapped on Mount Sinjar, and even threatening to invade the Kurdish enclave in northern Iraq, President Obama finally authorized air strikes against ISIS beginning in early August 2014. This was soon followed by the dispatch of American troops to Iraq and then to Syria to serve as advisers and support personnel to anti-ISIS forces. By the end of September 2016, there were more than five thousand US troops in Iraq and three hundred in Syria.¹ At least those are the official figures; the Pentagon also sends an unknown number of personnel, numbering as many as a few thousand, to Iraq on temporary deployments that don’t count against the official troop number. The administration has also been cagey about what mission the troops are performing; although they are receiving combat pay and even firing artillery rounds at the enemy, there are said to be no “boots on the ground.”

The administration is more eager to tout all of the bombs dropped on ISIS; the Defense Department informs us, with impressive exactitude, that “as of 4:59 p.m. EST September 27, the U.S. and coalition have conducted a total of 15,310 strikes (9,973 Iraq/5,337 Syria),” destroying a total of 31,900 targets.² While those statistics sound impressive, the pace of the US bombing has lagged far behind previous wars: in Iraq and Syria, US aircraft have flown an average of eleven strike sorties a day compared with eighty-six a day in Afghanistan in 2001 or 183 a day in Kosovo in 1999.³ Rules of engagement were so restrictive that initially two-thirds of strike sorties were coming back to base without having dropped any ordnance; those rules have gradually been relaxed over time.

Despite the self-imposed restraint, the US-led campaign has been taking its toll on ISIS. As of September 2016, the Islamic State had lost a reported forty-five thousand fighters along with 45 percent of its territory in Iraq and 20 percent in Syria.⁴ Iraqi cities ranging from Sinjar to Fallujah have been liberated from its grip. ISIS has also lost control of



the Libyan city of Sirte, which had been seen as an alternative capital for the group should its redoubts in the Levant fall.⁵ And now the offensive against Mosul, the last ISIS redoubt in Iraq, has started. ISIS still retains an end-strength estimated at twenty thousand to thirty thousand fighters, but the flow of foreign fighters, once a flood, has slowed to a trickle—from two thousand fighters a month to fifty.⁶ And while ISIS remains the richest terrorist group in history, it lost at least 30 percent of its revenues between 2015 and 2016.⁷

There are reports that ISIS is quietly preparing for the loss of its “caliphate.”⁸ Does this mean that we can all breathe a sigh of relief? Hardly. In preparation for the loss of territory, ISIS has been shifting more of its focus abroad. Its intelligence unit, known as Emni, has been recruiting and redirecting volunteers away from the battlefields in Iraq and Syria, preparing them instead to stage attacks in their countries of origin.⁹ Its operatives have already been responsible for the attacks in Paris in November 2015 (130 dead) and Brussels in March 2016 (thirty-two dead). Its online propaganda, meanwhile, has inspired numerous other terrorists including Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, who killed fourteen people in San Bernardino in December 2015; Omar Mateen, who killed forty-nine people in Orlando in June 2016; and Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, who killed eighty-six in Nice in July 2016.

Counterterrorism officials in America and Europe are bracing for more such attacks, with fighters returning home from Iraq and Syria posing a particular menace. France alone has seven hundred of its citizens fighting on these battlefields.¹⁰ Michael Sheehan, former deputy commissioner for counterterrorism at the New York Police Department and assistant secretary of defense for Special Operations, warns: “The threat of terrorism in the nation’s homeland is worse now that it has been since 2001.”¹¹

Interestingly, Sheehan bases his assessment not on the existence of ISIS per se but rather on the violence and chaos sweeping the Muslim world more generally. He notes: “Four nations are completely broken and engulfed in devastating wars with no end in sight: Yemen, Syria, Somalia and Libya. In at least four other nations—including western Pakistan, several provinces of Afghanistan, large sections of Iraq and northern Mali—there are large areas of persistent conflict and jihad presence. If you add Boko Haram fighting areas in the Nigeria-Niger-Cameroon border area, terrorists in the Egyptian Sinai, the bloody sectarian attacks in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and extremists in the southern Philippines, the picture becomes even more troubling.”

Sheehan’s analysis is invaluable because he invites us to widen our aperture beyond ISIS, which has been the major focus of US counterterrorism efforts for the past two years. ISIS, admittedly, has become the most powerful terrorist group in the world. But it is hardly the only one—and there is good cause to fear that in both Iraq and Syria its demise will simply create more operating space for other terrorist groups.

In Iraq a great deal of the fighting against ISIS has been done not by the Iraqi army but by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the Iranian-backed Shiite militia organization that is by now probably the most powerful military force in the country. Its leaders include terrorists such as Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Qais Khazali, who have a long and bloody track record of attacks on American targets. American officials prefer to play down the role of the PMF in the US-supported anti-ISIS campaign, but on the ground the PMF presence is unmistakable. For example, the PMF has taken over the administration of the northern Iraqi village of Bashir, recently liberated from ISIS by PMF fighters and Kurdish peshmerga. Reporter Sulome Anderson of *Foreign Policy* found that “The yellow, green, and black insignia of the Badr Organization, one of the most prominent groups in the PMF, flutters from many a building. It’s similar to the flag of Hezbollah, the powerful Lebanese militia, and the men in the Badr Organization discuss their sister Shiite group with a mixture of envy and pride. As with Hezbollah, Iran’s influence on the PMF is also highlighted in Bashir—dusty posters of Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei, Iran’s past and present supreme leaders, are scattered throughout the village.”¹²

Something similar is happening in Syria where, as the regular Syrian army has increasingly fallen apart, the Bashar Assad regime has been reliant on Russian aircraft and Iranian-supplied fighters. The Lebanese Hezbollah, a wholly owned affiliate of the Iranian Quds Force, is the most prominent Shiite militia in Syria but hardly the only one; Iran is recruiting Shiites from as far away as Afghanistan to fight for Assad and his Alawite regime.¹³

The Obama administration, desirous of a rapprochement with Iran, has chosen to turn a blind eye to these developments. But it is not immediately obvious that the replacement of a fanatical Sunni terrorist group with fanatical Shiite terrorist groups—both equally anti-American—is an altogether positive development.

Of course the situation in Iraq and Syria is so complicated that Iran is not the only party that stands to gain from ISIS’s setbacks. Another likely beneficiary is the Kurds. Already the Iraqi Kurds have taken advantage of the weakness of the Iraqi state to seize the disputed city of Kirkuk and other land in northern Iraq, expanding their territory by about 50 percent over the past two years.¹⁴ This exacerbates tensions with the Arabs in Iraq, both Sunni and Shiite—and those tensions could spike after ISIS loses control of Mosul, given that this city’s population is a mixture of Arabs and Kurds.

Meanwhile in Syria, the Obama administration, having all but given up supporting moderate Arab fighters, has devoted most of its support—in the form of arms, airpower, and Special Operations Forces—to bolstering the Kurdish YPG (People’s Protection Units). The YPG appeals to Washington because it is resolutely secular and it has determined fighters who have managed, with US help, to seize much of northern Syria from ISIS. But the YPG is also affiliated with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), a Marxist terrorist group that is fighting against Turkey and that is friendly with Iran. American support for the YPG has



alienated and alarmed Turkey, which sent its own troops into northern Syria in August, ostensibly to fight against ISIS, but really to drive back the YPG and hinder the formation of its Kurdish state, known as Rojava. Thus we were presented with the ridiculous spectacle of one US ally, Turkey, fighting another US ally, the YPG.

Besides the Kurds and Iran, there is one other beneficiary of ISIS's growing weakness that needs to be mentioned: other Sunni extremist groups that are aligned with al-Qaeda rather than with ISIS. The most prominent of these is the al-Nusra Front, the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, which recently changed its name to the Syria Conquest Front in an unconvincing bit of rebranding. Because the United States and other Western powers have provided so little help to moderate Syrian rebel groups, the al-Nusra Front has evolved to become, next to ISIS, the primary rebel group among Syrian Sunnis. There is a real danger that areas now under ISIS control will transition to al-Qaeda control—not much of a “win” for the United States.

As this brief survey suggests, both Iraq and Syria remain deeply unsettled and violent. The losses suffered by ISIS are good news, but they will not necessarily lead to a long-term diminution of the threat as long as those countries remain as chaotic as they are today—and as torn by sectarian, ethnic, and religious animosities. Terrorists flourish in just such conditions. Unless the basic needs of the people of Iraq and Syria are addressed—above all the need for security—this area will remain a breeding ground of terrorism, refugee flows, and other ills for years to come.

What policy should the United States pursue bringing a measure of peace and stability to this turbulent region? The current Obama strategy of trying to negotiate with Vladimir Putin and Bashar Assad in Syria, while de facto backing Iranian proxies in Iraq, is doomed to fail. Putin and Assad are dedicated at the moment to crushing opposition by force, not to ending the war by compromise. As for the Iranian militias in Iraq, the more powerful they get, the more of a backlash there will be from Sunnis, driving them into the arms of ISIS or some other extremist groups.

A better approach for Iraq would be to focus on addressing the grievances of Sunnis by assuring them that they will not again be victimized by a Shiite-dominated sectarian government as occurred after 2011. The United States should use all of its leverage to press for the creation of a Sunni Regional Government, an autonomous zone akin to the Kurdish Regional Government, even offering if necessary to provide an American security guarantee to the Sunnis. To be credible, this would require the long-term basing of US troops in the region, the KRG providing the safest area to do so. The United States should not repeat the mistake Obama made in 2011 of pulling US forces out once a modicum of stability is achieved; we have seen it will not last unless America stays actively involved.

In Syria the situation is far worse and thus it will take more US resources and more time to bring the fighting to an end—if that is even possible. Proposals for no-fly zones—grounding

the Syrian air force through US airpower and possibly doing the same to the Russian air force by distributing anti-aircraft missiles to moderate rebels—make sense, but they are, in and of themselves, inadequate. The most convincing plan to change the status quo has been presented by Kenneth Pollack of the Brookings Institution. He writes that “the United States could create a new Syrian military with a conventional structure and doctrine, one capable of defeating both the regime and the extremists. A decisive victory by this U.S.-backed army would force all parties to the negotiating table and give the United States the leverage to broker a power-sharing arrangement among the competing factions. This outcome would create the most favorable conditions for the emergence of a new Syrian state: one that is peaceful, pluralistic, inclusive, and capable of governing the entire country.”¹⁵

This may sound fanciful, but the United States helped to end the wars of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s by training and arming the Croatian army. Once the Serbs saw they could not win a military victory, they were willing to negotiate seriously, thus making possible the success of the Dayton Peace Accords. The current negotiations conducted by John Kerry to end the Syrian civil war have failed because the United States has foresworn any military leverage. Creating a new Syrian national army, backed by US airpower and US advisers, could tilt the balance of power on the battlefield and compel all parties to reach a settlement.

In sum, America needs to widen its objective from simply defeating ISIS—the current goal—to fostering peace and stability. If we don’t do this, we are likely to see the rise of ISIS 2.0 down the line. Recall that ISIS itself is really al-Qaeda in Iraq 2.0: AQL, after being defeated in 2007–9, was able to resurrect itself because of the collapse of authority in Iraq and Syria in 2011—in Iraq because of the departure of US troops, in Syria because of the outbreak of a civil war. This is a mistake we should not repeat today—but avoiding it will require a significant change of policy in Washington.

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