Viewpoints
No. 63

We Bomb ISIL: Then What?

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Military action in Iraq and Syria is moving ahead without a political strategy to accompany it. Although the administration argues that defeating ISIL requires the formation of inclusive governments, neither Iraq nor Syria has such government. The absence of a real political strategy will undermine any military success.

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Once again in the Middle East, military action is running way ahead of politics. The United States is going to war in Iraq and Syria with a clearly spelled out military strategy but, as in Iraq in 2003, with a political strategy based on little more than wishful thinking.

Even the military strategy is problematic. The United States has committed to fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from the air, without American ground troops. In Iraq, the crucial follow-up on the ground is left to the remains of the Iraqi army, a yet-to-be-formed national guard, the Kurdish *peshmerga*, and, de facto, assorted Shi'a militias. In Syria, the follow-up on the ground rests in the hands of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a divided and so far ineffective organization that has been unable to make much headway against the regime of Bashar al-Assad, losing out to ISIL and the al-Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra. The U.S. military estimates that transforming these various groups into effective fighting forces will take many months. It is not surprising that General Martin E. Dempsey, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a congressional committee on September 16 that "under certain circumstances" he might recommend the deployment of some personnel on the ground.

Despite the obvious weakness of the ground forces component of the military strategy, there is no doubt that sustained bombings by the United States of ISIL targets in both Iraq and Syria will weaken the organization, stopping it from making further rapid advances, likely precluding it from seizing more high values assets such as the Mosul and Haditha dams or the Baiji oil refinery in Iraq, and challenging its control of oil fields and refineries in Syria.

But military action, as President Obama has clearly stated and all analysts recognize, is only part of the solution. The fight must have political and ideological components. And that is the problem.

The Myth of Inclusive Government

The fight against ISIL in Iraq requires the formation of an inclusive government that represents and protects all segments of the population, thus reducing the appeal of ISIL. When Iraq's struggling political parties managed to form a new cabinet under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on September 8, Washington chose to see it as the required inclusive government that opened the way for U.S. armed intervention. In reality, the government is very similar in composition to the preceding one, although the new prime minister appears to be more conciliatory than the dour Nouri al-Maliki.

Thus, the prime minister, although not enjoying a honeymoon, is still given the benefit of a doubt—but for how long? Kurdish parties, for example, joined the new cabinet announcing that they would reconsider their position within three months unless the government accepted their extensive demands. So far the government has not taken any concrete decisions that could convince Sunnis and Kurds that their interests are now protected. Al-Abadi's promise on September 11 that the military would stop dropping barrel bombs on ISIL–occupied towns in order to avoid civilian casualties was a step in the right direction but hardly one sufficient to signal a fundamentally new approach. And in his foreign policy, al-Abadi remains close to the

regimes in Syria and Iran—speaking at the United Nations on September 25, he declared that he supported U.S. bombing of ISIL positions in Syria, but that the attacks must not be extended to the Syrian army.

Despite the difficulties, an inclusive government might still emerge in Iraq. In Syria, the situation is much worse. As long as Assad is in power, there is no point of talking about an inclusive government. Furthermore, the U.S. intervention is having the unwanted but not unanticipated consequence of strengthening his position. The idea that it is possible to fight ISIL without strengthening Assad, as the administration claims, is fiction. ISIL is the most effective adversary of the regime, with a proven ability to conquer and administer territory, as well as to operate oil fields it has captured and to export oil. U.S. air strikes on ISIL's assets would not benefit Assad only if the Free Syrian Army was able to move in quickly and impose its own control. This is certainly not the case now and it will not be for months to come, even if squabbling factions within it manage to overcome their internal differences. Like it or not, the United States, far from promoting a new, inclusive government, is helping Bashar al-Assad. Both sides know it: that is why the United States could inform the Syrian government about the forthcoming attacks of September 23, confident that such knowledge would not lead to the mobilization of Syria's air defenses. In turn, the fact that the United States is de facto helping Assad contributes to the perception among Sunnis that the United States, unwittingly or deliberately according to the more conspiratorially minded, is also strengthening the grip of Iran on the region: Iran backs Assad, thus any help to him is also help to Iran. And many Sunnis, including Gulf governments that are part of the coalition, see Iran as a bigger threat than ISIL.

Ideological warfare

A recurring theme of the Obama administration's statements about the fight against ISIL is the necessity to undermine the appeal of the organization's ideology. Defeating ISIL, Secretary of State John Kerry declared in an interview with CNN on September 24, "will involve a major effort to reclaim Islam by Muslims…I think you will hear more from the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia…"

In those few words, the Secretary managed to capture the difficulties and paradoxes of this ideological struggle. One, readily acknowledged by the administration, is that the United States cannot be part of this effort to "reclaim" Islam from ISIL's interpretation—only Muslims can do that. Another and thornier issue is that the U.S. view of how Islam should be interpreted—as a religion of peace and above all of tolerance—is not one shared by all U.S. allies in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, a pioneer in the attempts to re-educate young people attracted to radical Islamism and reintegrate them into the society, is committed to a strict, puritanical interpretation of the religion that leaves no room for other Sunni schools, and certainly not for Shi'a Islam, which it considers heretical. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia has called repeatedly for a "correct" interpretation of Islam which excludes "extremism, radicalism and terrorism." Nothing in the track record of the Wahabi religious establishment suggests that the correct interpretation will be tolerant.

The ideological struggle, in other words, is one the United States cannot fight and from which it must distance itself as much as possible. But those who have the credibility and the means to

wage that struggle may also make the situation worse by exacerbating divisions rather than healing them.

The International Context

The United States has been working assiduously in building an international coalition to support and participate in the fight against ISIL. The administration is fully justified in trying to make this fight a collective endeavor. ISIL poses a greater threat to the people and countries of the region than to the United States, and there is no reason why Washington should shoulder the entire burden. While militarily the United States will remain in the central position even if other countries participate, on the political front it carries a large baggage of past interventions, or failures to intervene, that have created resentment and mistrust. Furthermore, other countries are culturally more suited to carry out certain tasks. For example, Saudi Arabia has much more experience in dealing with Arab tribes than the United States does and might be more effective in convincing tribal leaders who dislike ISIL, do not trust Baghdad, and believe Washington betrayed them in the past to join the coalition.

While a coalition is crucial, its members, particularly those from the region, also add new layers of complications to the politics of the undertaking, without necessarily making a major military contribution. While it is important symbolically that Gulf countries participate in bombing raids, their most important military contribution is to give the United States access to facilities from where to launch the strikes or train Syrian militias. No alliance members furthermore appear willing to provide what is missing most in the intervention, namely ground troops. Politically, regional allies provide cover for the United States, but also bring their own goals and past baggage and present dilemmas into the alliance.

The difficulties begin with the definition of the problem. For the United States, ISIL constitutes the greatest danger in the region. For regional powers, ISIL is a danger, but not necessarily the major one. And joining in the fight against ISIL could have serious domestic repercussions, because there are probably active cells in all countries and because many ordinary Sunni citizens sympathize with the organization. Social media users do not constitute a statistically representative sample of the population, but it is clear that among them support for ISIS is overwhelming, as governments admit.

Saudi Arabia appears to be an enthusiastic member of the coalition. It was one of the first countries to endorse wholeheartedly the goal of putting an end to the Assad regime and resented Obama's refusal to back its rhetorical assertions that "Assad must go" with deeds. Particularly galling to the Saudis was the U.S. opposition until recently to the arming of Syrian rebels for fear extremists would be the beneficiaries. Saudi Arabia has also been upset for years about the outcome of the U.S. intervention in Iraq.

Saudis, and others in the Gulf, believe that by ousting Saddam Hussein, disbanding his army, and encouraging the purging of Ba'ath Party members from government positions the United States marginalized Sunnis and altered the balance of power in favor of the Shi'a population, thus "serving Iraq to Iran on a silver platter." The problem was compounded by the U.S. insistence on elections, which also favored Shi'as as the largest population group in the country, and then by accepting and backing Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and his Shi'a-dominated and

Iran-controlled government for two successive terms. The net result was a great increase of Iranian influence in Iraq and the growing prospects that Iran would succeed in its hegemonic project of controlling the Gulf. In turn, the marginalization of Sunnis led to the rise of ISIL and its growing popularity not only among Iraqi and Syrian Sunnis, but also among the youth of other Gulf states.

There is also resentment in Saudi Arabia as in other Gulf countries that when discussing terrorism, the United States only mentions Sunni terrorism, while turning a blind eye to what Hezbollah is doing in Syria and the Shi'a militias are doing in Iraq with the support of Iran. Instead, the United States continues to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran, essentially rewarding it. Saudi Arabia does not want a nuclear-armed Iran nor does it want a confrontation, but it also wants its role somehow diminished, making it a complicated ally for the United States. While the United States is trying to focus on ISIL, Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries want to bring Iran into the equation.

Turkey's stance is even more complicated and ambivalent. Its participation in the fight against ISIL is crucial, because its long and porous borders with both Syria and Iraq are the major entry point for foreign fighters who want to join ISIL and other groups. And Turkey could be a major staging ground for airstrikes in Syria and Iraq. Turkey does not support ISIL, which is also a domestic threat because it enjoys some popularity. But it also wants to see the end of the Assad regime, and therefore is leery of any actions that might strengthen him. Thus, Turkey refused to join the coalition when it was first launched at a meeting in Jeddah on September 11. At that time, Turkey was trying particularly hard not to provoke ISIL, which detained 49 Turkish citizens captured in Mosul at the beginning of the offensive in Iraq. With the hostages released on September 20, Turkey has been somewhat more forthcoming in its statements of support against terrorism, but it is a reluctant, cautious member of the alliance.

Kurds in Iraq and Syria bring yet another set of complications to the alliance. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) was directly threatened by the advance of ISIL in Mosul, virtually on its doorsteps, and immediately mobilized its *peshmerga* at a time the Iraqi army appeared to be in a complete state of collapse. As the Iraqi army retreated precipitously, the *peshmerga* quickly moved into territory around Kirkuk and along the Kurdistan's boundary with other Iraqi regions, de facto extending the reach of the KRG against the will of Baghdad and of the United States. Yet, the intervention of the *peshmerga* kept ISIL from conquering even more Iraqi territory. Iraqi Kurds are thus an important but inconvenient part of the coalition. They are fighting with much greater determination than the Iraqi army and have been able to take advantage of U.S. airstrikes to regain territory—they have been the needed boots on the ground. Better armed, the Iraqi Kurds could easily become even more effective. But they fight for Kurdistan more than for Iraq, and their success could bring them closer to complete autonomy or even independence, something neither Baghdad nor Washington wants.

The same is true for Syrian Kurds, who control enclaves along the Turkish border, which they call the state of Rojava. They have been fighting ISIL, but they also have their own agenda of autonomy and possibly independence. And this is particularly threatening to Turkey, because Syrian Kurds are close to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), Turkey's own Kurdish resistance movement, once denounced by the government as a terrorist organization and now an uncertain partner in an attempt to settle the Kurdish issue.

Each regional participant in the alliance, not just those discussed here but others as well, is joining in the fight against ISIL for different reasons. Each has goals unrelated to the degrading of ISIL.

Retrofitting a Political Strategy

The military strategy against ISIL has undoubtedly considerable weaknesses, the most important of which is the paucity of troops on the ground ready to take advantage of the bombings to regain territory. Furthermore, the bombing campaign is bound to create negative political repercussions, as bombs hit the wrong targets and civilian casualties occur, as it happened in Iraq and Afghanistan repeatedly.

But the most serious issue is the absence of a political strategy based on more than wishful thinking. Developing such strategy is going to be difficult, because the United States does not control the political situation in either Iraq or Syria. There are far too many actors that need U.S. support but do not feel beholden to it, certainly the Kurds in both Iraq and Syria, but also the government in Baghdad, which is probably as dependent on Iran as it is on the United States even after al-Maliki's removal. The Syrian regime, which is a major beneficiary of the intervention, is not going to listen to the United States, which has called for its overthrow. And regional coalition participants have disparate interests, disparate perception of the level of threat and where it comes from, and different goals.

The situation in Syria and Iraq, with a surging ISIL controlling increasing amounts of territory and resources and only weak resistance on the ground, made it very difficult for the United States to continue sitting on the sidelines, despite the best intention of the Obama administration not to drag the country into another war. There was urgency to the intervention, and it is understandable that military actions got ahead of the politics.

But unless a real political strategy is retrofitted into the intervention, the military effort will be wasted. The formation of inclusive governments, with which all groups can identify, is a worthy goal in the abstract. The question is what it means in practice. Unless Iraq, and eventually Syria, undertakes a real national dialogue, broadening the circle of consultation beyond the political parties in Baghdad, and reconsidering the relations between Baghdad and the provinces, there is no point pretending the government is inclusive. A group of Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish ministers sharing the spoils of power in Baghdad does not constitute inclusive government.

Without a true attempt by the leaders in Iraq and Syria to define inclusivity and work for it, the intervention will at most slow down ISIL's advance temporarily, and the intervention by the United States and the coalition will be wasted. As in Iraq and Afghanistan, a successful military intervention will be undermined by the hollowness of the political strategy.

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