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The United States and the Coalition versus the Islamic State: Too Limited an Approach

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The Strategic View

Given the prevalent sense in the international community that the Western-Arab coalition is failing to stop the onslaught of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, sources in the US administration are calling for stepped-up military activity by the coalition. Among those favoring this approach are Secretary of State John Kerry and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey. President Obama, however, is loath to take decisions that counter his policy that seeks to stay away from military intervention and engagement in Middle East problems. However, given Obama's objective to eradicate ISIS, it appears that the President must reconsider his Middle East policy and reexamine the validity of the United States' regional assumptions.

One key assumption was that efforts should be made to establish a special relationship with Turkey. However, Turkish leader Erdogan presented Obama with an ultimatum: if the United States wants Turkey to participate in the war against IS as a full-fledged ally, it must embrace the goal of ousting the Syrian regime. This demand puts the US President in a difficult position: on the one hand, the United States believes that without Turkey, the coalition against IS remains hollow. On the other hand, the United States wants to incorporate Iran into the war on IS and take advantage of this opportunity to thaw relations, but in order to do so the United States must heed Iran's demand and avoid taking steps to topple Bashar Assad. The current test of US-Turkey relations lies in the question of assistance to the Kurds in Iraq and Syria. The United States demanded that Turkey open its borders and allow aid and supplies to reach the Syrian Kurds threatened in Kobane, as well as opening an escape route into Turkey. However, Erdogan, focused on toppling the current Assad regime, is allowing the acquisition of cheap oil from IS. He also worries about the ramifications of the establishment of a Kurdish state. In his view, if the Turkish army becomes actively involved in fighting IS, the Kurds' strength will likely increase and Turkish Kurds might ultimately make demands of the Ankara government. Erdogan, concerned by that possibility, prefers to remain on the sidelines.

He did agree to a partial border opening, but only after a US operation that parachuted supplies to the Kurds in Kobane.

A second assumption is the preference given to fighting the Islamic State over securing the conditions that would prevent Iran from attaining military nuclear capabilities. There are increasing signs that the United States has formulated a new approach that incorporates Iran in a regional security architecture so as to further cooperation in fighting IS. In return, will the United States accept Iran as a nuclear threshold state? In addition, the establishment of special relations with Iran is liable to come at the expense of longstanding relations with traditional United States allies in the region, particularly Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel.

A third assumption was that the United States could withdraw its forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and stabilize US-trained local forces without ensuring the formatting of a stable, responsible, and functional governmental infrastructure in these countries – based on the belief that leaving a vacuum would not backfire. The negative implications of leaving a vacuum have emerged not only in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also in the slide toward instability in neighboring nations and the growing strength of radical elements working to topple state-based frameworks. Nonetheless, the United States still believes that the war against IS must be based on local ground forces, even if they are weak, splintered, and lacking in motivation. In any case, at this stage the involvement of US ground forces is not an option.

The Operational Level

Beyond the conceptual dimension, President Obama must make decisions on the operational level in terms of how to use force to realize the goal of eradicating the Islamic State. General John Allen, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), has presented a series of insights and proposals for the continued military operation against IS:

- a. The assessment of operational gains is limited to aerial forces, most of which must arrive from distant airfields, a constraint that does not allow uninterrupted aerial presence over the battlefields. The number of sorties by the coalition nations so far is limited (a few dozen per day). This does not represent sufficient volume to stop IS forces and is in any case unsuited to warfare in urban settings against terrorist/guerrilla organizations. Because of the difficulty in identifying targets, coalition planes attack economic infrastructures controlled by IS, which damages the supply of electricity, water, and food to the civilians in the war-torn areas. To land a harsh blow and stop IS forces, it is critical to generate precise, relevant intelligence and carry out hundreds of sorties a day, thus maintaining continuous aerial presence

over the combat zone for the sake of gathering intelligence and immediate attack targets.

- b. The response formulated so far indicates the need to allocate more Apache helicopters, which are effective in fighting mobile ground forces, especially in open areas. In urban settings, it is important to maintain coordination between the helicopters and the Iraqi and Kurdish forces fighting IS. In addition to their unique contribution to the fighting, Apache helicopters are also suited to defense of Iraqi military sites such as airfields and other strategic assets.
- c. It is necessary to beef up the ground forces fighting the Islamic State. As long as the United States and other coalition members are unwilling to commit their own ground forces, the Iraqi military and the secular opposition in Syria – the Free Syrian Army – must be relied on, even though these forces have not demonstrated sufficient fighting abilities. A concerted effort to train and equip them and increase their motivation to fight is critical. Hundreds of foreign advisors from the US Special Forces and other Western nations are already instructing Iraqi forces, but they are not escorting the fighting forces. Therefore, it is necessary to insert US military experts and commanders into the ranks of the Iraqi army's fighting forces. While Obama has resisted this recommendation, given his commitment not to deploy ground combat troops, General Dempsey said recently that the decisive battles in Mosul and other radical strongholds will "require a different kind of advising and assisting."
- d. It is important to give significant assistance, including air cover, to the leaders of the Sunni tribes in western Iraq willing to fight IS but lacking the necessary tools.
- e. In Syria it is necessary to accelerate the buildup and training of FSA units so they can confront armed IS forces. The challenge is complex: it is difficult to turn bands of armed rebels into an operational army with proven abilities and an effective command and control structure, especially given the collapse of FSA units and the desertion of fighters from their ranks to Islamic groups fighting the Assad regime. Therefore, the ORBAT must be increased and equipped with high quality arms. Furthermore, it is necessary to expand the training programs underway in Jordan and Turkey. The Pentagon has estimated that three to five months are needed to identify experienced fighters within the moderate Syrian opposition, and another year to train them for warfare. The challenge in the interim, other than air strikes, is to enlist ground forces from Arab nations, and especially from Turkey.
- f. Concurrently, it is necessary to deter Assad's forces from harming the moderate opposition forces, especially FSA units. At present, the Syrian air force's strikes are concentrated on attacking the FSA and the civilian population rather than fighting the jihadists. It is therefore necessary to establish a no-fly zone in Syria's north and east for all aircraft not belonging to the coalition and prevent Syrian attacks from the air against non-IS rebels.

Conclusion

It appears, therefore, that Obama's focus on air strikes is only an opening act, and *by itself* stands no chance of defeating the Islamic State and arresting the tide of volunteers flocking to join its ranks. IS fighters blend into the urban environment, making it difficult for the coalition forces to identify them and seriously damage their capabilities. An aerial campaign without a ground offensive can, at most, impede the activity of IS forces. To win the campaign, it is necessary to persuade the regional players to send ground forces into the battle. However, unless coalition forces are beefed up and, in particular, unless Turkey plays an active role in the fighting, there is only a slim chance that Arab nations will send troops into the fight.

The damage to infrastructures wrought by coalition air strikes and the vacuum in the civilian governance of the areas where the fighting is underway strengthen IS, which evinces concern for the needs of the local population. Therefore, coalition forces must provide for the needs of the population in these areas and, to the extent possible, avoid damaging the infrastructures required to provide for the critical civilian needs.

The coalition's war against IS helps President Assad because it means easing the pressure on the Syrian regime. Assad is not interested in suppressing IS now because its defeat would mean that he is once again viewed as the main threat to Syria's future, stability, and chances for its democratization. As long as Assad rules Syria it will be impossible to stop the enlistment of volunteers into IS ranks in order to fight him. Therefore, it is necessary to vanquish the Islamic State while simultaneously working to topple Assad's regime.

