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# AN INTENSIFIED APPROACH TO COMBATTING THE ISLAMIC STATE

By Michèle Flournoy and Richard Fontaine



Center for a New American Security

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In the 11 months since President Barack Obama committed the United States to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS), the group has expanded its international reach, metastasized to form offshoots across multiple regions, and increased its perceived momentum.<sup>1</sup> Although U.S. government officials cite a reduction in the overall size of the group’s sanctuary in Iraq and Syria and the killing of thousands of ISIS fighters, the fall of Ramadi and much of Anbar province to the Islamic State served as a wakeup call that current efforts to counter ISIS are not adequate to the task.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, the threat posed by the terrorist group to Americans at home and abroad appears to be growing as ISIS-inspired individuals conduct attacks targeting Westerners around the globe, including here in the United States. And the U.S. intelligence community reportedly assesses that despite almost a year of airstrikes, the Islamic State remains no weaker and no smaller in number than it was at the campaign’s outset.<sup>3</sup>

While President Obama has articulated a fairly comprehensive strategy against ISIS, the United States and the 60-nation coalition it has formed to fight ISIS have not translated the president’s words into an effective campaign on the ground. The military dimensions of the strategy have been under-resourced, while many of the non-military lines of operation remain underdeveloped.

This policy brief explores the threat posed by the Islamic State, assesses the administration’s efforts to date, and offers recommendations for the United States and its partners to make their efforts to counter and ultimately destroy ISIS more effective.

## THE ISIS THREAT

The Islamic State is at once a terrorist organization, a proto-state, and an ideological movement. In its effort to establish a caliphate and inspire Muslims around the world to join its cause, the group combines extreme violence, savvy use of social media, a jihadist narrative, an ability to seize and hold territory, and explicit hostility to the West.<sup>4</sup> Unlike al Qaeda – which maintains strict criteria and protocols for membership, asserts centralized control, and focuses on conducting carefully planned, spectacular attacks – the Islamic State has adopted a “let a thousand flowers bloom” approach that invites geographically-dispersed, self-proclaimed affiliates and inspires uncoordinated attacks.

Its hallmark attack outside the Middle East has thus far been of the “lone-wolf” variety. The Islamic State has called on sympathizers to attack Westerners and their property wherever they can be found. Of the 11 attacks that occurred in the West between May 2014 and February 2015, 10 were carried out by individuals.<sup>5</sup> ISIS has carried out or inspired attacks in Tunisia, Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Australia, France, Denmark, and other countries, including the United States.<sup>6</sup> The threat to the homeland appears to be growing: After an Islamic State-inspired attack in Texas in May, the FBI reported foiling several July 4th-related plots in what its director described as “crowd sourcing terrorism.”<sup>7</sup> Future attacks may not be limited to lone-wolf efforts; one counterterrorism analyst the authors talked to suggested that “ISIS is just one Mohammed Atta away from a 9/11-type attack in the United States.”

In Syria and Iraq, some 22,000 foreign fighters from 100 different countries have joined the Islamic State,<sup>8</sup> thousands of whom hold Western passports enabling them to travel freely within and between Europe and the United States. And ISIS’ threat to Iraq’s stability is clear. In addition to seizing Mosul

and Anbar, the group poses a grave threat to other parts of the country; currently, for instance, more than 40 percent of Iraqi security forces are assigned to the Baghdad Operations Command, an indication of the government’s fear for its capital.<sup>9</sup>

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While ISIS has suffered recent setbacks in both Iraq and Syria, its presence elsewhere is growing. The group has established a haven in Libya and the Sinai Peninsula and is attempting to establish footholds throughout the Middle East, in the Caucasus, Southeast Asia, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and elsewhere. Its ambitions – and the scope of its threat – appear to grow along with its capacity and reach. Driven in part by a sense of competition with al Qaeda, the threat posed by the Islamic State to the United States may grow over time as it becomes increasingly entrenched in more places and as it attracts and trains a growing number of sophisticated fighters.

## U.S. STRATEGY TO COUNTER ISIS: STRONG IN THEORY, INADEQUATE IN PRACTICE

Despite repeated charges that his administration lacks a strategy, President Obama has on several occasions articulated the lines of effort the United States is pursuing to combat the Islamic State. Over the past year, the administration has assembled a 60-nation coalition to conduct a long-term, multi-dimensional campaign to defeat ISIS. The key elements of this campaign include:

- The deployment of U.S. and coalition military teams to train and equip local forces in Iraq and from Syria and the provision of air support to help the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and Kurdish peshmerga push ISIS out of key terrain it has occupied in Iraq;
- Airstrikes in both Iraq and Syria against ISIS senior leaders, infrastructure, fighting positions, convoys, equipment, and oil and gas facilities that provide the group with a source of revenue;
- Information sharing with partners to help them strengthen border security to stem the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq and then back to their home countries;
- Multilateral cooperation to track and disrupt illicit financing of ISIS;
- Diplomatic efforts to press Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to build a more inclusive central government that represents and serves all Iraqis – Shia, Sunni, and Kurd – and devolves more authority and resources to the provinces;
- Discussions with partners regarding a negotiated transition to a post-Assad government in Syria;
- Efforts to discredit ISIS’ narrative and counter its propaganda online; and
- Measures to strengthen U.S. homeland security to prevent ISIS attacks.

In principle, all of these elements must be part of an effective American strategy to combat ISIS, but in practice the whole has been less than the sum of the parts. Many of these efforts remain more aspirational than real. In some cases, they have been woefully under-resourced; in other cases, the president’s rhetoric has not been translated into effective programs and actions.

In practice, American efforts to combat the Islamic State thus far convey a sense of creeping incrementalism. In recent weeks, for example, the administration announced the dispatch of 450 additional troops to Iraq – only 50 of which are trainers, with the remainder as support – to train Iraqi troops, bringing the total U.S. commitment to 3,550.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, a year-old DoD training effort has yielded fewer than 60 anti-Islamic State fighters for deployment in Syria.

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These and other moves simply will not turn the tide given ISIS’ size, spread, and momentum. To succeed in the president’s ambition of ultimately destroying the Islamic State – or at least containing ISIS’ gains and rolling them back – a broader and more intensive effort is needed.

## TOWARD A MORE ROBUST AND EFFECTIVE EFFORT

A more robust campaign to counter ISIS should start with intensifying and fully resourcing U.S.-led efforts in Iraq. To date, the counter-Islamic State strategy in Iraq has lacked the urgency and resources necessary for success. A re-energized and more forward-leaning approach should combine the following elements:

- **Intensify U.S. diplomacy in support of an integrated political-military plan for Iraq.** Iraq is the locus of the current U.S. military effort against the Islamic State, and the administration's strategy of working with and through Iraqi forces is the right one to achieve gains that are sustainable in the long term. But these efforts require better coordination between the military and diplomatic lines of effort. An integrated political-military plan should include stepped-up diplomacy with Baghdad to push for greater Sunni inclusion, devolution of authority and resources to provinces such as Anbar, as well as the establishment of a national guard as a vehicle for Sunni tribal militias to become part of the Iraqi security forces.

Shia party leaders in Baghdad must be made to understand two fundamental facts. First, failure to adopt more inclusive policies with regard to the Sunni population risks the dissolution of Iraq as a unitary state. Second, relying predominantly on Iranian-backed Shia militias to clear ISIS from Sunni areas will only further alienate the Sunni population and create fertile soil for ISIS' return. Given Iran's military operations and outsized influence in Iraqi politics, Tehran will be a major factor in the sustainability of a multi-sectarian Iraq. The United States should urge Iraqi leaders to make clear to Tehran that a zero-sum approach to sectarian conflict in Iraq risks the country's further fragmentation, increased ISIS influence, and deeper tension with the United States.
- **Intensify U.S. and coalition outreach to and support for the Sunni tribes.** While Shia-dominated Iraqi Army units may not have the "will to fight" to regain Sunni areas from ISIS, Sunni militia would be willing to take up arms against ISIS provided two key conditions are met. First, they must be convinced that at the end of the day Baghdad will provide them with more autonomy and resources to govern themselves at the provincial level. Second, they must believe that the U.S.-led coalition will provide them with the military and financial support necessary to enable their success against ISIS. Both conditions will be difficult to attain given the previous Sunni tribal alliance with the United States during the Anbar awakening and the failure to translate those gains into greater Sunni political representation in a federalized Iraq.

Washington should clarify its willingness to provide operational support to Sunni tribal fighters and redouble its efforts to persuade Arab partners, who have largely sat on the sidelines and watched Iran fill the vacuum in Iraq, to provide financial support to Iraq conditioned on greater inclusion of its Sunni population.
- **Provide arms directly to Sunni tribes and the Kurdish peshmerga.** The pipeline of weapons through Baghdad to the Sunnis and Kurds willing to take on the Islamic State has often been slow and inadequate, undermining the effectiveness of both training and operations against ISIS. The United States should speed the supply of arms and equipment directly to local tribal militia and peshmerga units, while holding out the prospect that arms will flow through Baghdad if and when the central government establishes a reliable process for their transfer and passes legislation to include these fighters

in the Iraqi security forces. Providing this assistance directly could also incentivize Shia politicians in Baghdad, who have thus far been reluctant to pass legislation establishing an Iraqi National Guard, to support the new law in order to ensure these local forces ultimately fall under the control of the Iraqi security forces.

- **Embed U.S. military advisors at the battalion level and allow them to advise Iraqi commanders during operations.** The Iraqi security forces' will to fight has faltered repeatedly in the face of Islamic State advances, and yet it is difficult to bolster morale, stiffen backbones, or adjust a battle plan from behind the wire at a training base. When Iraqi units are trained, equipped, and ready for combat, U.S. military advisors should be allowed to embed with Iraqi battalions and advise Iraqi commanders during operations from "the last point of concealment" – i.e, a protected position close to the fighting. While this would increase the risk to some U.S. personnel, it would likely have a marked impact on the combat effectiveness of Iraqi forces battling ISIS.

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- **Intensify the coalition air campaign and deploy forward air controllers to call in close air support during combat missions.** The air campaign against the Islamic State has thus far been the centerpiece of U.S. strategy, yet as currently conducted it is unlikely to turn the tide. Since August 2014, the U.S.-led coalition has conducted over 2,600 air strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and over 1,600 in Syria. But the intensity of the air campaign has been far less than in previous air campaigns and has been

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somewhat hampered by a lack of both intelligence on ISIS targets and nearby basing to allow more responsive strikes on emergent or fleeting targets. Employing more U.S. air assets based in Iraq or neighboring partner countries, rather than on distant aircraft carriers, would enable far more strikes per day in both Iraq and Syria. Turkey's recent decision to open Incirlik air base for U.S. aircraft conducting operations against ISIS is an important step in this regard. Authorizing U.S. forward air controllers to accompany Iraqi forces into the fight to identify targets and call in close air support for Iraqi units under fire would also make those forces far more effective. This step, and embedding U.S. combat advisors, would require some increase in the number of U.S. support forces in Iraq to ensure the availability of capabilities for medical evacuations, combat search and rescue, and a quick reaction force.

At the same time, the United States should also intensify its efforts to counter ISIS in Syria. Specifically, the United States should:

- **Eliminate key restrictions on aid to the Syrian opposition.** The Islamic State will pose an enduring threat to Iraq and other countries as long as it enjoys a safe haven and base of operations in Syria. The continued leadership of Bashar al-Assad remains the fuel that fires the sense of Sunni disaffection in Syria and pulls that population toward its purported Islamic State protectors. Current U.S. policy requires oppositionists seeking training to target only the Islamic State and not the Assad regime. It is small wonder that the DoD program has trained just 60 potential fighters.

The Department of Defense training mission should cease its insistence on the Islamic State as the sole target and begin training and equipping moderate opposition fighters who wish to take on the Assad regime as well. It should also begin providing anti-aircraft artillery (excluding shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles) to the moderate opposition to counter the regime's continued use of barrel bombs against the civilian population. As part of this effort, the United States should leverage its increased commitment to persuade Gulf states and Turkey to back the American effort rather than to support Jaish al Fatah or other extremist groups in Syria.

The United States should seek to hasten the departure of Assad from power but retain the basic structures of government and avoid the disintegration of the Syrian state. This is a difficult and risky objective, but the alternatives promise endless bloodshed and fuel for ISIS' continued growth. Moving U.S. policy in this direction would allow Washington to better coordinate with regional states, including Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, that wish to more vigorously oppose Assad. It may also induce Turkey to enhance its border controls to better prevent the flow of foreign fighters into Syria.

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- **Set the conditions before attempting a settlement in Syria.** A flurry of rumors suggests that, following the agreement on Iran's nuclear program, the administration may attempt a multilateral peace negotiation aimed at ending the Syrian civil war. Yet no political solution will be possible so long as the key parties – including Assad, the Islamic State, and other jihadist groups – believe that they can win. The lack of serious U.S. engagement to date means that it would have little leverage in such a negotiation if it began tomorrow, and the parties Washington wishes to see prevail – moderate rebels – are in fact the weakest on the field.

Setting the conditions would first and foremost mean strengthening the elements in Syria who are best placed to govern a post-Assad Syria and building support among the Gulf partners and Turkey for such a force. It would also include raising the costs for Iran both in Syria and across the region through more aggressive use of military and intelligence tools – jointly with Arab partner militaries – to counter Iran's surrogates and proxies. And it would mean engaging in a dialogue with Iranian officials to detect any changes in their calculus with respect to Assad and his regime's future.

- **Employ a “tourniquet strategy” around Syria.** While the United States takes more affirmative steps to achieve an acceptable endgame in Syria,



it should also lead the coalition in a collective effort to keep the civil war from destabilizing countries on its borders, especially Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Each of these countries is being overwhelmed by the largest refugee crisis since World War II: More than 4 million refugees have left Syria, with 1.8 million going to Turkey, nearly 1.2 million in Lebanon, and some 630,000 in Jordan. These states need more assistance from the international community to deal with this humanitarian crisis and counter ISIS efforts to launch attacks and gain a foothold on their territory. The U.S.-led effort should bolster the resilience of these border states in the face of unprecedented pressure. The reported (and then officially denied) plans to establish a “safe zone” in Syria along the Turkish border could be a step in the right direction, though militarily difficult to achieve and defend.

Neither the United States nor the international community can afford to focus only on countering ISIS where it is strongest – in Syria and Iraq. As the group seeks to establish affiliates in places as far flung as Afghanistan, Libya, Nigeria, and Yemen, the United States should seek to prevent it from creating additional safe havens from which it can conduct attacks. The United States and its partners should:

- **Intensify the global campaign against the Islamic State.** An enhanced strategy that combines military, intelligence, diplomatic, and economic efforts will be necessary to prevent ISIS from becoming the new al Qaeda – a terrorist organization with global reach and ambitions to attack Americans at home and abroad. Many tools will be familiar from that fight, including counter-threat finance, building partnership capacity, intelligence sharing, and targeted counterterrorism operations. The United States should leverage the tools it has honed and the lessons it has learned to keep ISIS from establishing itself as a viable terrorist organization in countries beyond Syria and Iraq.
- **Adopt a conditions-based approach to sizing U.S. forces in Afghanistan for 2016 and beyond.** In Afghanistan, the Islamic State’s efforts to recruit disaffected Taliban fighters and create a rival organization offers one more reason to abandon the calendar-based withdrawal of U.S. forces from that country by the end of 2016. Instead, the United States should adopt a more forward-looking approach that would keep a modest force in place to advise and assist the Afghan national security forces and conduct joint counterterrorism operations to safeguard both countries.

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IN AFGHANISTAN, THE ISLAMIC STATE’S EFFORTS TO RECRUIT DISAFFECTED TALIBAN FIGHTERS AND CREATE A RIVAL ORGANIZATION OFFERS ONE MORE REASON TO ABANDON THE CALENDAR-BASED WITHDRAWAL OF U.S. FORCES FROM THAT COUNTRY BY THE END OF 2016.

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- **Counter ISIS’ narrative on social media.** ISIS reportedly puts out nearly 90,000 messages a day on social media outlets, ranging from Facebook to Twitter to YouTube to WhatsApp.<sup>11</sup> The group is highly effective in using the Internet and social media to disseminate propaganda, radicalize and recruit followers, provide operational support to foreign fighters, and inspire “lone wolves” to conduct jihad. To date, U.S. and coalition efforts to counter ISIS messaging have been inadequate and ineffective.

A more coordinated digital effort is needed, one that includes not only other countries but also key partners in the private sector and nongovernmental organization (NGO) community. This

counter-messaging campaign should include efforts to amplify more moderate voices within Islam who discredit ISIS' extremist views and calls to violence. It should also disseminate tales of disaffected former Islamic State fighters to better reveal the reality of ISIS and dissuade others from joining.

While the efforts of partner governments like the United Arab Emirates and Tunisia will be particularly important, it is imperative that the United States also engage key private sector and NGO partners to bolster their efforts. To cite one example, Google regularly reviews videos posted on YouTube and removes those that show or aim to incite violence. In addition, the company has recently connected YouTube stars skilled in reaching younger audiences with NGOs working to counter ISIS narratives. These and other creative approaches should be encouraged and supported.

## THE LONG-TERM EFFORT

Beyond these near-term steps to intensify the campaign against ISIS, the United States needs to revisit and revitalize efforts that aim to address the conditions that create fertile soil in which violent Islamic extremism can take root and grow. On the face of it, steps such as empowering more moderate voices within Islam and building the resilience of communities at risk of radicalization seem attractive and entirely non-controversial. But translating those generalities into specific policies and programs can quickly become controversial.

Should the United States press Saudi Arabia to stop its export of Wahhabism across the Islamic world? Should U.S. leaders openly call for the separation of state and religion in the Muslim world? Should they give greater priority to addressing the failure of states across the Arab world to meet the basic needs and address the grievances of substantial segments of their populations? Should the United States renew its push for democratic reform in the Arab world, even among friendly autocracies, or count on them to impose stability through repression? Should Washington press European allies who have failed to integrate Muslim immigrant populations into their societies to take a different approach? And are American leaders willing to scrutinize their country's own treatment of U.S. Muslim communities and change course where heavy-handed surveillance has trumped community engagement and alienated the very communities they seek to make resilient to radicalization? There are few easy answers to these questions, but they are central to the long-term effort to combat the Islamic State – and the successors and offshoots of it that will emerge as long as violent extremism remains an attractive ideology to motivated individuals.

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Together, the steps outlined here would mark a significant intensification in the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq, Syria, and globally. They would involve putting a small number of U.S. “boots on the ground” and would expose American troops to greater risk. Yet the risks of inaction are greater still. If the United States has learned anything since 9/11, it should be the need to deny sanctuary to a terrorist group that wreaks unspeakable violence and brutality against all except those who share its tortured worldview.

Most Americans regret having permitted al Qaeda to establish a sanctuary in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Years from now, they should not look back with regret at this period of time, when the Islamic State is creating its own havens. In the Middle East and elsewhere, the United States has imperfect and disorganized partners, but they are partners nonetheless. Now is the time to intensify America’s efforts to help lead them in a common campaign to defeat the Islamic State.

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## ENDNOTES

1. This paper uses the names “Islamic State” and “ISIS” interchangeably.
2. Administration officials report the loss of more than a quarter of the populated areas the Islamic State seized in Iraq. See, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President on Progress in the Fight Against ISIL,” July 6, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/07/06/remarks-president-progress-fight-against-isil>.
3. Ken Dilanian, Zeina Karam, and Bassem Mroue, “Despite Bombing, Islamic State Is No Weaker Than a Year Ago,” Associated Press, August 1, 2015, [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/08/01/despite\\_bombing\\_islamic\\_state\\_is\\_no\\_weaker\\_than\\_a\\_year\\_ago\\_127626.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2015/08/01/despite_bombing_islamic_state_is_no_weaker_than_a_year_ago_127626.html).
4. For useful descriptions of the Islamic State, see, *inter alia*, Nicholas J. Rasmussen, Director, National Counterterrorism Center, “Current Terrorist Threat to the United States,” hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Senate, February 12, 2015; Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March 2015; Audrey Kurth Cronin, “ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group,” *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 2015); Brian Fishman, Counterterrorism Research Fellow, International Studies Program, New America Foundation, “The Next Decade: Aligning Strategy Against the Islamic State,” hearing before the Armed Services Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, June 24, 2015; and Linda Robinson, Senior International Policy Analyst, RAND Corporation, “An Assessment of the Counter-ISIL Campaign,” hearing before the Armed Services Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, June 24, 2015.
5. Rasmussen, “Current Terrorist Threat to the United States.”
6. *Ibid.*
7. Julia Edwards and Mark Hosenball, “FBI says it thwarted Islamic State-inspired July 4 attacks,” Reuters, July 9, 2015.
8. Jeh Johnson, Secretary of Homeland Security, remarks to the United Nations Interior Ministerial Security Council Briefing on Countering Foreign Terrorist Fighters, May 29, 2015, <http://www.dhs.gov/news/2015/05/29/remarks-secretary-homeland-security-jeh-charles-johnson-united-nations-interior>.
9. Robinson, hearing before the Armed Services Committee.
10. Ashton Carter, Secretary of Defense, “Statement on Counter-ISIL,” testimony to the Armed Services Committee, U.S. Senate, July 7, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1956>.
11. Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Intensifies Effort to Blunt ISIS’ Message,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2015.



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CNAS is located in Washington, and was established in February 2007 by co-founders Kurt M. Campbell and Michèle A. Flournoy. CNAS is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt nonprofit organization. Its research is independent and non-partisan. CNAS does not take institutional positions on policy issues. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the authors.

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