

# The Fight Against ISIS: Reviewing US Strategy

General John R Allen AO

Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL (2014-15)

Chair: Dr Neil Quilliam

Acting Head, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House

2 December 2015

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

## Neil Quilliam

Good evening. I'm Neil Quilliam, I'm the acting head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme here at Chatham House. Just a few housekeeping points before we start. The event will be held on the record for the first 25 minutes, whilst we're in conversation, but the Q&A session will then be off the record. So please do tweet (using #CHEvents) during our conversation, but put away your devices when we move into the Q&A session, please.

I'm really pleased to introduce our speaker this evening, General John Allen. General Allen is co-director for the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence at Brookings. He previously ran the security dialogue for the last Middle East peace talks efforts with Israel and Palestine, and more formally, having just left the position as a special presidential envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. He held that position from September 2014 to October 2015. A very busy year, of course. General Allen, welcome.

## John Allen

It's good to be with you, thank you.

## Neil Quilliam

You're welcome. You've joined us on a most auspicious occasion. I'm sure it hasn't escaped your attention that all cameras, all activity, is focused on Parliament (except here, this evening), on the vote.

## John Allen

We probably should have rescheduled, actually.

## Neil Quilliam

What, the vote?

## John Allen

[laughter] No.

## Neil Quilliam

And Iraqi forces seem poised to retake Ramadi, so this is a very auspicious time to be coming together and having this conversation, so we're very pleased that you're with us today. We're here to talk about the fight against Daesh, reviewing US strategy. We've asked you to come and share your views on the fight against Daesh and tell us what it reveals about US foreign policy. I'm sure that the issue of UK airstrikes against ISIL will come up, as will Russia's intervention, the role of Turkey and the Gulf Arab states. But for now, I'd like to really focus on the coalition's strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL.

But before we start, I'd like to say for the sake of simplicity and consistency, we've decided between ourselves we're going to use one term, and that's going to be Daesh, instead of ISIS, IS or whatever. I would like to forbid the audience, if I may, from using terms like ISIL-Daesh, as one term. I hear politicians doing that all the time and it's a little cumbersome, shall we say. So if we can stick to one term, that will save us a lot of time and energy.

Anyway, having made that clear: General Allen, I want to step back a little bit. There have been a slew of excellent articles and, indeed, books on Daesh. One excellent one written by our colleague Hassan Hassan that described Daesh, where it came from and where it's heading. I read earlier today that deciding how we think about this group is critical to deciding how we fight it. Given that you led coalition efforts to fight it, how do you conceive of it? Is it a well-resourced terrorist group using territory to plan attacks abroad? Or a fledgling state that simply sponsors terrorist attacks when under assault?

#### John Allen

That's a very interesting question. First, the organization, as an organization, is something I've never seen before. It is far better organized than Al-Qaeda, and I had a lot of experience with Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2007, in the Al Anbar province. It is better organized and better resourced than the Taliban – again, another organization I had some significant experience with.

But your question seeks an answer to whether it is a proto-state or whether it's an organization. Obviously many of the countries involved, and the coalition in particular, we see it as an organization that has attempted to seize and maintain control of territory and people. The designation by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in the summer of last year as a caliphate gave it a self-definition that placed it in a doctrinal position, and a doctrinal obligation, to constantly be in relentless attack against the apostates. Thus, relentlessly gaining territory, relentlessly gaining control of population.

So with that in mind, what we have sought to do is to deal with it at multiple levels. When the coalition came together last year – it's worth remembering that at the time, we did this really on the run, around the UN General Assembly of 2014. We were experiencing and witness to some of the most horrendous acts I certainly have ever seen in my own experience of many years in the uniform. We needed to get organized as quickly as we possibly could, to try to stay the momentum that this organization was building. So we needed to deal with it as a physical entity that defined itself as a caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the caliph, which gave it not just a doctrinal definition but also gave it a basis for recruiting that it, as a terrorist organization, probably would not have had.

It's extraordinarily well resourced. Although the coalition is squeezing it now in ways that we had not been able to until just recently, it was nearly self-sufficient – which makes it, again, a different kind of organization than we had seen. Self-sufficient in the context of its use of the oil enterprise, massive extortion of the subjugated population – you are taxed for everything that you do inside Daesh territory. The slave trade has generated a lot of revenue. As horrific as this organization is on any given day, that adds another layer to the horror of the reality of Daesh, the slave trade. The sale of antiquities. Then, when Daesh ultimately came roaring out of Syria and into Iraq, it captured a number of banks that had significant cash holdings in them as well. The numbers vary in terms of our estimates but somewhere in excess of \$500 million to \$750 million.

So those various aspects of the reality of Daesh – that it holds terrain, seeks to expand terrain, subjugate population, expand control of population, and is largely self-sufficient in terms of its resourcing – has made it a unique challenge for us.

Now, the coalition strategy is fivefold, five principal points. The first is the military strategy, which I think gains and holds most of the attention and the imagination of those of us who are engaged in this every day. The second of the five – we call them 'lines of effort' – is the effort to interdict the finances, to separate it from the international financial system, to interdict the capacity of Daesh to leverage the oil enterprise. There's been some significant work on that recently. The third area is the effort to interdict the

flow of foreign fighters, and I'll come back to that in just a moment. The fourth area is competing in the information sphere, competing in the narrative – with the narrative. This is one that's been really challenging for the coalition. And then the fifth area for the coalition is one which we have seen some success, and it's an area where we're going to need to put even more effort – the area of stabilizing populations. Because in the end, as we push Daesh out of population centres, the defeat of Daesh is not just the physical defeat of the force called Daesh, but it's also the effective rescuing of the population that had been under its boot. The effectiveness of the stabilizing of that population and the recovery of what we call 'liberated peoples' – the recovery of those individuals really puts paid to the attractiveness of Daesh or the influence of Daesh.

So five lines of effort. This is where it's important to understand the passage of time and the taxonomy by which we should think of the organization today. When we came together as a coalition last year – again, moving as quickly as we could to get organized, to try to blunt the forward momentum – Daesh was largely locally confined in Syria and Iraq. In the meantime, we have seen Daesh designate a number of what are called overseas provinces. Those overseas provinces and small enclaves or cells, for the capacity for them to project power, that is new to how we originally saw the organization.

So today, as Daesh seeks to expand into what we'll call a platform organization of Syria and Iraq – if you will, the headquarters being in Raqqa, with sort of the spiritual headquarters being in Mosul – and the outlying provinces in Libya, the Sinai and the North Caucasus, and there's one sort of coming together in the Saudi peninsula. There is one called the Khorasan, which is a swath of Pakistan and Afghanistan. There is likely to be one to emerge in Bangladesh and probably one in Southeast Asia. What we see now is Daesh has become, in essence, an entity of three real components, which is the platform of Syria and Iraq, the outlying provinces, and then the network that connects the two. It's the network that operationalizes Daesh's capacity for now international reach, extra-regional reach.

So the strategy has to embrace that. It has to embrace not just dealing with and defeating the core, which has the effect in the end of beginning to collapse it from the bottom up, but it also has to understand the network, because it is through the network where command and control is exercised, the flow of resources can move, foreign fighters can have effect and the narrative can be shared. So seeing it in the taxonomy of a three-component system now is really very important. That's the direction that the coalition is heading.

### Neil Quilliam

Thank you very much. You've described the five lines of effort. During your time as special presidential envoy, what would you say in terms of what was achieved or not achieved through this strategy? What have been the strengths and the weaknesses to date? What have been the successes and failures? Looking back, what would you do differently?

### John Allen

I spent a lot of time in Iraq in 2007, and many of the sheikhs – my principal role was to work with the tribes, to bring them over to fight Al-Qaeda. One of them in particular was a very close friend, and we worked very closely to fight in the east around Fallujah. It was horrific to me to see place after place that we had fought for going down under the black flag. It was horrific to see all that we – and when I say 'we', I mean the United States and the United Kingdom and others – had done begin to come unglued as this attack occurred. Mosul went down – four divisions of Iraqi infantry collapsed. Crucifixion of Christians, the beheading of Shia, the summary execution of anyone that was captured. It's important to return to

those moments because we were not quite sure where Iraq was going to end up. We were not even sure it was going to continue as an entity that was recognizable.

So in essence, between the Yazidi catastrophe in the area of Sinjar and then the really tremendous strategic blunder of Daesh to turn to the east and go for Irbil instead of putting all of its combat power to a southern drive – it hived off capabilities. That's really what brought the coalition in, in a very kinetic way. In essence, we took Daesh on frontally. We had to stop the momentum. We had to buy some time. We had to begin to get our special operators on the ground so that we could survey what was left of the Iraqi military.

So I have to give you that context. We were not sure where this was going to end up, but we did know this: if we didn't intervene quickly with a lot of combat power to slow or even halt the momentum, it was going to be an academic conversation, because Daesh was headed for the holy places of the Shia confession. Iran was nigh on to intervening and this would have made this thing an explosive regional sectarian battle.

So in the five lines, where we find ourselves today in what we're saying is the beginning of the second year of the campaign is that Daesh, at a military level, has been confined geographically in the region. We're still dealing with the expansion into the distant provinces. We're still trying to understand the network. But Tikrit has been taken back, Baiji has been taken back. Mosul has now been isolated, with the recent extraordinary work by the Kurds to cut Route 47 and to liberate Sinjar. There are Yazidis going home now. In Syria, the Syrian border from Iraq all the way to the Euphrates has been taken from Daesh. Tal Abyad, which was the principal crossing point into Syria, has been recovered. We have Syrian-supported elements moving toward Raqqa now. We have now US special operators on the ground, or very shortly on the ground, in Syria, to provide additional support to that.

So what we're moving towards now is a regional effort to pressure Daesh around its periphery and its entirety. We couldn't have done that before. We had to fight them where we had to in order to prevent them from taking action or prevent them from achieving advantage. So now we're going to pressure them around their entire periphery, to force Daesh to have to – where it could before shift resources to the one place we were attacking, now they have to react in all directions. And very importantly, we're going to push our special operations, direct action strike force elements, in. They'll begin to go after the leadership itself. Back in May, we attacked the chief financial officer for Daesh, Abu Sayyaf. He did not survive the raid but his wife was captured and turned out to be running the slave trade. A Yazidi woman was also liberated and we took seven terabytes of information off the objective. That helped us enormously to understand what we were doing.

So today, a regional pressure strategy is underway. Our effort now is to understand and to deal with the organizations called the distant provinces, and the analysis of the network for critical pathways and key nodes which can be disrupted to disrupt the connectivity between the core and the outside.

In terms of countering the finances, I believe we have been successful in separating Daesh from the international financial system. We are now attacking those cash repositories, direct attack upon those piles of money that they captured. Recent raids on the oilfields above Deir Ezzor have done a lot to limit Daesh's capacity to leverage the oil enterprise. We're now actually attacking the tankers, the tanker trucks, which was the connective tissue from the oil head to the black marketer.

The foreign fighter piece, we would like to have seen that come farther. It's a very difficult problem. Over a hundred countries on the planet are providing foreign fighters and they're making their way to the region

still. We believe now that the Russian intervention is going to exacerbate that probably in some respects. We've already seen some of that already.

In terms of the narrative, that's been a real challenge for us. King Abdullah of Jordan says quite properly and quite correctly that the best counter-messaging strategy must have an Arab face and a Muslim voice. But to take it beyond that, regardless of the region, it has to have an indigenous face and a Muslim voice to be the proper counter-mechanism. The Emiratis built a centre in the United Arab Emirates called the Sawab Center, or the 'right path', which has helped us to monitor social media, both in terms of trends and the opportunity to counter-message. We will probably see one emerge in Africa. We hope to see one in Western Europe. We believe we will see one in Southeast Asia. This will give us global connectivity for strategic messaging but with local application through the indigenous populations.

Finally, in terms of stabilization, that's one of the areas where we have been pretty successful, led by the Germans and by the Emiratis again. Tikrit was our first opportunity. With the clearing of Tikrit, we've created with the UNDP a funding facility for immediate stabilization (FFIS, it's called). We're trying to float it at about \$60 million and apply money very quickly after Daesh has been cleared, after the police have re-established security of the population, began to return essential services, medical support for the women and children who suffered terribly under Daesh's boot. We did that, I think, pretty well in Tikrit. More than 75 per cent of the population has gone home. In a world today where Europe is suffering under waves of refugees who have no hope of going home, the more hope we can create through coherent stabilization plans that people can go home, is a very positive outcome.

We are poised now with Ramadi, which is the next big city which will come under attack. We have echeloned the police and the funding facility to be able to quickly provide support.

So it's a long answer, but there's been – so much of the first year was getting organized and beginning to apply the doctrine. Now we're beginning, I believe, to achieve traction in a number of these areas.

### Neil Quilliam

You mentioned the UAE a number of times there. There's been public criticism of the role played by the Gulf Arab states, particularly that they no longer fly over Iraq, no longer carry out those sorties. How do you respond to that criticism? Are they a key part of the coalition or are they outside that?

### John Allen

They're a very important part of the coalition. When I hear that question, I always caution that we should not measure their contribution solely on a military contribution. They were quite active initially in the skies over Syria. In my long career, I never imagined that we would see five Arab air forces flying in complex strike missions against an organization like Daesh, and they did. The Saudis were one of the first countries out of the gate when this crisis started, with a \$500 million humanitarian contribution. All of our Gulf partners have worked very hard to either participate in the humanitarian dimension of the crisis – whether it's for the people themselves or for the funding facility. Each has taken steps uniquely inside their own countries to ratchet down on donor activity to Daesh and other groups. Then, of course, the Emiratis, the Kuwaitis and others have been critical in the stabilization line of effort. The Emiratis have been critical to the countering narrative line of effort.

What's happened in the meantime, of course, is Yemen. It should come as no surprise that much of the attention of these countries, who have in the end limited capacity – much of the attention and much of the

capacity of those countries was focused elsewhere. That doesn't mean that they have forsaken the coalition or forsaken their objectives with respect to what we want to do with Daesh or the political transition in Syria. It just means that for now, much of their capacity is otherwise occupied.

### Neil Quilliam

I'm going to ask you one final question before we go to the Q&A session, and that's about Russian intervention in Syria. Bit of a loaded question. Is it helpful to the coalition? Does it create obstacles? Is it something that can be accommodated and incorporated? Or has it just thrown things out of order?

### John Allen

The coalition has been and will continue to be focused on fighting and defeating Daesh. That's not changed at all, frankly. The continued emphasis on pressuring the core, pressuring Daesh in Syria and Iraq, that has not changed. In fact, we want to accelerate it, because as we continue to pressure Daesh around its periphery, we might find that there could be a real collapse at some point around that periphery. We want to be poised to be able to take advantage of it.

As we watched unfold the Russian deployment into Latakia, we had hopes that they would partner with us with regard to Daesh, that they would be a factor with the Syrian regime on lowering the violence against what we would consider moderate Syrian elements. That they would be a partner in the context of putting together a roadmap or a political transition. It turned out to be very different in reality. The Russian presence in the region was very clear that its intent was to stabilize the regime, its oldest overseas partner. Assad is really on the ropes, shy of the Russian intervention. It also landed on the same side with allies like Iran and Hezbollah and a number of other extremist Shia militia elements. It's very clear then that what's happened with their appearance in the region is to sharpen some of these sectarian differences, with the reality that as they sought to strike what they called the terrorist elements – our view was, defeat Daesh, create a political transition, the conversation that could foster political transition. Our hope had been that that would be, for them, the same priority. It turned out to be: defeat the terrorists, leave Assad in place and then talk about a political transition.

We've had some developments in the last couple of meetings in Vienna and the G20, and I think that's all sorting itself out. We've seen some timelines that have been issued with respect to forming an interim government and then having internationally administered elections. All of that is aspirational at this point. We should applaud that at least that kind of conversation is underway.

But the truth is, when a Russian airplane takes off in Syria and a piece of ordnance comes off its wing, it's going to land on a Sunni Arab. Whether it's Jabhat al-Nusra or Daesh, or that large group of individuals that we call the moderate Syrian opposition, they're stuck in that reality now. Our hope is that they can become a useful contributor to the process for political transition, lower the violence and help us to deal with Daesh. To this point, other than some recent bombing activity on Daesh, the preponderance of their targets are elsewhere.

### Neil Quilliam

Thank you very much. We're now going to switch, we're going to be off the record now. We're going to have thirty minutes of Q&A.