

Just 'bombing' ISIL is foolish at best

Doug Bandow

June 7, 2016

Presidential campaigns have a destructive way of telling voters that the nation's toughest problems are mindlessly simple to fix. Just build a wall, pay off the national debt, bring back jobs from overseas. In fact, no president could do those things, or at least not without enormous difficulty and huge unintended consequences.

That's rarely been truer than when candidates weigh in on how to defeat the Islamic State, the bloodthirsty group that seized swaths of Syria and Iraq. If there's any lesson from 9/11, it's that it's a bad idea to let an extremist group fester unchecked in a place from which it can plan and carry out attacks on the United States, as al-Qaeda did in 2001 from its sanctuary in Afghanistan.

President Obama's strategy for rolling back ISIL's territorial gains has been to try to limit the role of American troops while delegating most of the fighting to local forces, including the feckless Iraqi armed forces that barely resisted when ISIL took over some of that nation's most important cities two years ago.

Republican presidential candidates have shown contempt for Obama's cautious approach. Texas Sen. and then-candidate Ted Cruz declared he'd "carpet bomb" ISIL to see whether "sand can glow in the dark." Donald Trump, now the presumed nominee, said he'd "bomb the (bleep)" out of ISIL.

The ongoing battle to dislodge Islamic State fighters from Fallujah, 40 miles from Baghdad, shows how foolish this kind of bluster sounds in the real world.

ISIL fighters want to keep the civilians in Fallujah as human shields, and they've shot and killed many who've tried to flee. Iraqi forces are deliberately going slowly to avoid killing civilians. Many will die anyway, in order to root out the estimated 800 to 1,000 ISIL militants holding the city. The idea of indiscriminately bombing a city of 50,000 — including an estimated 20,000 children — to kill or drive out 1,000 fighters is simplistic nonsense.

The truth is that there's no easy way to defeat ISIL, but the current approach is showing some results. ISIL hasn't seized any new territory in Iraq this year, and Iraqi forces have retaken about 45% of what ISIL initially seized.

That's the good news. The attack on Fallujah displays all the flaws as well, chiefly the uneasy alliance of Iraqi government forces and Shiite militias. Shiite brutality against Sunnis is a chief reason Sunni enclaves such as Fallujah repeatedly fall to Sunni extremists such as ISIL.

The U.S. is providing air support, training and logistical backup for Iraqi forces. That's appropriate. What America hasn't been able to do is bring about a tolerant, inclusive Iraqi government that restrains majority Shiite oppression of the nation's Sunni minority.

This leaves a big, unanswered question. Even if the U.S.-backed Iraqi army manages to liberate Fallujah and then Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, from ISIL control, what happens next?

Twice in 2004, the U.S. military fought bitter campaigns to conquer Fallujah, a Sunni city that became a stronghold for former Baathists, Sunni insurgents and al-Qaeda. Alas, rule by the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad felt like an occupation. When the Islamic State targeted Fallujah two years ago, the terrorist group easily gained control of the city.

Fallujah needs to be retaken, but by Iraqi forces.

Direct U.S. involvement is likely to create significant political problems. Already, Iraqi Lt. Gen. Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, rather like Goldilocks, has complained that he never found U.S. airstrikes to be quite right. The commander of the Fallujah operations observed: "I don't think they trust Iraq's government or military."

Yet air power is of limited value in an urban campaign while the risk of civilian casualties is great. Washington already has been criticized for killing Iraqi civilians elsewhere. Given the American military's history in Fallujah, the U.S. is at risk of being charged, fairly or not, with causing civilian deaths there.

Worse, participation in the Fallujah operation will appear to give America's imprimatur to the involvement of Shiite militias. Most are allied with Iran, and some are headed by figures designated as terrorists by the U.S.

Their taking part might be necessary, given the generally poor performance of the Iraqi armed forces. Nonetheless, the militias have been accused of atrocities, reinforcing Sunni antagonism toward the central government.

The U.S. has little leverage to force Baghdad to adopt a more inclusive policy. Nor is the government of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi strong enough to enforce such an approach.

Sunni leaders already have accused the U.S. of allying itself with terrorists and sacrificing human rights. Should the "liberation" of Fallujah be followed by Shiite forces brutalizing the Sunni population, Washington will be blamed.

Washington has proved that it cannot control events in Iraq. Only the Iraqis can resolve political problems that led to military losses. Fallujah is the Iraqis' fight.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Reagan.