



# Fighting ISIL is Not America's War: Other Countries Should Lead Coalition Against Islamic State

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President Barack Obama now has a strategy for dealing with the Islamic State. He plans to repeat Washington's earlier failed strategies for intervening in the Middle East.

Since 1991 every administration has used force in Iraq. The result has been disaster. Washington's target now includes Syria. The U.S. again will organize, lead, arm, train, and bomb. Other countries might help out—a little. The result again likely will be disaster.

Washington should try a new approach. The U.S. should leave the fight to those actually threatened by the enemy du jour, in this case ISIL. Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, in particular, should act to degrade the Islamist group's capabilities, shrink its territory, and defeat it, as the president hopes to do.

The Islamic State is flamboyantly evil. But that doesn't make it particularly dangerous to America. "Caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi might spin fantasies about ISIL conquering much of the region and creating a powerful Islamic kingdom rooted in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. But the Islamic State is no replacement for the Soviet Union.

With the latest estimate of 20,000 to 30,000 fighters—after months of increased recruiting—ISIL's total fighting strength equals about two U.S. army divisions—minus the training and equipment (though the group acquired a lot of materiel from the defeated Iraqi army). The Islamic State is weaker than every genuine state in the region as well as America. The group has succeeded primarily because of its opponents' infirmities. Even without U.S. involvement, the Islamic State would find it difficult to hold onto its gains as its adversaries regroup.

The president deceptively called ISIL a terrorist group and contended that “these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including to the United States.” Secretary of State John Kerry expanded the deceit: “We’re engaged in a major counterterrorism operation, and it’s going to be a long-term counterterrorism operation. I think war is the wrong terminology and analogy.”

So far this is flatly false.

U.S. intelligence officials admit that they see in the group neither the willingness nor the desire to attack the U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson acknowledged: “We know of no credible information that ISIL is planning to attack the homeland at present.” Nicholas Rasmussen, Deputy Director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, told Congress that ISIL primarily threatened U.S. interests “inside Iraq right now.” Daniel Benjamin, a former Obama counterterrorism adviser, warned that administration officials are “all over the place describing the threat in lurid terms that are not justified.”

ISIL broke with al-Qaeda in large part because of the latter’s emphasis on the “far enemy,” America. The Islamic State is deploying an army in an attempt to become something akin to a normal government, controlling territory and population. Instead of creating a terrorist sanctuary, conquered territory offers a return address which would allow the U.S. to retaliate massively for any attack, ending any illusion that the Islamic State was a powerful “caliphate,” the group’s avowed objective.

ISIL’s murder of two American journalists was grotesque, but these are not the first Americans to be killed overseas by thugs. The deaths, though outrageous, do not constitute a threat to U.S. national security. In fact, the beheadings were the equivalent of waving a red cape at the American bull. Alas, the administration responded foolishly—but predictably.

Despite the fact that President Obama believes ISIL has graduated from JV status to dire threat, he won’t introduce ground forces for combat. “We will not get dragged into another ground war in Iraq,” the president insisted. But airstrikes are no panacea. The Libyan civil war dragged on for several months despite vigorous allied air attacks. ISIL already has begun shifting men and materiel to prepare for U.S. action. Having committed America’s prestige to a campaign intended to “degrade,” “defeat,” “crush,” “destroy,” and “eradicate” ISIL—which Washington has not achieved with al-Qaeda after 13 years of effort—the president will face pressure to escalate if his initial efforts fall short.

Moreover, attempting to destroy the new caliphate would remove the most important deterrent to Islamic State terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland. Hopefully ISIL will remain ill-equipped to target America. However, if the group blames its loss of “statehood” on the U.S., the former might decide to make common cause with al-Qaeda and devote its ill-gotten wealth to terrorism rather than conventional battle.

The Islamic State does threaten Arab nations. In fact, virtually every state in the Middle East has an incentive to defeat, crush, and destroy the new “caliphate.” At least so long as Washington doesn’t do the job for them.

The president admitted that America cannot “take the place of Arab partners in securing their region.” However, under his plan the U.S. will be deeply involved, ostentatiously taking the public lead, providing much of the muscle, and directing other nations’ activities. By relieving those most at risk of responsibility for confronting a threat *against them*, the administration will discourage them from responding appropriately.

Washington’s efforts so far have yielded meager results. “Arabs Give Tepid Support to U.S. Fight Against ISIS,” headlined the *New York Times*. Even supposed allies refused to make specific commitments. They do not want to be seen as carrying out Washington’s program. Salman Shaikh of the Brookings Doha Institute observed: “there’s this nagging doubt that this strategy is intended just to serve U.S. interests and not the broader interests of the region.”

Indeed, the Islamic State’s most enduring threat is ideological/theological. The president declared: “We stand with people who fight for their own freedom, and we rally other nations on behalf of our common security and common humanity.” But that’s not how it appears to many Arabs, who see Washington again allied with sectarian and authoritarian regimes, ever ready to bomb to advance its own interests.

In fact, ISIL grew out of al-Qaida in Mesopotamia. Although the latter was defeated, local people’s grievances were not addressed. Now the Islamic State is active well beyond Iraq. President Obama might declare that ISIL does not represent Islam, but he has no credibility with Muslims. There may be no worse visual than Christian America again attacking Muslims at the behest of corrupt, apostate Arab governments. It is bad enough to be seen as a Western lackey. But the Gulf States in particular also may be seen by their peoples as joining a sectarian conflict on *the wrong side*, against their fellow Sunnis. And unlike after 9/11, Washington cannot even argue that its homeland was attacked.

This battle must be fought by Muslims. Any coalition will be stronger the less American it looks. Countries in the region have more than enough power to destroy the Islamic State. Turkey has an army of 400,000. Iran has nearly as many in the army and paramilitaries. Iraq has a nominal army of nearly 200,000 and some 300,000 police. Saudi Arabia has nearly 200,000 army, national guard, and paramilitary personnel. Syria’s military, though degraded by war, numbers some 110,000 plus paramilitaries. Jordan has 74,000 in the army. The Kurdish Peshmerga numbers in the tens of thousands. All of these but Iraq and Kurdistan have some air force ground attack capabilities.

The nations with the greatest interest in opposing a self-proclaimed Islamic caliphate in the Middle East are those attacked or threatened with attack by the Islamic State. Even so, cooperation will not be easy. The Arab governments are divided by politics and religion—they typically view each other as more serious enemies than ISIL. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel acknowledged: “Each country has its own separate limitations, its own separate political dimensions.” Instead of attempting to dictate, Washington should rely on necessity, brought on by its refusal to intervene, to encourage otherwise antagonistic parties to accommodate each other.

Iraq must realize that sectarian misrule has drained effectiveness from both government and military. Dissatisfaction with Baghdad caused many Sunnis to back ISIL; breaking that link is key to defeating the Islamic State. Replacing Nouri al-Maliki as prime minister was a good first step, but his successor, Haider al-Abadi, must reach out—seriously and substantively—to Sunnis and Kurds. Even with support from Washington the new Iraqi government will have great difficulty putting the Iraqi Humpty Dumpty back together.

Many Sunnis feel betrayed after helping to defeat al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. In ongoing operations Baghdad's armed forces have been careless with civilians' lives. The central government's reliance on Shia militias, many guilty of atrocities, has exacerbated Sunni fears. A Tikrit University professor told the *New York Times*: "We're between two fires: I.S. and the militias."

Washington can encourage cooperation by making clear to the Iraqi government that the U.S. will not defend a regime which has squandered previous American support. Indeed, Washington has little reason to favor a united Iraq, and none whatsoever to back a united sectarian Shia Iraq. If Baghdad fails to reach necessary political compromises, the U.S. should deal independently with the Kurdistan Regional Government and Sunni leaders, and express its openness to separatist options. Washington should not push any particular result, but stand aside as Iraqis find their own way.

The Kurds are prepared to fight, but need better, more modern weapons. There's no reason that America must act as Kurdistan's armorer. In lieu of combat the Gulf States could purchase weapons for those willing to fight. Providing support would allow Turkey to forge a stronger relationship with, and enjoy greater leverage over, the KRG. Germany, too, has offered to assist.

In Syria the administration should set priorities. The Islamic State is far more dangerous than the Assad government. The apparent belief that a few extra guns will allow the weak moderate opposition to simultaneously defeat the government and Islamic State is a "fantasy," as the president earlier intoned. Moreover, many "moderates" are merely "caliphate lite," admit even State Department officials. The Free Syrian Army continues to cooperate with ISIL at times and "moderate" insurgents may have sold U.S. journalist Steven Sotloff to the Islamic State.

Worse, assistance to these groups will only further tie down the Syrian army, which could be fighting the Islamic State. So long as the administration is determined to oust the Assad regime, Damascus will have an incentive to target U.S.-supported groups rather than ISIL. The administration should exit the Syrian imbroglio and leave bombing Islamist forces in Syria to the Assad government.

Washington views Iran as an unfortunate complication, but Tehran will act irrespective of the administration's desires. Iran already is providing military aid to Iraq. The more public Iran's support the more likely Iraqi Sunnis will resist Baghdad, however. There should be discreet bilateral discussions about how to most effectively cooperate against the Islamic State.

The Gulf States should help care for refugees, arm friendly forces such as the Kurds, and challenge ISIL's theological premises. Saudi Arabia and its neighbors also should stop funding extremists like the Islamic State in Syria. These majority-Sunni countries should engage Iraq's government and Sunni minority, seeking to draw the latter away from ISIL. They also could contribute militarily, as did Qatar and United Arab Emirates with airstrikes in Libya.

Jordan and Turkey have competent militaries capable of hurting ISIL and aiding others on the Islamic State's target list. The proposal to fight the terrorists over there rather than at home rarely makes sense when applied to the U.S. Most of those "over there" never would show up "at home." However, the argument does apply to Jordan and Turkey. ISIL is right there and covets territory in both nations. Better to destroy the Islamic State now than wait for it to grow more threatening.

Especially important is Ankara, nominally a member of the "core coalition" against ISIL. But the Erdogan government rejected a U.S. request to use Incirlik Air Base for American operations. Ankara probably views the rejection as costless since Washington will find a way to carry out the attacks anyway—without implicating Turkey. With 49 Turks held captive in Mosul, Ankara worries about Islamic State retaliation. However, the Erdogan government should not allow the mass kidnapping to immobilize the region's greatest Arab power with so much at stake in the current conflict.

The administration should indicate that America will not solve a mess on Turkey's border. And Ankara will regret allowing the problem to grow. ISIL already has a large number of Turkish fighters and is recruiting inside Turkey. The Islamic State will appear more attractive as it expands. Moreover, Turkey's long-time adversary, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has risen to support Iraq's Kurds and may gain both weapons and recruits. Finally, Iraq will move closer to Iran if Baghdad has to rely on Tehran's assistance to battle ISIL.

While Egypt has not previously intervened in Iraqi or Syrian affairs, its brutal suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood and hostility toward Hamas demonstrates the military regime's concern with political Islam. The Sisi government could similarly contribute to the suppression of the Islamic State.

Military action by multiple nations would provide cover for Israel to stage covert attacks on Islamic State positions and personnel. Obviously Israel has much to lose—far more than America—from the creation of a genuine Islamic State nearby. Israel could informally backstop the Kurds and strike ISIL targets in Syria.

Finally, Washington should encourage the Europeans to offer weapons and training. Britain and France, in particular, have historic interests in the region. Their national line-drawing helped create many of today's geopolitical problems. And far more Europeans than Americans are joining ISIL's forces. There is no enthusiasm for war in Europe—so far both Britain and Germany have ruled out airstrikes. However, Berlin has indicated its willingness to help arm the Kurds. Other Europeans should join in.

The Islamic State deserves the worst. But contrary to the conventional wisdom, ISIL poses little threat to America. Defeating the group is not Washington's responsibility. And after debacles in Iraq and Libya, impending collapse in Afghanistan, and routine disaster in Yemen, why should anyone expect renewed American military intervention in the Middle East to lead to peace, liberty, prosperity, and stability?

Before his speech, President Obama told an interviewer, apparently without irony: "Keep in mind that this is something that we know how to do." But, alas, do badly. He is following his predecessors down the path to endless war in Mesopotamia. Again U.S. officials are inflating threats, discouraging allies, creating enemies, wasting resources, and entangling America. The outcome isn't likely to be any better than before.

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