

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## 5 Inconvenient Truths of the War on ISIS

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It is unfortunate that the bloody terrorist attacks in Paris have led to proposals that generate far more heat than light. The usual flock of hawks calls for massive bombing campaigns against ISIS-held areas in Syria and Iraq while lobbying for the United States to send combat units, not just training and special ops personnel, into both theaters. Yet most of those same individuals also seek to oust Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad from power, exclude Russia from the region and roll back Iran's growing influence. Their preferred strategy is an incoherent mess—and any reasonable debate about a response to ISIS must take into account some inconvenient truths.

### **Iran and its Shiite allies are crucial opponents of ISIS:**

Any campaign to undermine Iranian power automatically benefits ISIS. Some of the most tenacious and effective military opponents of that radical insurgency have been forces backed by Tehran. Those include Shiite militias in Iraq, Assad with his Syrian Alawite base and Hezbollah in Lebanon. That is not surprising. ISIS is first and foremost an extremist Sunni movement that generates most of its strength from predominantly Sunni regions in Iraq and Syria. Although ISIS fighters hate the Western powers, especially after the United States and its allies launched airstrikes against their caliphate, they harbor an even greater hatred for all Shiites, whom Sunni militants regard as evil heretics. An important component of the volatile conflicts in so many portions of the Middle East is a blood feud between Sunnis and Shiites. Hence, Iran and its allies are enemies of ISIS that are unlikely to relent. Instead of spurning their contribution, the West should recognize it as an important tactical benefit.

### **The major Sunni powers are unreliable allies against ISIS:**

The uncomfortable reality is that such countries as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey helped create the ISIS threat. Early on, wealthy contributors from the Gulf countries funded the factions that coalesced to become ISIS. Even when the horrifying nature of that movement became evident, the leading Sunni powers displayed ambivalence, at best, about opposing the insurgency. Ankara still seems more concerned about undermining burgeoning Kurdish power in northern Syria than with weakening ISIS. And Riyadh and its Gulf allies have been pulling back, rather than increasing, their belated military opposition to that movement. Once again, there appears to be an element of Sunni solidarity that has crept into their calculations. Although the United States and the other Western powers may experience some success in pressuring key Sunni countries to confront ISIS, those countries will never be more than reluctant partners in such an enterprise.

### **Russia will insist on being a player in the Middle East:**

It is utterly unrealistic to try to exclude Moscow from involvement in Middle East affairs. Although Syria lies barely 500 miles from Russia's southern border, most American opinion leaders seem outraged that Vladimir Putin has decided to intervene militarily or even become

involved diplomatically. Yet they consider it perfectly reasonable for the United States to intrude, even though Syria is 5,500 miles from the American homeland. Given the geographic proximity and the possible impact of Middle East instability on Russia's own Muslim populations, it is both arrogant and irrational for U.S. leaders to seek to force that country to remain on the sidelines and let Washington try to resolve the region's myriad problems. Moreover, Putin shows no willingness to abandon his intervention, and short of triggering an extremely dangerous crisis with a nuclear-armed power, the United States has no way of compelling him to do so.

### **The Kurds are a complicating factor:**

There is no question that Kurdish fighters in both Iraq and Syria have proven to be extremely capable adversaries of ISIS. Indeed, they have been at least as successful as the various pro-Iranian Shiite forces. But the Kurds have their own political agenda, and that agenda directly contradicts the official Western commitment to maintaining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria. It was a revealing development that the forces recently liberating the city of Sinjar all flew the Kurdish flag, while the Iraqi national flag was nowhere to be seen. The same display of Kurdish separatism was evident during the earlier victory of Syrian Kurdish forces in Kobani. The reality is that the Kurdish populations have no enthusiasm for or loyalty to the Iraqi and Syrian states. Despite sometimes significant internal bickering (especially among Syrian Kurds), their overarching goal is the creation of a Greater Kurdistan. That entity would encompass not only majority-Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria, but a major portion of southeastern Turkey as well. Intensified Western backing for Kurdish armed campaigns against ISIS, which may make sense from a tactical military standpoint, is certain to create severe tensions between the West and both the Iraqi and Turkish governments.

### **Western attacks on ISIS strengthen the narrative of Muslim victimization:**

Perhaps the worst aspect of an intensified Western military campaign against ISIS is that it plays into the narrative of a new Crusader invasion of Muslim lands. As much as Western audiences may see that as merely a self-serving myth, Muslim populations are likely to note that this is the latest in a series of Western (Christian) assaults on Islamic entities. Following on the heels of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, this new conflict is almost certain to heighten the belief that Islam is under a relentless infidel assault. Consequently, even if the United States and its allies ultimately crush ISIS (which is by no means certain), it will inevitably strengthen the sense of persecution and provide an ideal basis for recruiting a new generation of militant terrorists. It would be far better to have ISIS defeated by indigenous regional forces. That outcome might well fuel a new round of animosity on the part of Sunni Arabs toward both Kurds and Shiites, but at least Western societies would not be the primary targets.

As U.S. and other Western policymakers decide what to do about ISIS, they at least need to confront these underlying realities, as disagreeable as some of them might be. Inconvenient truths need to be accepted and incorporated to avoid policy calamities. Officials ignored such truths in both the Iraq and Libya military interventions, and we are now paying the price of having to deal with the chaos those blunders caused. It is imperative that we not make similar mistakes in developing a strategy regarding ISIS.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor at **The National Interest**, is the author of 10 books and more than 600 articles on international affairs. His latest book, coauthored with Malou Innocent, is **Perilous Partners: The Benefits and Pitfalls of America's Alliances with Authoritarian Regimes** (2015).*