

# Newsweek

## To Reduce ISIS Threat, U.S. Should Pull Out Of The Middle East

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Just four days after Salah Abdeslam, the mastermind of last fall's Paris attacks, was finally captured, the Islamic State group (ISIS) claimed responsibility for the attacks in Brussels. The attacks, which have killed more than 30 and wounded almost 200, provide another chilling reminder of how dangerous the world can be.

In and around official Washington, the script is becoming sadly predictable. Immediately following the news, administration officials assert their resolve and commitment to combatting terrorism: "Attacks like these only deepen shared resolve to defeat terrorism around the world."

Close on their heels, administration critics line up to fearmonger, launch cheap insults at President Barack Obama for not paying enough attention to the extremism and to talk tough about striking back at ISIS.

All the Republican candidates criticized Obama for staying in Cuba. Donald Trump took the opportunity to point out that he has long been in favor of closing up the border, while Ted Cruz called on the president to recognize that "radical Islam is at war with us" and for "empowering law enforcement to patrol and secure Muslim neighborhoods before they become radicalized."

Finally, both Europe and the United States are likely to ratchet up the war on the ground against ISIS. To date, this approach has borne decidedly mixed fruit. On the one hand, ISIS has certainly lost significant ground over the past year. On the other hand, very little of that success can be traced directly to U.S. or French military efforts.

Rather than go through the motions focused on short-term political gains, both Europe and the United States should pursue a long-term strategy. That strategy might take many forms but at heart a sound long-term approach needs three fundamental components.

First, a long-term strategy requires an enduring commitment to openness and tolerance. Both Europe and the United States benefit tremendously from immigration, both economically and socially, and from a vigorous marketplace of ideas sustained by diverse religious, racial and ethnic populations.

The costs of closing borders, polarizing society along ethnic and religious lines, and limiting civil liberties will far outweigh whatever benefits they might bring in the short run.

Second, a long-term strategy must emphasize a law enforcement approach to combatting terrorism rather than a military one. The notion that Europe and the United States can fight a “war” against terrorism is ridiculous. Terrorism is a tactic, not a disease or an organization. No amount of military adventurism will eliminate the ability of violent individuals to cause pain. Nor will destroying ISIS be enough to ensure some kind of victory.

The root causes of violence in France, Belgium and San Bernardino, California, stem from the sweeping unhappiness and anger within the Arab and Muslim worlds. Until those issues are settled, Europe’s and America’s entanglement in Middle East affairs will continue to spawn attacks in the West.

This is why destroying Al-Qaeda didn’t solve the problem but instead just produced the next incarnation of the threat. Simply put, killing more militants will not produce long-term security in Europe and the United States.

The third component is to pull back from the region. Our over-involvement in the Middle East has not only engendered anger among many Muslims in the region; it has also worked directly against our own security in other ways. ISIS, let us not forget, is an outgrowth of the Sunni insurgency that rose up to fight U.S. forces in our war of choice in Iraq (2003-2011). They are an unintended, albeit not unforeseeable, consequence of that wrong-headed war.

More bombs and boots now may have similarly counterproductive results down the line. In addition, our deep engagement in the region has resulted in a pernicious, long-standing relationship with Saudi Arabia, which is the foremost exporter of the radical Wahhabist ideology that drives Al-Qaeda, ISIS and other anti-American militant groups.

The strategic importance of the Middle East has been greatly exaggerated. And pulling back from the region, although it would not necessarily yield positive results in the immediate term, is likely to have hugely beneficial long-term effects as far as securing us from the minor but real threat of terrorism.

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