

Washington Refuses to Face Contradictions in ISIS Fight

By [Ted Galen Carpenter](#)

December 12, 2014

Obama administration officials clearly regard ISIS as a serious, perhaps even existential, security threat both to the Middle East and the democratic West. Accordingly, Washington has assembled a numerically impressive international coalition and assigned a high priority to defeating that extremist organization. But there is a disturbing, somewhat mystifying, aspect to the administration's strategy. U.S. leaders steadfastly refuse to acknowledge that there are major contradictions in Washington's various goals regarding the fight against ISIS.

Nowhere is that more evident than with respect to the ongoing civil war in Syria. The United States simultaneously seeks to defeat ISIS while continuing to undermine the government of Bashar al-Assad. Both goals might be achievable if there were legions of political moderates in Syria that had a reasonable chance of coming to power. But moderates—especially those committed to preserving Syria's territorial integrity—are relatively few in number, and many of those that do exist are not nearly as well organized, well armed, and motivated as their extremist rivals. Indeed, some of the groups that Washington previously regarded as moderate, including elements of the Free Syrian Army, turned out to be cozy with ISIS. That point became horrifying evident when an FSA faction apparently turned over American hostage Steven Sotloff to ISIS for \$50,000, leading to the grisly beheading of the unlucky journalist.

The reality is that U.S.-led airstrikes and other military measures designed to degrade ISIS automatically strengthen Assad's hold on power and benefit his regime. U.S. leaders refuse to face that disagreeable truth. But foreign policy frequently requires making a choice between bad options and worse ones. U.S. leaders need to ask themselves whether they would prefer to see Assad or ISIS prevail. The goal of seeing both defeated is merely an alluring fantasy.

Washington's refusal to face reality on that score is closely connected to another denial of reality. There are many parties who wish to see ISIS destroyed, but some of those potential allies make U.S. policymakers extremely uncomfortable. In addition to Assad, key enemies of ISIS include Iran's clerical regime, ruthless Shiite militias in Iraq, and Hezbollah in Lebanon and southwestern Syria. Clearly, those are not savory allies, from Washington's point of view. But they are effective fighters. In fact, some of the fiercest fighting has occurred between Hezbollah military units and ISIS—with the latter faring badly. Again, U.S. leaders need to ask themselves whether they can afford to snub effective anti-ISIS allies, even if they might be unsavory.

Finally, Obama administration officials need to face the prospect that relinquishing the goal of

preserving the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria may be a price that must be paid to defeat ISIS. One of the most appealing secular allies in Syria is the Kurdish population in the north and northeast of the country. But most Kurds are ambivalent, at best, about restoring a united Syrian state ruled from Damascus. Instead, many of them favor creating an autonomous region similar to the self-governing Kurdish region next door in Iraq. U.S. officials need to ask themselves whether there is any compelling reason from the standpoint of U.S. interests to insist that either Syria or Iraq remain intact within current boundaries. It is hard to find even a reasonable justification for such a demand, much less a compelling one.

Washington should be receptive to the emergence of far more decentralized political arrangements in both countries—or even to the emergence of successor states. The latter course might include a Sunni Arab entity in western Iraq and portions of Syria, and an independent Greater Kurdistan in majority Kurdish areas of the two countries. Entities established and boundary lines drawn by the foreign offices of the European colonial powers after World War I should not govern U.S. policy in the twenty-first century. If the decentralization, or even partition, of Syria and Iraq, becomes the price necessary to defeat ISIS, Washington should not obstruct that process.

Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a member of the editorial board at Mediterranean Quarterly, is the author of nine books and more than 600 articles and policy studies on international affairs.