



Uncertainty over Obama's ISIS strategy lingers after Paris attacks

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Three former Obama administration officials and a top Senate Democrat questioned the president's strategy for combating ISIS over the weekend, and polls suggest the American people share their concerns.

Michael Vickers, a former Special Forces and CIA officer who worked for the Defense Department during the Obama and George W. Bush administrations, wrote in Politico that "time is not on our side" in the fight.

"By any measure, our strategy in Iraq and Syria is not succeeding, or is not succeeding fast enough," Vickers, who was undersecretary of defense for intelligence from 2011 to 2015, said. "We are playing a long game, when a more rapid and disruptive strategy is required."

He recommended a plan that focuses on Syria over Iraq and replicates the level of force used by President Bush in Afghanistan after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. He noted that the U.S. conducted as many airstrikes in two months in Afghanistan as it has in 16 months against ISIS.

However, he cautioned against allying with Russian President Vladimir Putin and Syrian President Bashar Assad to win the war. Instead, he suggested supporting moderate Syrian opposition groups.

Two former defense secretaries who served under Obama said Sunday that they agree with Vickers to some degree about the lack of strategy and lack of resources devoted to the fight against ISIS.

Former Secretary Chuck Hagel said on CNN Sunday that "there are no easy, simple solutions" to the conflict.

"There is no military solution to this," Hagel said. "We are up against an ideology, we are up against a reality, a set of dynamics we've never seen before."

According to Hagel the U.S. needs a more clearly defined political strategy in Syria and the military strategy should be based on that, a point he made in a memo written shortly before he resigned in 2015.

"What's happening here is completely out of control, and there's no prospect for bringing any kind of stability, I think, on the path we're on now, and that was what I was talking about in the memo," Hagel said.

Leon Panetta, Obama's CIA director from 2009 to 2011 and secretary of defense from 2011 to 2013, said the president has identified the right mission in Syria, "to disrupt, dismantle and destroy ISIS."

"The resources applied to that mission, frankly, have not been sufficient," Panetta said on NBC's "Meet the Press" Sunday.

Panetta called for increasing the tempo of airstrikes, organizing Sunni and Kurdish ground forces, increasing the number of Special Forces and intelligence advisers on the ground, and potentially getting NATO involved in the military effort.

"Airstrikes alone are not going to win here," he said.

According to Panetta, though, it would be a mistake to trust Russia or Iran, or to pursue any strategy that leaves Assad in power in Syria. He said the U.S. needs to lead the effort against ISIS because nobody else will.

Obama's first secretary of defense, Robert Gates, was also critical of the president's handling of ISIS in a Fox News interview Friday.

"I think we can do more," Gates said. "I think that we actually can do more with the resources that we already have dedicated."

Sen. Dianne Feinstein, vice chair of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, argued on CBS's "Face the Nation" Sunday that the administration has the right general principles on Syria but is not doing enough to accomplish the goals of defeating ISIS and removing Assad.

"This has gone on too long now," she said. "And it has not gotten better. It's gotten worse."

Also appearing on "Face the Nation," Brett McGurk, special presidential envoy to the coalition against ISIS, said, "We're at war with ISIS, and it's a war that we're not going to relent until we destroy this barbaric terrorist organization."

McGurk emphasized the support from the global community, including Russia, and said the progress made so far may enable allied forces to push down on and isolate ISIS in Raqqa, the capital of its caliphate.

"We're going to pressure them and strangle them to their core," he said.

Current Secretary of State John Kerry defended the Obama administration's approach on NBC's "Today" Monday and urged the public not to panic over the threat of terrorism.

"I believe ISIS is going to be defeated," Kerry said. "ISIS is not 10 feet tall."

He highlighted the success of coalition efforts in taking back 25% of ISIS-controlled territory over the last year, but he did acknowledge that more work needs to be done.

"It has to be picked up, the pace has to be picked up," he said, "and more needs to be done, and everybody understands that."

Kerry was in Abu Dhabi Monday meeting with Arab allies about the violence in Syria and the threat posed by ISIS.

"There is a strategy in place growing by the day, and I have no doubt whatsoever that with the help of all the nations that are united against Daesh, they are going to be defeated, and we're going to do everything in our power to hasten that journey," Kerry said, using another name for the Islamic State.

During his daily press briefing, Press Secretary Josh Earnest told reporters the U.S. is "pulling more than our weight" in the coalition. "And we believe that there is more that can be done if countries are willing to contribute additional resources."

The Associated Press reported that Earnest, "said the U.S. may step up efforts supporting strategies believed to be working airstrikes and train-and-assist missions in Syria and Iraq but he played down the possibility of any surge of new American resources into the fight."

Speaking in Malaysia on Sunday, Obama himself pledged not to "relent."

Ending a trip to Asia, Obama implored Americans not to let the specter of terror cause them to compromise their values or change the way they live, The Associated Press reported.

"We do not succumb to fear," Obama stated.

"The most powerful tool we have to fight ISIL is to say that we're not afraid, to not elevate them, to somehow buy into their fantasy that they're doing something important," the Associated Press quoted the President saying.

Though a new CBS News poll indicates Americans have doubts about the administration's strategy.

The poll, which surveyed 1,205 adults across the U.S. between November 19th-22nd, found that only 23 percent of Americans think the President "has a clear plan for dealing with the militant group ISIS."

"Large majorities of Republicans and independents say the President doesn't have a clear plan, and almost half of Democrats (40 percent) agree. More Democrats (45 percent) say he doesn't have a plan than say he does," the poll's authors concluded.

This disapproval continues a trend CNN's Alexandra Jaffe described in February, writing that: "Americans are increasingly unhappy with President Barack Obama's handling of ISIS."

The questioning of Obama's handlings of ISIS by the general public is unsurprising, explained John Mueller, a political scientist at the CATO Institute and The Ohio State University.

"If the president doesn't seem to be doing a good job on a major issue it makes sense for people to question that," Mueller explained.

"They do it all the time," Muller added, explaining that it is a "perfectly reasonable" reaction to have because "people are always asked."

While he noted the international reaction to the Paris attacks is not nearly like what we saw in the wake of the September 11th attacks, Mueller described it as "massive."

"It's hard to think of another case," Mueller said, aside from the 2005 attacks Britain bombings that "have had a somewhat similar reaction."

Asked about French President Francois Hollande's call for other countries to join the assault on ISIS, Mueller said that while it's "fair to say it puts them on the spot," it may not make a major difference in strategy.

Other world leaders, Mueller said are "obviously devoted to do something about ISIS in Iraq and Syria."

While the French have rapidly increased the number of air assaults on ISIS held territories, Mueller explained we "have to get past the huffing and puffing first and see what settles down."

"It's too early to tell whether that's going to have an important impact."

Mueller cautioned against dramatic strategy shifts, arguing that "usually drastic measures taken in panic are bad ideas."

The President, Mueller explained has a plan to combat ISIS that he's "explained about four million times now."

While the Paris attacks may be leading to further questioning of Obama's strategy to counter ISIS, Mueller said the administration's policy has been "quite successful over the last year."

Mueller described the Obama administration's policy as an "appropriate," and "patient" one "that will gradually show progress," noting in particular "its very low cost in terms of American lives."

Though he conceded he has "some concerns here and there," Mueller argued that the basic policy "seems to be very good."

Mueller described recent successes in Iraq that left ISIS with less land and cut off the supply line between Mosul and Raqqa. However, he conceded the progress of the Obama administration's policy may not be as impressive to the average person as it is to him.

The CBS poll seemed to show that Americans are increasingly warming to strategy shifts. The poll found that 50 percent of Americans, "now favor sending U.S. ground troops to fight ISIS militants in Iraq and Syria, up four points from August."

The willingness to send troops was prominent among Republicans, with two-thirds of Republicans favoring the measure, "while about half of Democrats oppose that."

Regardless, CBS's polling concluded, "support for using ground troops has inched up among Americans across the political spectrum."

"Most Americans (63 percent) think ground troops will be necessary to remove the threat from ISIS militants; just one in five thinks the threat from ISIS can be removed using airstrikes alone."

But some experts continue to caution against jumping into war on the ground. Citing a Reuters/Ipsos poll in which 76 percent of American said they do not want U.S. ground forces sent to fight ISIS, Forbes' Loren Thompson wrote an article offering: "five arguments why sending more U.S. troops to Iraq or Syria would be a major mis-step."

Among the reasons offered by Thompson were providing easy targets, taking pressure off local forces, and the risk of becoming a force of occupation.

"The bottom line is that injecting U.S. ground forces into the fight against ISIS is an invitation to further military fiascos in the Middle East of the sort that Washington has experienced all too frequently in recent years," Thompson argued.

Mueller argued that changing strategy to send American or French soldiers to fight ISIS on the ground may just further fuel the terrorist group.

"Sending a lot of Americans or Frenchmen into the fray is likely to cede to the ISIS narrative," Mueller offered.

Even reacting so strongly to the Paris attacks could fuel ISIS, Mueller explained.

"By treating the [Paris attacks] so hysterically it may encourage ISIS to try to do more."

Describing the attacks as "absolutely horrible," Mueller added, "spending so much emotion on it is likely to encourage them. "To think of them as an existential threat exalts their ego."

"What they've got is, an empire that consists mostly of sand," Mueller described, noting that the whole world having such strong reactions, "over everything they do, that might compel them to do more of the same."

"Whether they're capable or not we'll have to see."