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Are We on the Right Path?"

America's Strategy Against ISIS Must Focus on Assisting the Iraqi Security Forces and Government

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"There is no military solution to the problem" has become a constant refrain in American strategic and policy discourse, particularly as it relates to the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS). The refrain is, of course, a truism. The problem of ISIS transcends its military threat and requires a solution that is not purely military. That solution MUST have a military component, however, for the simple reason that this is a war. Observing that war is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that engages diplomacy, politics, economics, society, and many other things is one thing. Arguing that one can be successful in war without the effective use of military force is quite another. It will take more than diplomacy to defeat ISIS; it will also take fighting. The questions are: Who will do the fighting? What do they need to succeed? What role should the U.S. play? How would effective military strategy fit into a larger all-of-government and coalition strategy?

Iraq has a government, a functioning (if battered) military and police force, and a population mobilizing under the control of various leaders (including some Iranians) to fight ISIS. It is neither necessary nor wise for the U.S. to send large numbers of combat forces into Iraq to do the fighting themselves, and no one is suggesting that. Sound American strategy in Iraq must surely focus on enabling and assisting the legitimate security forces of the legitimate government of Iraq to defeat ISIS and re-establish the sovereignty of the Iraqi state.

The current administration strategy is correctly oriented on this approach, and suggestions that the U.S. should abandon Baghdad and support an independent Kurdistan or Sunni Arab tribes in a way that might bring about an independent "Sunnistan" are misguided, for reasons I will explore momentarily. But the current strategy is not providing the kind and quantity of support required to succeed. It is not merely that it is under-resourced, although it is, but also that it misunderstands the nature of the assistance that the U.S. must give in order for Iraqis to succeed.

ISIS has developed into an extremely sophisticated and capable hybrid army, as the analysts at the Institute for the Study of War have articulated in detail.[1] It maneuvers mechanized formations in the field while simultaneously engaging in dispersed urban warfare, raids and ambushes, and straightforward terrorism. It has been conducting an assassination campaign against members of the Sunni Arab community whom it thinks might form the basis for a rebellion against it similar to the "Anbar Awakening" for many years. It operates both within the population and apart from the population, deriving popular support or tolerance partly from communal grievances and partly from the terror and oppression it imposes on the large mass of Sunni Arabs who do not agree with its worldview.

The Iraqi Government will have to address the grievances much better than it has done so far, as Chairman Dempsey and Secretary Carter, among others, recently testified.[2] But the Iraqi military, supported by the coalition, will have to defeat the army that ISIS now has in the field as well as the instruments of oppression it has deployed throughout the areas it controls. Those are military and security functions, and they require priority until they are completed. For there can be no hope of a political settlement or the resolution of grievances while the ISIS army is in the field and while those whose grievances must be redressed are under the terrorized thrall of this brutal foe.

The destruction of the mechanized forces of ISIS should be a relatively straightforward task for the U.S. military, which was designed, after all, to do precisely that against much more sophisticated enemies. It is difficult to understand why ISIS has been able to move formations of vehicles around a theater patrolled by coalition airpower, and that is a problem that should be rectified as quickly as possible.

The challenge of driving ISIS from within urban centers and the population is more complex, of course, as it always has been. But if the current strategy seems to be constraining the effectiveness of airpower against ISIS vehicles beyond the battle zone, it is excessively focused on providing only or primarily airpower to this more complicated fight. Airpower can certainly help a great deal in defeating ISIS fighters entrenched in cities. It was invaluable in2007-2009 in support of American, Iraqi, and coalition ground forces clearing entrenched al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) fighters out of dense urban as well as rural terrain. Making airpower effective in this situation will require relaxing constraints on the risk of civilian casualties—it simply is not possible to operate effectively in an urban fight without expecting to cause some collateral damage. It also requires expanding the footprint of U.S. military personnel on the ground who can serve as Forward Air Controllers (FACs). FACs would both make the application of airpower more effective and mitigate some of the risk of civilian casualties in urban areas.

But the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) need more than air support. Hollowed-out by years of politically-motivated purging under former Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki, stunned and shamed by the collapse of four divisions in the initial ISIS advance last year, battered by a year of brutal warfare since then, and buffeted by continued setbacks, the ISF needs partners on the ground. U.S. trainers must embed with Iraqi units, as Max Boot and many others have explained articulately.[3] They will have to fight with those units, since advisors who do not join their advisees in combat lose credibility and miss the opportunity to help when they are most needed. They should also be able to bring a fuller array of American asymmetric capabilities to bear, including artillery and helicopter aviation, that provides immediate and responsive fire support to Iraqi troops in combat and, in the case of artillery, continues to be effective even in bad weather.

American and coalition forces could bring other asymmetric capabilities to bear against ISIS if restrictions on force size, basing, and operating patterns were relaxed. Our special mission units (SMUs) can and should conduct frequent raids against ISIS leaders and staff positions in support of both offensive and defensive ISF operations. SMUs have demonstrated their ability to disrupt enemy operations repeatedly in both Afghanistan and Iraq at a very low cost in American lives. A more expansive American footprint would also allow U.S. forces to enhance ground-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, facilitating the gathering of the intelligence needed both to support SMU operations and also to avoid surprise. A larger number of American advisors embedded with Iraqi headquarters at all echelons could facilitate communications, planning, intelligence analysis, and many other supporting functions essential to the effective prosecution of war. I will not try to detail here the specific force requirements for this kind of operation except to note that the total overall force needed is likely in the vicinity of 20,000 U.S. troops.

There are three meaningful objections to such a deployment. First, that it may fail and may simply drag the U.S. deeper into a quagmire. Second, that it would put U.S. forces in the position of fighting alongside of and supporting Iranian troops and proxies. Third, paradoxically, that it would lead the Iranians to attack American forces in Iraq.

Any military undertaking runs the risk of failure, and the situation in Iraq is parlous enough to make that risk high for virtually any course of action. Were the president to deploy forces as suggested above with the missions and authorities described only to see them fail, he (or she) would face the same choice President Obama faces today: change the strategy and resources allocated to fight ISIS or accept the high

risk of a permanent ISIS state. Stephen Walt has recently argued precisely for accepting the existence of an ISIS state rather than engaging in a major escalation.[4] But his argument is based on a series of misrepresentations about the threat ISIS poses to the West (in addition to a tendency toward moral equivalency between this genocidal organization and, for example, the British).

If it were true that ISIS could mobilize and radicalize only a relatively small number of people and could not meaningfully dispatch them to the West in support of widespread terrorist attacks, then the morally-repugnant realist argument for containment might make some sense. But ISIS has mobilized many thousands of foreigners in a process that continues to accelerate. Growing numbers of them are returning to the states of the West not exclusively, as Walt hopefully suggests, having turned away from the excesses of ISIS, but rather, at least in some cases, with the hope of bringing jihad to us. The argument for containment misses the most fundamental problem, in fact, by ignoring the reality that containment in this case means constant vicious sectarian warfare. It is precisely that sectarian warfare that is helping to radicalize and mobilize elements of the Muslim population around the world. Allowing it to persist indefinitely would pose an unacceptable level of risk to Americans here at home.

It is very difficult to make a sensible, fact-based case for the feasibility of containment of an ISIS state. It is therefore difficult to sustain policy recommendations that accept the serious risk that ISIS will be able to sustain itself. It is conceivable that things might reach such a point that only a massive American direct intervention would be sufficient to prevent that from occurring, but we are by no means yet at that point. It behooves us to do everything we can to avoid getting to that point, in fact. From which it follows that providing much more robust support to the Iraqi forces now in the field is by far the best option we can now choose.

The mutually-contradictory arguments about Iran merit consideration. Empowering Iran to control Iraq would be disastrous both for the fight against ISIS and for U.S. interests broadly. The Iranian government repeatedly and explicitly describes the goal of its strategy as expelling the United States from the region entirely and establishing a Persian hegemony (Tehran speaks of its "leadership") in its place. That prospect should be enough to end any discussion about simply backing Iran in Iraq. If it is not, however, we must reflect on the role that Iran and its proxies have been and are playing in this struggle. Despite lofty pan-Islamist rhetoric, the Iranian regime is defined by a powerful Shi'a identity and overwhelmingly supports sectarian Shi'a groups throughout the region. Those groups, in turn, have played central roles in persuading Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria that they face an existential threat that could require them to turn to ISIS or any other group that promises to protect them. Iranian-supported and Iranian-controlled forces, in other words, are major drivers of ISIS support and recruitment. Backing them will make the problem worse rather than better.

The trouble is that Iranian forces and proxies are now spread throughout Iraq and integrated with many Iraqi forces fighting ISIS. Recent reporting that U.S. forces will be sharing the base at Taqaddum in Anbar Province highlights the challenge of providing American assistance to the ISF without simultaneously empowering Iran.[5] It may be that Iranian influence is now so pervasive that it cannot be reduced or checked, but that proposition has not been tested. It is suspect, in fact, given the continued resentment Iraqi leaders privately express about Iranian control and the reality that Arab Iraqis are just not that open to domination by Persians.

But the U.S. has not offered enough assistance to Iraq to make it a reasonable calculation for Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi to send the Iranians packing. The additional support suggested above should come with a demand—Iraqi units can have one set of advisors at a time. If they want the real asymmetric capabilities that American forces could bring if they were allowed to, then they have to send the Iranians away from those units. There is reason to believe that the Iraqis will make that choice if we put enough assistance on the table. Considering the downside risks of allowing the current situation to develop as it has been, it is well worth the attempt.

It is true that Iranian proxies could attack U.S. forces in Iraq (or elsewhere in the region) if Tehran chose to oppose an escalation of U.S. activity in Iraq in that way. And Iran's leaders might do so. They are observing the redeployment of American troops to Iraq with concern and are escalating their rhetoric about American support to ISIS (yes, they believe that) and America's intention to establish a permanent imperial base in Iraq from which to threaten Iran.[6] This hostile rhetoric is noteworthy as it comes in the context of the nuclear negotiations and of U.S. hints and suggestions that the White House sees Iran as a potential partner in Iraq.

The real question here, however, is simple: Is the U.S. prepared to give Ayatollah Khamenei veto power over our activities in the region? As long as there are any Americans in the Middle East, the Iranians have the ability to attack them. Yielding to the principle that such a risk means that the U.S. must never take action that might provoke Tehran will make the U.S. a de facto partner in its own expulsion from the region and the establishment of an Iranian hegemony. It does not follow, of course, that the U.S. should go out of its way to provoke Iran, since American interests are not served by a war with Iran in Iraq. But supporting the Iraqi military in defeating ISIS—another stated objective of Tehran—should not be enough to trigger an Iranian-sponsored attack on U.S. personnel. If it is, then the state of U.S.-Iranian relations is far worse than we have been led to believe and the idea of meaningful negotiations with such an implacable enemy is bizarre.

Some increasingly argue that the U.S. should abandon Baghdad and the decrepit Iraqi Security Forces largely or entirely and instead focus on helping the Kurds and/or the Sunni tribes directly. These ideas are superficially appealing. The Kurds are steadfast and determined enemies of ISIS and have been effective in holding it at bay and even pushing it back in some areas. The Sunni tribes, on the other hand, rose up against ISIS once in its previous incarnation as AQI, and one could hope that they would do so again.

The idea of victory through Kurdistan is problematic for at least two reasons, however. The first is geographical and strategic—Kurdistan is close to Mosul and ISIS-controlled areas of Ninewah, Kirkuk, and Diyala Provinces, but it is far from Anbar, Salahaddin, Baghdad, and Babil. Kurdish forces, suitably reinforced, might conceivably clear ISIS from regions along the Kurdish region's immediate borders, but could not clear it from its deep safe-havens nor drive it from the mixed-sectarian areas in which it seeks to thrive. And Kurdish leaders would never try to do so.

The second problem with the Kurdish solution is ethnic. Tensions between Arabs and Kurds all along the ethnic seam are running high. ISIS deliberately stokes those tensions, but the consolidation of Kurdish control over Kirkuk and other disputed areas causes many Sunni Arabs to fear that Kurdistan will ultimately engulf most of Mosul, much of Ninewah, Kirkuk, and parts of Diyala that they view as Arab. There is ample historical precedent to assess that these fears will lead to ethnic violence—indeed, there

are some worrying indicators that they already are doing so. Arming the Kurds and facilitating Kurdish expansion into Arab areas in the name of chasing out ISIS is thus very likely to cause an ethnic war to explode against the background of the ongoing sectarian war.

Relying primarily on the Sunni tribes is problematic for different reasons. To begin with, as we have noted, ISIS is on to that trick. The terrorists have been selectively destroying all those they think could lead such an uprising. They may not have cowed the population or prevented other anti-ISIS leaders from emerging, but they have badly disrupted the social mechanisms that made the Anbar Awakening possible. Nor are the tribes currently organized into effective fighting forces, as they would have to be to take on the hybrid army that ISIS now fields. It will take a lot longer to train hordes of tribesmen—if they became suddenly available—to the necessary level of combat capability than it would take to train, advise, and assist the ISF while encouraging Sunni enrollment into that force.

Any such efforts, moreover, would deeply undermine the prospects for a political resolution to this crisis. Trying to work with Baghdad, the Sunni tribes, and the Kurds to reconcile their differences and address grievances within the context of an Iraqi state will certainly be difficult, even if an appropriate military solution to the military problem is found. Trying to facilitate a peaceful agreement between an independent Kurdistan, a newly-forming independent Sunnistan, and a rump Shiastan will be orders of magnitude more difficult.

There is no agreement between Kurds and Arabs about where the border between them should be, and their conflicting claims make any such agreement highly unlikely. It has been difficult enough to manage this problem within the context of a unified Iraq, which makes the issue of borders considerably less significant than it would be if there were to be two independent states. The history of efforts to mediate such disputes peacefully is not encouraging moreover—one need only consider the collapse of the Yugoslav state in the 1990s. Negotiating the emergence of an independent Kurdish state will also involve enormously complicated regional diplomacy, and could well alienate Turkey, a critical (if difficult and equivocal) partner in the struggle against ISIS in Syria.

The prospect of an independent Sunnistan is even more fraught. The Sunni Arab regions in Iraq, unlike the Kurds, have never had a notion of an independent Sunni Arab state. No one has seriously thought through what the boundaries of such a state would look like. Trying to help establish Sunnistan while also supporting Kurdish independence would immediately put the struggle for borders in Ninewah Province front and center, and would certainly distract from any efforts to fight ISIS. But Iraq's Sunnis are not remotely as cohesive as its Kurds. It is highly unlikely that there would emerge a single Sunnistan, or even a single Sunni federal region within Iraq. We are much more likely to see multiple Sunni Arab mini-states try to emerge, fighting each other, the Shia, and the Kurds for power, resources, and boundaries.

And, of course, we face the additional problem that ISIS currently controls most of Sunni Arab Iraq, while the Sunni tribes even with the support of the ISF and the coalition have been unable to retake it. The notion that the tribes alone, without the ISF, and while fighting amongst themselves and with their neighbors for political supremacy, could expel ISIS is implausible.

If Iraqis choose over time to partition their state peacefully either within a federal paradigm or into independent states, the U.S. need not oppose them. But it is fully as wrong, imperialistic, and counter-productive to force the Iraqis to partition as it would be to occupy and govern Iraq ourselves.

Supporting the current Iraqi Security Forces with serious military assistance across the full spectrum of the asymmetric capabilities that the U.S. can provide is by far the least unattractive of the options facing us in the fight against ISIS in Iraq. The risks are high, and the costs may be high. But the alternative is accepting a major strategic defeat that will significantly increase the risk to the U.S. and European homelands, as well as fueling continued regional war.

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[2] General Dempsey, "Testimony on US policy towards Iraq and Syria and the Threat Posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant," *US Senate Committee on Armed Services*, September 16, 2014, http://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/14-66%20-%209-16-14.pdf and Secretary of Defense Ash Carter, "Statement on U.S. Policy and Strategy in the Middle East before the House Armed Services Committee," *U.S. Department of Defense*, June 17, 2015, http://www.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1949

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[5] David Alexander, "U.S. troops at Taqaddum to help Iraqis plan fight for Ramadi," *Reuters*, June 12, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/12/us-mideast-crisis-usa-taqaddum-idUSKBN0OS1DI20150612

[6] "Didar nokhost vazir iraq ba rahbar enqelab" [Iraqi prime minister's visit with the leader of the revolution], Preservation and Publication Office of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, June 17, 2015, http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=29974.