# VI. Notes from the Editor

## Op-Ed: Competing Perspectives on Countering ISIS

### by Hashim Al-Ribaki

Even though the existing counter-ISIS strategy has achieved some recent successes, such as the liberation of Anbar province, scholars have suggested several counter-ISIS strategies. They could be classified into three categories: containment, political reconciliation, and an offensive military campaign. It is not possible to discuss in detail all the suggested strategies here, but I will discuss each category from the view of one scholar who represents that school of thought (while recognizing thatall scholars whose policy arguments fall within a particular category do not share identical views).

1. *Containment:* Stephen Walt has suggested a containment strategy based on "local actors… with the United States staying far in the background."[1] According to him, this strategy should prevent the expansion of ISIS, encourage better integration of Muslims in Europe, have a minimal role for the US, and promote improved governance throughout the Middle East.[2] Therefore, from this perspective America should adopt a "hands-off approach" in their counter-ISIS strategy. However, while this strategy offers some crucial long-term objectives, it does not constitute an effective strategy to counter ISIS. The ISIS leadership incorporates former members of Saddam's regime. These members were able to pursue their policies for 24 years without being "normalized" despite international pressure, economic crises, and demolished legitimacy after two costly wars against Iran and Kuwait. Further, due to their lack of domestic capabilities, anti-ISIS groups would rely on regional powers that have conflicting interests, exacerbating the situation even further.

2. *Political Reconciliation:* Lina Khatib has emphasized political reconciliation as the best strategy for dealing with ISIS. She suggests adopting comprehensive measures to win the trust of the local Sunni populations, and most importantly to reach political reconciliation in both Iraq and Syria.[3] But political reconciliation seems an unrealistic goal. Concerning Syria, one crucial obstacle is the absence of representatives for moderate Sunnis who are potentially capable of implementing any comprehensive deal that may be reached on behalf of Sunnis with the Assad regime. Furthermore, Assad does not show a willingness to make any meaningful concessions that could attract the Sunni community. Talking about political reconciliation in Iraq only serves ISIS rhetoric, which stresses the perceived marginalization of Sunnis, whereas Sunnis are currently represented in the Iraqi government and have an important role in the fight against ISIS.

3. *Offensive Military Campaign:* Kim Kagan, Fred Kagan, and Jessica Lewis have suggested an offensive military campaign as the best strategy to destroy ISIS. Their strategy is based on "challenging the ISIS military campaign plan" because political efforts "are necessary but not sufficient conditions."[4] The literature on terrorism supports this strategy, where there are four methods by which terrorist groups end: victory, political settlement, policing, and military campaign.[5] Political settlement is not a workable option with ISIS, and ISIS would never achieve victory because of its broad goals. Given the limitation of police access to the territories under ISIS control, policing is not effective enough to destroy ISIS. Furthermore, Seth Jones and Martin Libicki have emphasized the effectiveness of offensive military actions in destroying powerful terrorist groups.[6] This strategy in principle would be the optimal way to destroy ISIS, especially at the time of its rise. ISIS is self-financed because it controls oil-rich territories. Thus, ousting them from these territories would lead to their financial breakdown, limiting their ability to launch massive attacks or run their organization. It also would falsify its slogan "lasting and expanding", undermining its cause in the eyes of its supporters by

indicating that it is no longer able to achieve their political objectives. Deployment of troops would be seen as legitimate because of the lack of domestic capabilities and ISIS's sweeping advances (in contrast to the current situation, where any deployment would be understood as too late and done for expanding U.S. interests). Such perceptions may radicalize some moderate groups, replicating the chaotic dynamics that followed the invasion of Iraq. Therefore, a lack of domestic capabilities combined with President Obama's commitment not to deploy combat troops made this strategy unlikely, and the current advances make it ineffective.

These strategies should not be viewed as dichotomies. By most assessments, ISIS can only be defeated militarily. Afterwards, a comprehensive political reconciliation can work on preventing the rise of new terrorist groups and achieving containment's long-terms objectives. However, a continuation of the existing strategy, with significant tactical changes, seems more foreseeable and effective, to include defeating ISIS militarily by building domestic capabilities. Since the Syrian situation is so chaotic, adopting a strategy that centers its operation in Iraq would be influential. The U.S. should intensify training and equipping the Iraqi armed forces until they become capable of securing territories, protecting civilians, and launching offensive campaigns against terrorist groups, while also facilitating a defensive role for popular mobilization forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga. These efforts should be accompanied by offensive airstrikes that target ISIS leadership and their war capabilities.

Sunni fighters should be trained and equipped on a larger scale to enable them to defend their cities after their liberation. Those fighters should be recruited from tribes known for their aversion to ISIS, in order to make sure that they will never sympathize with any jihadist extremist groups. Also, the U.S should recognize the importance of popular mobilization forces. Pressuring the Iraqi government to distance itself from them is not a wise decision, given their decisive role in the fight against ISIS. The U.S should not increase the offensive capabilities of Kurds and Sunnis, because having greater capabilities would pose a real threat to Iraq's sovereign integrity by motivating these groups to refuse the prospect of any strong central government and preferring a partitioned Iraq. Concerning Syria, the battle for Aleppo following the announcement of a "cessation of hostilities" highlights some of the shortcoming of this initial step, but no one can deny that levels of violence have been reduced with the Assad regime being more focused on targeting ISIS.[7] Therefore, it is necessary to intensify efforts to remove ISIS and pursue a diplomatic path that pressures all the warring parties to adopt a democratic solution that protects minorities' rights as well as avoiding the partitioning of Syria, which might destabilize the region further, since the majority of countries here already suffer from deep societal divisions.

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### Notes

[1] Stephen M. Walt, "ISIS as Revolutionary State", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94, Issue 6, November 2015.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Lina Khatib, "The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding", Carnegie Middle East Center, June 29, 2015. Accessed on April 1, 2016: http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/29/islamic-state-s-strategy-lasting-and-expanding/ib5x

[4] Kimberly Kagan, Frederick W. Kagan, and Jessica D. Lewis, "A Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State", Institute for the Study of War, September 2014. Accessed on April 1, 2016: http://www.understandingwar.org/report/strategy-defeat-islamic-state.

[5] Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, "How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons For Countering Al-Qaida", Rand Corporation, 2008. Accessed on April 1, 2016: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG741-1.pdf

[6] Ibid.

[7] Genevieve Casagrande, "Russian Airstrikes in Syria: February 29–March 15, 2016", Institute for the Study of War, March 17, 2016. Accessed on April 1, 2016: http://understandingwar.org/map/russian-airstrikes-syria-february-29-march-15-2016