

The U.S.-led campaign against the Islamic State: many questions, few answers

By Yossi Alpher

■ Executive summary

The U.S. commitment to “ultimately destroy” the Islamic State implies an extended military commitment in a highly complex Middle East environment. By looking at the strategic issues that emerge from this dynamic, we can hope better to understand impending developments.

These issues centre on the motive behind the U.S. decision to enter the conflict; the U.S. relationship with its European and regional partners and, by contrast, with other major actors in the region like Iran, Syria, Turkey and Egypt; the options for the Islamic State’s response; and issues of U.S. strategy and grand strategy regarding the Islamic world.

The U.S. has succeeded in creating a military coalition with European and Arab partners to combat the Islamic State (IS, also known as ISIS, ISIL and Daish). This coalition has started bombing extensively in Iraq and Syria. It is attacking al-Qaeda-related and IS targets, with U.S. forces heavily engaged in the air and many coalition partners engaged on a more limited basis in combat or in supplying logistics and training to Iraqi and Syrian opposition forces. The U.S. is apparently directly or indirectly sharing intelligence and operational planning with non-coalition members Iran, Syria and Hizbullah.

President Obama’s declared objective as enunciated on September 10th 2014 is to “degrade and ultimately destroy” IS. Achieving this goal is projected by U.S. spokespersons to take years. IS has responded by expanding its attacks and opening new fronts in Syrian Kurdistan, Lebanon and reportedly in Iran.

This is an extremely complex situation in terms of the multiplicity of actors and the complex web of loyalties and alliances involved. It is far too early to assess the outcome. But as we follow the course of this dramatic new dynamic, we can at least seek to define the key strategic issues that will be the focus of the months ahead. To do so this expert analysis uses an intelligence assessment technique, addressing the issues in the form of questions that point to the relevant areas of inquiry.

The U.S. decision to act and the initial strategic approach

How should we understand the choice of IS as the target of a U.S. military “return” to the region? At a superficial level it appears to be the outcome of U.S. public outrage over two videoed executions of U.S. citizens. In view of domestic criticism of President Obama and impending mid-term elections, it may also in some way reflect U.S. domestic political considerations. But why is the target IS and not, say, the murderous Assad regime or Boko Haram? Any assessment of the strength of the U.S. commitment to act against IS should be based on a better understanding of the motive for its intervention.

What will happen as, almost inevitably, it emerges that air attacks alone will not destroy IS? President Obama already confronts counsel from his own generals and former senior officials concerning the need for “boots on the ground”. If the U.S. fails in its effort to quickly train more than 10,000 Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian opposition forces to do the job – a likely contingency – Obama might feel obliged to take the unpopular (among his domestic constituency) step of risking public ire over returning body bags, not to mention beheadings of captured military personnel. Alternatively, he would have to settle for a prolonged war of attrition with IS with no boots on the ground and no clear outcome.

Two additional preliminary areas of inquiry that arise ask whether anticipated and already threatened IS-sponsored terrorist attacks against U.S. and other coalition civilian targets would deter or, alternatively, energise the U.S. public regarding this campaign, and whether and to what limited extent Washington's European and Arab allies would contribute to the deployment of a ground force.

As usual, a common European response is elusive. The presence in IS ranks of hundreds or even thousands of European jihadis, the growing numbers of Middle East asylum seekers trying to reach Europe – some dying in transit – and Europe's geopolitical interests in the Middle East all present major challenges. Will Europeans elaborate their own strategy or follow Washington's lead? Will NATO become involved, as it did so controversially in Libya?

Then, too, there is the issue of U.S.-implemented and -supervised training of anti-IS forces in Iraq and Syria: recent failures of similar endeavours in Iraq and Afghanistan cast doubt on the likelihood of success of such a strategy.

The U.S. and its regional partners

The Obama administration is seemingly committed to a strategy of maintaining the unity of Iraq, even at the cost of cooperating militarily with Iran. It is also evidently cooperating tacitly with the Assad regime in Syria and with Hizbullah in Lebanon, thereby inevitably generating profound mistrust in Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem – mistrust that will be exacerbated if U.S.-Iran cooperation is perceived to soften the U.S. position regarding Iran's nuclear programme.

The Saudis and emirates, on the other hand, seem to be participating in the U.S.-led coalition half-heartedly: their publics are broadly sympathetic to IS, they seek the downfall of the Assad regime in Syria and they dislike the Shia-led government in Baghdad.

Were any or all of these alliances and partnerships to fail, to prove counter-productive or to emerge as hopelessly contradictory, would Washington at some point consider enabling Iraqi fragmentation and the emergence of three far more coherent (albeit with problematic ethno-religious dividing lines) federal or even independent entities: Kurdistan, Sunni Iraq and Shia Iraq? Or is it adamantly committed to the Sykes-Picot status quo? A course of "updating" Levant/Iraq state boundaries has been advocated by people like Vice-President Biden, but also hinted at by Israel, Saudi Arabia and the emirates, who fear Iranian aggrandisement as a consequence of a U.S. attempt to maintain Shia-majority rule over Iraq's minority Sunnis and Kurds.

Some observers see the relatively light presence in the coalition of five Arab partners and several European partners – clearly the U.S. is doing the heavy lifting – as a

U.S. coalition-building success; others perceive it as a failure. Only time will tell whether this coalition reflects genuine international and regional solidarity with Washington and concern that IS could threaten all – or, rather, a loss of – the kind of international and regional credibility required for Washington to persuade others to commit their armed forces and risk Islamist retaliation, as it did successfully in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The U.S. and the rest of the region

Iran, Russia and Syria seemingly present an alternative anti-IS coalition. New modes of U.S. interaction with each of them are likely to emerge from this campaign and affect broader regional and international issues. For example, a U.S. deal with Syria's Assad (and, by extension, abandonment of the Syrian non-Islamist opposition) could conceivably emerge as the only way to defeat IS. Or a perceived need for operational coordination with Iran might be understood by Israel and Saudi Arabia to have softened U.S. policy regarding Iran's nuclear programme in the run-up to the November 24th negotiating deadline. At some point, if the total elimination of IS appears to be impossible, U.S. planners might consider political strategies for containment or a regional balance of power (involving, for example, Iran-Turkey-IS or Iran-Saudi Arabia-Turkey) as alternatives.

Turkey in particular presents the U.S. with a geostrategic challenge. It has lengthy borders with Iraq and Syria and a moderate Islamist government that has until recently been ambivalent about opposing IS. It fears lest the emergence of an independent Kurdistan – particularly in Syria, but conceivably in Iraq as well – should galvanise the Turkish Kurdish population and complicate Ankara's efforts to rationalise their status. Since its cooperation appears to be key to U.S. and coalition success, the U.S. needs to recruit Turkey's active participation in the anti-IS alliance beyond Turkish self-defence gestures like creating a no-man's land or no-fly safe zone on the Syrian side of the border.

Egypt is a more willing partner in terms of anti-Islamist orientation. But U.S. disapproval of the removal from power of a democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood president and subsequent human rights abuses on the part of the new regime introduced tensions to the relationship. Besides, Egypt is busy suppressing militant Islamists in Sinai and Libya and quarantining Hamas in Gaza. If the U.S. tries to bring Cairo into meaningful participation in the anti-IS coalition, it will presumably have to pay a diplomatic or strategic price in order to placate President al-Sissi.

The Obama administration may now feel obliged to renew its effort to bring about an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution – perhaps in a process that features some sort of symbolic Arab state participation – in order to "balance" its military campaign against Sunni Arabs and maintain stability on the Palestinian front. More probably, we might

expect benign neglect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in view of the U.S. commitments elsewhere and as a possible quid pro quo for Israel avoiding any provocative involvement in the war against IS or aggressive protest against a nuclear deal with Iran. Prime Minister Netanyahu also appears to be exploiting his anti-Islamist ties with moderate Sunni Arab states toward the goal of freezing the two-state process with the Palestinians. The entire issue could be particularly relevant if IS invades Jordanian territory and Washington wants at all costs to deter Israel from entering the fray.

Options for the Islamic State

Presumably, U.S. planners have heard the warnings from some Sunni Arab quarters that a campaign against IS – a movement that currently enjoys varying degrees of popularity and sympathy among a variety of Sunni Arabs – could paradoxically strengthen IS and spawn the emergence of additional militant Islamist groups in the region. How, then, do the planners address the possibility that, as in Iraq after 2003, the U.S. military campaign would make regional matters worse, not better? Are they prepared for a Sunni Arab backlash when Arab civilian casualties begin to pile up as a consequence of coalition air attacks?

On the other hand, conceivably the IS leadership's calculations will change under coalition military pressure. IS might seek to compromise, perhaps invoking Islamist contacts in Riyadh and Doha. Or it might at some point seek to reduce rather than expand the number of fronts it has opened in the region, or to temper its hitherto barbaric treatment of "heretics". It might have to confront the contingency that, like other violent Islamist non-state actors such as Hizbullah and Hamas, its war goal has to be little more than "winning by not losing". If it chooses to adopt a more modest and moderate pose, it could seek to merge with, say, al-Qaeda/Jabhat al-Nusra. Alternatively, it could fragment, with its ex-Baathist, Naqshabandi, and other Sunni Iraqi non-Islamist components organisationally and geographically distancing themselves from the real extremists. This and similar developments might also reveal weaknesses in IS's capacity to manage the vast regions it has conquered.

U.S. strategy and grand strategy

How does the anti-IS campaign figure into broader strategic thinking among U.S. defence and strategic planners with regard to the overall dynamic of tribalism, Islamism and fragmentation that is playing out in the Levant, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Libya and elsewhere in the greater Middle East? On September 10th Obama compared the IS threat to that posed by terrorists in Yemen and Somalia – seemingly a poor analogy insofar as terrorism and insurrections in these countries have not been subdued and the drone attack strategy seems to have created greater radicalisation among the local population, as in Pakistan. Indeed, Yemen is rapidly becoming a secondary

theatre of conflict between (Iranian-backed Houthi) Shias and (Saudi-backed) Sunnis over potential control of the strategically vital Bab al-Mandeb Straits. In Iraq, Syria, Somalia and Yemen the U.S. invites accusations by sensitive Arab and Muslim circles of essentially inserting itself into Islamic civil wars.

On September 28th Obama stated:

We cannot do this for them, because it's not just a military problem, it is a political problem And if we make the mistake of simply sending U.S. troops back in, we can maintain peace for a while. But unless there is a change in not just Iraq, but countries like Syria and some of the other countries in the region, think about what political accommodation means [and] think about what tolerance means.

This implies an immense nation-building and political/civil society reform programme extending over years – an undertaking the president has not really addressed. It also implies regional agreements (see above) that no single external actor seems capable of arranging.

Obama has already acknowledged "misjudging" the rise of IS, "not having a strategy" to deal with it and "overestimating" Iraq's capacity to fight it. Credible press reports indicate that intelligence warnings were played down because the White House was busy with other priorities. The president's reluctance to support robust non-extremist opposition to Bashar al-Assad a year or two ago is now cited by his detractors as a major factor in creating the current situation. This broaches the prospect that Obama's allies will now challenge his strategic judgement.

How does the U.S.-IS conflict figure into the broader and seemingly growing conflict between the West and militant Islam? Ostensibly, we should anticipate a coherent and comprehensive new U.S. Middle East stabilisation initiative for state- and democracy-building, counter-terrorism, and refugee rehabilitation. It must take into account the extent to which the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have aroused Muslim antagonism toward the U.S. and confront the question of how the West can successfully integrate the growing presence in its midst of what is increasingly an indigenous Islam. And it must presumably send the message that a prolonged campaign against IS will not constrain a potential U.S. response to strategic challenges elsewhere, such as in Ukraine or the South China Sea.

In the absence of such an initiative, this U.S. military operation will presumably be seen as an aberration, a relatively brief departure from the dynamic of U.S. disengagement from the Middle East that seemingly reflected the Obama administration's policy priorities until now. In this regard, the success or failure of this military campaign could corner Europeans into confronting whether they have independent policies toward the Middle East or are merely

following Washington's lead with varying degrees of enthusiasm and reluctance.

One way or another, the U.S. and its allies need an exit strategy: a formulation of criteria concerning the degree of "degrading" and "destroying" to be attained and the minimum degree of moderate governance and political stability to be left in place in the deserts of Iraq and Syria. ■

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