

Position Paper

Trends in the International Community's War on IS

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Allies with varying capabilities unite in the war against the "Islamic State" [Reuters]

Abstract

A combination of several factors has driven the United States to launch military operations against the Islamic State (IS) organisation. Perhaps the most important of these are the imminent danger to Erbil and Baghdad, the worsening humanitarian situation, Iran's strategic role regarding the military position of the governments in both Baghdad and Erbil, and the pressure on the Obama administration exercised by the Washington political community. IS' beheading of American hostages in response to the initial American intervention has reinforced the US military response option. However, there is political uncertainty and considerable suspicion regarding the overall goals of the war, impacting Muslim public opinion in Syria, Iraq and neighbouring countries, including Saudi Arabia. On the one hand, it is difficult to undertake wide-ranging aerial bombardment (as is currently occurring in Syria and Iraq) without making deadly mistakes against civilians, and even military allies. On the other hand, scepticism is fuelled by the lack of clarity regarding America's objectives, and whether this war is only against IS and whether it includes other organizations that Washington labels as radical, such as the al-Nusra Front and the Ahrar al-Sham Movement. This ambiguity about the war's objectives, together with the persistence of the Syrian regime and its probable entrenchment as a result of the war, makes regional participation in the war more difficult, despite US promises to train and help what the Americans call "moderate" Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters.

Introduction

According to the New York Times (international edition, 21 September 2014), President Obama held a number of meetings with political figures from outside his administration to discuss the steps his administration would take against the sudden and massive

expansion of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. The last of these meetings was on 10 September, just hours before the US declared war on IS. Obama told columnists from major American newspapers he had advised members of the US administration they would have to ignore the external pressures generated by IS' murders of American journalists. Obama, despite enormous pressure on the Washington administration, wanted to respond to the developments in Iraq and Syria in calm and considered fashion in order to avoid embroiling the US in a similar fiasco that occurred when the George W. Bush administration undertook its "war on terrorism" in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Two days before this meeting with the media, Obama invited ten foreign policy experts and former officials to a lengthy dinner meeting, which was also attended by Vice President Joseph Biden, Secretary of State John Kerry, and Secretary of the National Security Council Susan Rice. While Obama acknowledged that former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other senior American politicians have criticised his administration's reluctance to provide early assistance to the Syrian revolution, he also expressed doubts about whether such assistance would stop the rise of IS. In response to the criticism, Obama cited how the hasty deployment of American troops to Lebanon by the Reagan administration in 1982 had resulted in a humiliating US withdrawal after its troops were subjected to a suicide attack from Iran and Syria supporters.

The detailed report in the New York Times underlines the development of Obama's strategy: the American president initially resisted direct intervention in Iraq and Syria, but appears to have been compelled to do so upon realising the enormous threat posed by the massive expansion of IS. However, his strategy would be pointedly and entirely different from that pursued by the Bush administration after the events of 11 September 2001. Thus, two glaring questions arise: Why has Obama decided to embark on a new war in the Middle East? What is his strategy and what are the risks inherent in this strategy?

From US withdrawal in the Middle East to war

The developments that created the climate for foreign intervention began on 10 June 2014, when the sudden collapse of the Iraqi army in the provinces of Nineveh (Mosul) and Salah al-Din (Tikrit) allowed the Islamic State and its allied groups to seize control of the cities of Mosul and Tikrit. Because entire Iraqi military divisions fled from their camps and locations, the Islamic State fighters not only dramatically expanded their geographic territory, but also acquired large quantities of heavy weapons and military equipment. Initially, it was estimated that the Naqshbandi soldiers who are loyal to former Iraqi Vice President Izzat al-Duri, along with Sunni tribal revolutionaries, former Iraqi army officers and Iraqi resistance organisations, had played a major role in the attacks on Mosul and Tikrit, and that they would be partners in controlling the two cities.

Within a few days, it became clear that IS was the major force in the attacks, and that it was close to achieving complete control of the two cities.

It was also evident that increasing numbers of tribal members had joined forces with the organisation of the Islamic State (IS), considered to be more extreme than al-Qaeda. Soon, the armed groups led by Islamic State fighters had extended their control to other towns in the provinces of Salah al-Din and Tameem (Kirkuk), in addition to their control over a wide area of Anbar province. Thereafter, they attempted to seize control of the northern sector of the Diyala province and the northern entrance of the Iraqi capital city of Baghdad. The ongoing military and security vacuum within Iraq has led the Peshmerga forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government to expand beyond the borders of that region, both in the disputed city of Kirkuk, and in areas of Nineveh and Diyala provinces. This ultimately prompted IS to clash with the Peshmerga for several days, and due to the rapid decline of the Peshmerga forces, Erbil, the capital of the Kurdish region, is threatened.

By the end of July, after IS announced its transformation into the Islamic State and declared Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as the Muslim Caliph, northern Iraq began to witness a wave of migration and a large influx of refugees due to IS violence against the Christian, Yazidi, Shia and Kurd populations in areas under its control. It is not easy to ascertain the truth about rumours regarding IS kidnapping Yazidi women, but the shocking record of the organisation in dealing with its opponents was sufficient for the world to take the stories of kidnapping and abuse seriously. These events, together with the blockade imposed by Islamic State forces on Mount Sinjar, and the strategic threat of IS expansion in the Kurdish region and in Baghdad, were the primary motives for the American bombing of IS sites, particularly Mount Sinjar, which is on the borders of the Kurdistan region.

The Obama administration did not immediately declare war on IS. It was not clear at the end of the first week of August, when the first American aircraft made the initial raids on the north of Iraq, whether Obama was ready for a long-term military commitment to defend Baghdad and Erbil's governments. What was evident was that the imminent danger to Erbil and Baghdad, the worsening humanitarian situation, Iran's military support to the governments in Baghdad and Erbil, and the political pressure on the Obama administration, were the main motives driving limited American intervention at that time. However, instead of calming fears about its expanding influence, IS responded to the initial American intervention by beheading American hostages. The pressure on Obama to present a convincing strategy to deal with IS literally doubled, and led to his statement on 10 September, which included an effective declaration of war on IS in Iraq and Syria as well.

Obama's strategy: victory by remote control

The Obama administration's strategy is based on intervening against IS on multiple levels:

1. **Utilising Iraq's urgent need for American support to press for a change in Baghdad's balance of power.** American pressure has already succeeded in deposing the former prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, and in building a broad consensus for his successor, Haider al-Abadi. This consensus is based on considerations between Abadi and the Sunni Arab bloc, and other considerations with the Kurdish bloc. It is clear that Washington's main goals were to prevent the Kurds from holding a referendum on self-determination, and to persuade Sunni Arabs to become part of the authority in Iraq. The Americans believe that it is possible to ultimately push the Baghdad government to form a local National Guard in the Sunni-majority provinces, which would be controlled by local administrations so as to protect these provinces and to participate in the war against IS. But understandings between Baghdad and the Kurds have remained incomplete, particularly regarding the disputed areas. Thus far, despite several conciliatory measures, Sunni Arab confidence in the Abadi government does not appear to have significantly increased. It is too soon to gauge whether Abadi has the strength and legitimacy to respond to the grievances and demands of the Sunni Arabs, or indeed whether he had originally intended to do so.
2. **Forming a broad coalition of Western and non-Western nations, especially Arab countries, which are sometimes called the "Sunni countries", such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.** Saudi Arabia hosted an international meeting in Jeddah on 11 September, while France organised a similar meeting in Paris on 14 September. In spite of these efforts that induced a significant number of countries to participate in the war against IS in various ways, Saudi Arabia's attempts to exclude Iran led senior Iranian politicians, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, to denounce both meetings as well as the International Alliance against IS and its objectives. However, this does not mean that Washington and its Western allies do not want Iran's participation.
3. **This alliance aims to wage war in a significantly different manner from the US approach to the first and second Gulf Wars (under the administrations of George Bush and George W. Bush respectively).** Apart from sending American military experts to Baghdad and Erbil to assist in rebuilding the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga, and perhaps to participate in directing operations, Obama has ruled out sending ground troops to the battlefield during the remainder of his term. The Obama administration plans to

conduct an aerial bombing campaign that may continue for months or years, with the visible participation of willing Gulf Arab states. This campaign aims to drain IS and destroy its control and command centres, troops and equipment deployment points, and decimate its financial resources such as oil wells and refineries, in addition to providing air support to Kurdish and Iraqi forces in their operations against IS, and in their effort to recapture IS-held areas. While a number of US allies believe that the Iraqi government's request for international assistance provides legal grounds for U.S intervention in Iraq and not in Syria, Washington considers shelling IS positions in Syria to be legal as well, because the Syrian government is weak and has no sovereignty over large parts of the country, and because of the threat posed to Iraq by IS presence in Syria.

4. **Setting up camps in the vicinity of Syria to train and prepare several thousand Syrian rebels to contribute to the war against IS within the Syrian territories.** This is in addition to providing additional military assistance to Syrian rebel groups that are described to be moderate and are already fighting IS.
5. **Individual country efforts to prevent ideological and financial support to IS.** In parallel with the military aerial effort and the efforts to rebuild and rehabilitate the Iraqi forces and the Peshmerga, it is expected that countries throughout the world who wish to prevent more volunteers from joining and supporting IS, will stop the movement of funds to it, and contribute to the media and intellectual war against it.
6. **The Obama administration believes that the combination of these efforts can ultimately produce a significant decline in the military and financial capacity of IS.** This will stop IS advances in Syria and Iraq and allow for Iraqi and Kurdish forces and Syrian rebel groups to retrieve IS-controlled areas.

Strategic Dilemmas

There are many holes in the American strategy at both the military and the political levels:

Turkey's role

At the political level, the Obama administration claims the coalition against IS includes more than a hundred countries so far; however, though both policy and geographical considerations necessitate a strong Turkish role in this alliance, Ankara has thus far been reluctant to take a frontline role despite its alarm over the group's expansion. Attempting to crystallise Turkey's position, on 26 September, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that his country wants the coalition countries to agree to establish a buffer zone in Syria along the Turkish border, and a no-fly zone to prevent

the Syrian Air Force from flying over part of the country, in addition to training and arming the FSA. These demands are related to Ankara's conviction that the original problem is Syria rather than Iraq, and that Turkey alone cannot bear the burden of a million and a half Syrian, Kurdish and Yazidi refugees.

Iranian involvement

Although the major Western countries responded to Saudi Arabia's desire not to invite Iran to the meetings in Jeddah and Paris, the US and most European countries favour Iranian participation in the war against IS. Since the Iranians support the Syrian regime, this contradicts the Turkish and Saudi calls to direct the war towards the overthrow of the Syrian regime. It also collides with the failure of the latest round of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear dossier, to reach an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 group. Indeed, the French Foreign Minister, Laurent Fabius, said at the end of this round (26 September), the talks did not make any significant progress.

Unclear war objectives

The other political problem relates to the war's true goals and whether it is against the Islamic State only, or whether it also includes organisations that Washington deems radical, such as the al-Nusra Front and the Ahrar al-Sham movement. During the first weeks of bombing, evidence emerged which showed the breadth of scope of the targeted Syrian organisations, such as the bombing of an entity that the Americans called "the Khorasan Group". When this group was targeted, it turned out that in fact it was a site that belongs to the al-Nusra Front in the Aleppo countryside. The lack of clarity with respect to the objectives of the war, especially against the Assad regime, also makes it difficult for the Syrian rebel brigades to accept and participate in the war against the Islamic State (IS), despite American promises to train and help what they term the "moderate FSA".

Complex Iraqi politics

The Iraqi political situation is no less complicated. The progress achieved by excluding al-Maliki and the formation of a national coalition government may not advance much further, especially in light of the conflicting interests of the various parties in the government. Though everyone recognises the need to encourage Sunni Arabs to move against IS, there are no signs that the people of Anbar, Mosul and Tikrit have given up ties with IS. There is no doubt that tolerating IS in these areas reflects the population's hatred of and loss of confidence in central government forces, rather than any loyalty to or intrinsic identification with IS. What is certain is that the gap between the Sunni majority populated provinces and the Baghdad government, which is controlled by the

Shias, is still quite wide. In addition, the continuing and relentless violations of sectarian Shiite militias against the Sunni population do not help much in building confidence among the Sunnis.

Other strategic factors

The key factor is that most political doubts are related to the overall goal of the war and its impact on Muslim public opinion in Syria, Iraq and neighbouring countries, including Saudi Arabia. On the one hand, it is difficult to undertake wide-ranging aerial bombardment such as that which is occurring in Syria and Iraq today, without making deadly mistakes against civilians, and even military allies. This is what actually took place in rural areas of Idlib and Aleppo, when the coalition raids killed dozens of civilians, and what happened south of Tikrit, when other strikes killed dozens of Iraqi soldiers. Within weeks, Syrian demonstrations against the war were launched and hit several cities on 26 September. These demonstrations may escalate to include large sections of the Muslim Arab population who are sceptical about the true objectives of this war, especially in view of Arab and Western silence on the actions of Shia militias in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. Although the Obama administration was keen to involve planes from Arab and Islamic Sunni countries in the war, such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to refute accusations that the US is waging a new war on Islam and Muslims, this policy may end up causing significant damage to the participating countries themselves.

Finally, whether or not Turkey and Saudi Arabia are able to persuade Washington to make more serious efforts to help the Syrian opposition against the regime, the legality of the coalition bombing targets in Syria will not be without controversy in international forums. This issue will undoubtedly be highlighted if countries such as Russia feel that the war against IS is going to negatively impact the Syrian regime, or if it indirectly contributes to weakening Assad's administration.

Militarily, the Americans and their Western allies repeat that the air attack alone will not defeat and eradicate IS, noting that the war may continue for years. The cumulative effects of a long-running war in an area of critical concern are not guaranteed. There is clear amplification of IS power by Western politicians and Western media, which appears to have been designed as part of the war itself, necessary for mobilising public opinion in the United States and Europe. It is clear that while the American president does not want to engage his country's troops on the ground, he certainly wants to achieve concrete results before the end of his term in 2017, and this requires the participation of Western or non-Western troops in the war. Notwithstanding Western exaggerations in estimating the power and military capacity of IS, after weeks of shelling, it does not seem that the influence of IS in Iraq has declined except in a very limited manner. Meanwhile IS forces are making steady progress in north-eastern Syria. There is also no

evidence that the Kurdish Peshmerga and Baghdad military forces are capable, in the foreseeable future, of retaking cities like Tikrit and Mosul without ground military support. IS' defeat in Syrian cities such as ar-Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor appears even more difficult.

Consequently, Washington and its allies, sooner or later, will inevitably become involved in the fighting on the ground and undertake land-based military action. At that point, new calculations concerning the uncertainties and the political and military risks of this war will be made.

Future calculations

Obama came to power through many promises to put an end to America's wars in the East, and to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan. Over the past six years, he has attempted to steer clear of direct involvement in the multiple and successive crises in this region. Now, the American president finds it impossible to continue this policy of crisis avoidance, despite being inhibited by concerns emanating from the huge costs (financially and otherwise) of his predecessor's incursions into Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama wanted his administration to take sufficient time to prepare a thorough strategy to eliminate IS, but the strategy announced by the President, which is currently underway, appears to be riddled with gaps and surrounded by countless question marks.

No one in Washington knows when this war will end, nor can they articulate criteria to judge its success or failure, or the extent to which it can continue. It is difficult to envision the future fate of Iraq and Syria, the main theatre of operations, after the war; thus, there is a lack of clarity on how to respond to the demands and concerns of the various parties in both countries and in the region as a whole. Although the Obama administration believes it has succeeded in engaging a number of Arab Sunni countries in the coalition, to provide justification for the war, it is not clear whether these states have convinced their peoples that IS poses a significant threat that requires participation in the war, nor is it certain what role these countries will play in the event the coalition extends its operations to a ground war.

In the final analysis, the Islamic State's rise and its rapid expansion represents an important facet of the deterioration of the eastern national state. The eastern national regime has reached the end of its road nearly one hundred years after its creation at the hands of the Western Imperialist powers. This raises a final question: How can a cross-border force control large swathes of two states that have always been considered the hearts of the regional system without a reassessment of the entire regional regime?