The United States vs. the Islamic State

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Paradoxically, the United States finds itself in the conflict against the Islamic State partly because of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, which destroyed the country's military and state infrastructure and enabled the subsequent territorial consolidation of the Islamic State in the resulting vacuum. The war in Iraq and its consequences, combined with the US failure in Afghanistan, highlight the dilemma posed by the new conflict with the Islamic State, namely, should the US continue to maintain a presence in the Middle East, and if so, for what purpose and at what level. On the one hand, the United States has experienced a series of failures in its attempt to design regimes in the region, shape policy, and defeat opponents with military force. On the other hand, it has experienced the limitations that arise from avoiding military force – including ground combat – and from relying on international and regional organizations to achieve policy goals. The dilemma has become all the clearer ever since Russia assumed the freedom in Syria that the US hitherto claimed for itself, and began using force primarily in order to support its ally, Assad, the formal ruler of Syria, rather than fight the Islamic State. This situation, in which Russia, the US, the military forces of neighboring countries such as Jordan and Turkey, and Hezbollah forces from Lebanon have been conducting ground operations in Syria for quite some time, is analogous to that of Spain in the 1930s, when it served as a midpoint on the road to a larger conflagration. From the US perspective, these factors complicate any efforts to devise a policy on Syria that will yield positive results.

President Obama gave the definitive framework for the US political and military operation against the Islamic State in an address to the nation on December 6, 2015. Key messages included: "Our military will continue to

hunt down terrorist plotters in any country where it is necessary"; "in Iraq and Syria, airstrikes are taking out ISIL leaders, heavy weapons, oil tankers, infrastructure"; "we will continue to provide training in equipment to tens of thousands of Iraqi and Syrian forces fighting ISIL on the ground so that we take away their safe havens"; "in both countries, we're deploying Special Operations Forces who can accelerate that offensive"; and "we're working with friends and allies to stop ISIL's operations – to disrupt plots, cut off their financing, and prevent them from recruiting more fighters….We're working with Turkey to seal its border with Syria."[1]

At this stage, dealing with the internal problems created by the Islamic State is relatively simple for the United States; coping with the consequences of the Islamic State's success in the Middle East, however, is more problematic. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have made the US decidedly reluctant to intervene in situations leading to ambiguous political achievements, and even if the Islamic State were totally defeated, it is not clear whether any political entity – Syrian or Iraqi – acceptable to the US administration would be able to take control of the evacuated territory. The profound objection to sending ground forces into combat is a result of past failures, or as the President said, "We should not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq and Syria…and it won't require us sending a new generation of Americans overseas to fight and die for another decade on foreign soil."[2] Aerial operations, however effective, are of limited value without troops on the ground. The Islamic State's activity in built up areas reduces US willingness to engage in aerial attacks, as these are liable to increase the number of civilian casualties. Furthermore, aerial warfare does not impede the Islamic State from expanding its influence gradually in other countries of the Middle East, such as Jordan.

Fighting against the Islamic State

In order to fight the Islamic State without any significant ground operations, the United States has created two campaign frameworks. The first is local, comprising armed residents of Iraq and Syria. The second is international, which includes over sixty countries and various organizations that have joined a military coalition designed to defeat the forces of the Islamic State.

In the local framework, the United States has included various allies whom it can support with training, exercises, and a supply of military equipment. Initially, it chose the Free Syrian Army – a large opposition group founded

by Syrian army deserters during the Arab Spring uprising – to represent Syria. This group was included in the United States' Syria Train and Equip Program, which was widely criticized because though designed to train 3,500 local Syrian combatants, by late 2015, a few months after the program was established, only 54 of them had completed the course. Kurdish organizations in Syria have likewise received training through the program.[3]

Participants in the Syria Train and Equip Program were assigned three objectives: to protect the Syrian people against attacks by the Islamic State and guard the territory controlled by the Syrian opposition; to defend the training forces of the United States army, its allies, and the Syrian people against terrorist threats in Syria; and to promote conditions for a negotiated settlement that would end the conflict in Syria.[4] By October 2015, once it became clear that the program had failed to achieve its goals, it was terminated. The Obama administration decided that all the bases used to train opposition organizations in Syria would be closed and replaced by one small base in Turkey, which would train only commanders of opposition organizations. At the time this article was written, the details of the new American policy had not yet been made clear.[5]

Events in Iraq have developed differently, but the situation framework is similar to that in Syria. The groups supported by the United States include the security forces of the Iraqi government, which unlike the Syrian regime, is Washington's ally. At the same time, US support also reaches groups similar to those that are cooperating with it in Syria: the Kurdish Peshmerga militia and clusters of volunteers from among Sunni tribes who support the Iraqi security forces in their war against the Islamic State. The program for the Iraqi forces includes a supply of American weapons and training on how to use them, and is conducted by a team of 3,100 American soldiers who are scheduled to prepare 23 Iraqi battalions for duty.[6]

Along with establishing the local combat framework, President Obama initiated the Coalition to Degrade and Defeat ISIL, which he announced on September 10, 2014 while announcing American military involvement in the war against the Islamic State. To date, over 60 countries and various organizations have joined this coalition, including Canada, Australia, the Arab League, Germany, and other European Union states. Some countries – including the United States, Canada, Australia, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, France, Jordan – are actively taking part in air attacks against the Islamic State; others are contributing to the war effort by training local

forces, supplying equipment and ammunition, and providing economic aid. The five goals of the coalition are to provide military support for local coalition partners; to strike at the flow of foreign combatants arriving in Iraq and Syria; to halt the Islamic State's sources of financing; to deal with the humanitarian crises in the region; and to expose the true nature of the Islamic State and damage its propaganda capabilities.[7] Differences among the coalition members exist based on their respective approaches to the political and operational levels of the two arenas – Syria and Iraq. Turkey, for example, takes a different approach toward the Kurds in northern Iraq, and accepts their de facto autonomy there, while using nearly all available means to prevent the emergence of a similar identity among the Kurds of northern Syria. By contrast, France is operating in Iraq but avoiding military intervention in Syria.

A list of prior conditions posed by the US for groups seeking to join the Train and Equip Program in Syria, now defunct, has recently been revealed. One of these conditions was that the rebels were to use military force solely against Islamic State targets, and refrain from attacking the forces of Assad or his allies.[8] The list reflects the dilemmas faced by President Obama in deciding which enemies to target among the many forces fighting in Iraq and Syria, since it is clear that any attack on one leads to the immediate strengthening of another. A similar problem arose with the addition of the latest member of the coalition, Turkey.[9] The United States has paid a price for Turkey's membership and aid to the coalition forces, which have included the use of Turkish air force bases as departure points for the coalition's aerial attacks against the Islamic State. The Turks have taken advantage of this agreement to attack Kurdish forces that have been fighting its regime for years, but who at the same time have been loyal allies of the US in its war against the Islamic State.[10]

In 2015, ongoing fighting against the Islamic State in Syria generated another problem: friction between the United States and Russia. In an effort to retain its two related footholds in Syria – the Assad regime and a military base on the Mediterranean coast – Russia stationed additional units on Syrian soil and, as of the writing of this article, used airborne and ballistic missiles. The United States will have to deal with this political signal and its operative consequences. Having grown accustomed to the Russian military presence in Syria over the years, the US will presumably attempt to detect the potential for antagonism and reinforce the informal pattern that has hitherto

prevailed so that its activity in Syria will not jeopardize Russian interests. Possible friction generated by Israeli and Russian aerial activity in Syria is ostensibly not of direct concern to the US, but the administration cannot afford to ignore the consequences of such. At this stage, Israeli-Russian coordination has helped reduce the risk.

Another question on the agenda with no clear cut solution is the effect of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the major powers, and relations between Tehran and Washington. In the foreseeable future, the United States will most likely seek to limit the visibility of any possible cooperation between the two countries on both fronts – Syria and Iraq. The 2016 US presidential campaign requires that there be extra caution regarding attempts to achieve understandings and arrangements.

The Islamic State Threat in the Internal American Theater

The Islamic State has long extended beyond the borders of Syria and Iraq. Its effective use of mass media, especially social networks, has helped it spread its message and pose a genuine threat to its enemies, even those distant from Syria and Iraq. This has led to two phenomena that may well threaten the internal security of the United States.

The first pertains to the foreign volunteers who are joining the ranks of the Islamic State. These constitute a threat as they may return to their countries of origin after acquiring experience in battle and undergoing Salafi jihad indoctrination. At this stage, however, the threat is perceived as extremely marginal, as the number of American foreign fighters who have thus far tried to join the Islamic State stands at approximately 200 – an extremely low figure compared to the number of volunteers from other Western countries. Furthermore, only a small number of them have actually succeeded in enlisting in Islamic State ranks. The return of the few who did manage to join the conflict is also expected to be difficult – even impossible – given the intense scrutiny of US intelligence services.[11]

The second threat consists of attacks carried out by individual terrorists, in most cases unaffiliated with any established organizational structure – "lone wolf terrorism." Such individuals have not managed to join the Islamic State itself, and are thus choosing an alternative course of action, namely, local attacks in their country of origin. FBI head of counterterrorism Michael Steinbach discussed the possibility of a terrorist attack inside the United States by a "lone wolf" influenced by Islamic State doctrine. He noted that

the threat is significant and concrete, as tens of thousands of American citizens have been exposed to Islamic State propaganda and are thus liable to engage in such actions. Indeed, Islamic State spokesmen have declared that 71 separate terrorist cells exist in 15 US states – a figure that is a source of concern to US security services.[12]

A number of facts support the suspicion that the internal terrorist threat is greater than that of returning foreign combatants. Until now, at least three terrorist attacks have been conducted within the borders of the United States by perpetrators who identified with or were directly guided by the Islamic State. One took place in Tennessee in July 2015, where a naturalized American Muslim citizen shot and killed five US marines.[13] Another occurred in Texas in May 2015, when two Muslims fired shots at a building where a contest on caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad was underway. The two gunmen were killed, and one person was moderately wounded.[14] The third occurred in San Bernardino on Decmber 2, 2015, when a married couple killed 14 people in a mass shooting attack at a holiday party at the Inland Regional Center. Further evidence of the Islamic State's attempts to penetrate the United States emerged the following month, when the FBI arrested some ten people suspected of belonging to the Islamic State and planning to carry out a terrorist attack against various targets in the United States on July 4, 2015.[15] Both the US administration and FBI sources have repeatedly declared that the supreme objective in dealing with the spread of the Islamic State inside the United States is countering its influence among its potential target population.

Although the Islamic State does not constitute a threat to US sovereignty within its own borders, the US does play an essential role in affecting the Islamic State's success and survival in the war in Iraq and Syria. According to statements made by the State Department in August 2015, the total number of Islamic State targets hit during aerial attacks by the US-led coalition was 10,684.[16] For the sake of comparison, the number of attacks carried out by NATO forces against various targets in Libya in 2011 was estimated at 1,500.[17] Nonetheless, senior American officials have reportedly admitted that the Islamic State has managed to replenish its ranks, so that its current number of combatants is now equal to what it was at the beginning of the campaign despite the fact that over 10,000 of its fighters have been killed in these bombings.[18]

Conclusion

United States success against the Islamic State has thus far been limited. Although a significant number – approximately 10,000 – of Islamic State fighters have been killed, and some of the territory it has conquered has been seized by the various forces fighting against it, the Islamic State continues to recruit volunteers and control resources and a great deal of money. Turkey's participation in the attacks against the Islamic State, and its provision of an airport on its territory for use by American planes has improved the international coalition's military capability and eased the situation of the land forces fighting the Islamic State, but to date no substantial change has taken place in the balance of power between the sides. In the end, an increase in military aid to local forces and an acceleration of the process of training ground troops cannot compensate for the inherent weaknesses of the ethnic-religious-demographic divisions in either Iraq or Syria. Even if America sends in ground troops, it cannot insure a military victory over the Islamic State that will be followed by an acceptable political compromise among the various local forces, their willingness to cooperate within a single state framework, and the end of involvement by other countries in the region, such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, all of which are meddling in Iraq and Syria.

In the absence of a concrete threat on its soil, and due to the military constraints it has imposed on itself, the United States will have to choose from among three alternatives: (1) dispatching a significant force of American ground troops into combat; (2) stationing US soldiers along the front in order to bolster the effectiveness of its air strikes and the performance of local fighting forces; and (3) increasing its aid to local forces, even if these are not cooperating with each other and the chances of having them cooperate politically in the long term are limited. One possible blueprint lies in strengthening the fighting forces of Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, though this is tantamount to ignoring other considerations, i.e., sacrificing them at the altar in hope of defeating the Islamic State.

An assessment of American action thus far indicates that no dramatic change in its policy is expected from the Obama administration. The 2016 budget for equipment and training submitted to Congress is modest – less than $1.5 billion; as far as is known, no change in the nature of military involvement against the Islamic State is under consideration. On the other hand, a number of Republican candidates in the presidential campaign have

announced that if elected, they would inject enough force into the campaign to achieve military victory. The current Russian military buildup in Syria, and the possibility that Russia will succeed not only in maintaining the Assad regime, but also in repelling the Islamic State, if only partially, and thus enhance its own status in the Middle East, may highlight the cogency of the Republican argument that President Obama's hesitant policy in the entire Syrian theater has damaged the image of the United States as a deterrent power.

The balance of local and regional forces operating against the Islamic State has created a situation in which there is no way out of the labyrinth and – from the administration's perspective – no ideal solution. Each of the parties involved accepts the existing situation and is unwilling to fathom any drastic change and its possible consequences. Will a change of administration and ideology in Washington break through this magic circle? Time – and the American voter – will tell.

Notes

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