December 19, 2014

Evaluation of the American Campaign against ISIS and Its Chances of Success[1]

"Our objective is clear: We will degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy."

President Barack Obama delivers an address to the nation on the U.S. Counterterrorism strategy to combat ISIL, in the Cross Hall of the White House, Sept. 10, 2014. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

President Barack Obama outlining the American strategy in his speech (Whitehouse.gov, September 10, 2014)

The American campaign against ISIS: implications and chances of success

1. President Obama has set the US the **clear, but in ITIC assessment pretentious, goal of destroying ISIS with a comprehensive campaign of several years.** By setting the final goal as the destruction of ISIS, he has created **high expectations** for his and the next administration. Their ability to meet the expectations is of great importance. That is because the campaign extends beyond the narrow perspective of the war on terrorism, and its outcome will affect **the America's status the Middle East and around the globe for years to come. Thus not only is President Obama's foreign policy being tested, but the image of American regional and international power also faces a significant challenge.**

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[1] This bulletin was taken from Section Eight of the October 26, 2014 ITIC study, "ISIS: Portrait of a Jihadi Terrorist Organization," http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20733

2.   One question is whether the United States will succeed in the campaign against ISIS and realize the strategic goals set forth by President Obama. In ITIC assessment **it will be very difficult for America to achieve all the goals it set for itself, for the following reasons:**

A.   **The political assumptions and goals, both declared and undeclared, which are at the root of the campaign against ISIS seem to be unrealistic:**

1) The intention to establish a **central democratic regime in Iraq**, which will impose its control over the whole country, failed even during the years the US maintained a large military force in Iraq. **The current goal is even more unrealistic**, after the US has withdrawn its troops from Iraq and the country is divided into its religious-sectarian components.[2]

2) **As for Syria,** it is impossible to rely on the so-called moderate rebel organizations to eradicate ISIS. That is because those organizations are fragmented, their military capabilities are limited and they lack effective leadership. Even if American aid strengthens the Western-oriented rebel groups to the point where they may be able to stand up to their enemies more successfully, it is still unlikely that they will be able to overcome the Assad regime and ISIS and other jihadi organizations.

B.   **The difficulty of uprooting an organization with a Salafist-jihadi ideology like ISIS:** ISIS is not just an isolated terrorist organization whose influence is confined to a single territorial area. It is an organization with a radical Islamic ideology supported by Sunni population groups and drawing its strength from the disintegration of the social and governmental systems in Iraq, Syria and the Middle East as a whole. In Afghanistan and Pakistan the United States also failed to uproot the global jihad, although it did manage to weaken Al-Qaeda after it had invested considerable resources and a prolonged military

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[2] US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel pointed out in his speech that "Iraq's continued political progress toward a more inclusive and representative government - and its progress of reform and reconciliation - will be critical. We believe that Iraq's new Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, is committed to bringing all Iraqis together against ISIL […]" (website of the Armed Forces Committee of the US Senate, September 16, 2014). In practice, however, the establishment of the Haider al-Abadi government (September 8, 2014) in place of the Nouri al-Maliki government did not increase the legitimacy of the Iraqi regime among the Sunnis.

presence (which is now coming to an end).[3] Foreign fighters also join ISIS because of the political and social distress in the Arab-Muslim world and in Muslim communities in the West, and therefore it is not enough to streamline counterterrorist measures and strengthen international cooperation.

C. **The limitations of military force in fighting against terrorist organizations:** Aerial attacks against an organization such as ISIS, which has a well-formulated ideological worldview and enjoys the support of Sunni population groups, cannot lead to its elimination. In the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge, Israel learned the limits of military power in fighting Hezbollah and Hamas. Both are radical Islamist terrorist organizations, one Shi'ite and the other Sunni, which are firmly rooted within the local populations. Moreover, in ITIC assessment even the massive military involvement of American troops in Iraq and Syria (currently not on the agenda) **would not lead to the elimination of ISIS and the establishment of stable regimes** (during its stay in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American army learned first hand the limits of military force in imposing law and order and establishing an effective central government in societies divided both politically and socially).

D. **The basic weakness of the local power centers that the United States relies on:**

> 1) **The Iraqi Army**, in whose establishment the US has invested considerable resources and power, remains unmotivated and does not enjoy legitimacy among Sunni Muslims. The Iraqi Army may prove effective in protecting Baghdad and Shi'ite population centers, but not in occupying and controlling the Sunni areas where ISIS is based. It is doubtful whether additional American investments of money, military equipment and advisors to strengthen the Iraqi Army would change this basic situation.

> 2) **The Kurdish Peshmerga forces** may prove effective in protecting the Kurdish autonomous region, and possibly also in limited offensive

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[3] On May 2, 2011, American forces carried out a targeted killing of Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. In retrospect, it can be stated that killing bin Laden weakened Al-Qaeda but did not eradicate the global jihad organizations. Al-Qaeda's center in Afghanistan/Pakistan was indeed weakened, but in Iraq and Syria a new and more dangerous center was established. Approximately six months after bin Laden was killed, the ISI sent jihad operatives to Syria, where they established the Al-Nusra Front and initiated a process that subsequently created ISIS and helped change the balance of power in both Syria and Iraq.

operations. On the other hand, their effectiveness and motivation will be far lower in operations in Sunni and Shi'ite areas.

3) **The Iranian-supported Shi'ite militias in Iraq** may prove effective in protecting Baghdad and Shi'ite population centers. However, military aid to those militias will not provide them with offensive capabilities allowing them to occupy the Sunni areas that ISIS controlled. Moreover, strengthening the Shi'ite militias also come at the **price of increasing Iran's political influence in Iraq**.

4) **The so-called moderate Syrian rebel organizations:** The organizations are divided organizationally, differ from one another in ideology and are lacking effective (political and military) leadership. Aid from the United States and the West could strengthen their resistance against ISIS and the Syrian regime, but it is doubtful whether it would provide them with significant offensive capabilities against their enemies.

E. **The weakness of the coalition supporting the US:** It is a **heterogeneous coalition** with different political interests and constraints, limiting the scope of participation of the various countries. The coalition countries are expected to provide limited aid to the aerial attacks against ISIS. In addition, **Turkey**, which is of great importance, has interests and political constraints of its own and at least for the time being does to want to be deeply involved in the fight against ISIS. Moreover, in the future, if and when the coalition has to cope with difficulties, some of its members are liable to abandon the campaign. The bottom line is that **the US bears the brunt of the fighting and will have to bear the consequences over the years.**

F. **The major difficulty in effective cooperation with Bashar al-Assad's regime and with its supporter, Iran:**

1) The Assad regime could have aided in fighting ISIS no less and maybe even more than most of the countries in the coalition and the so-called moderate rebel organizations supported by the United States. However, **America regards the Assad regime a factor in the process leading to the establishment of ISIS and the civil war in Syria, and not part of the solution.** Cooperation with it is liable to alienate the Americans from the Sunni Muslim population in Syria and undermine United States cooperation with the so-called moderate rebel organizations.

2) **Cooperation with Iran**, which has influence and presence in Syria and Iraq, is also **politically problematic**. Iran supports terrorism, strives for hegemony in the Middle East and to harm American influence in Syria and Iraq and to harm American allies (Israel, Saudi Arabia and Jordan). Although there may be future tactical collaborations against ISIS with Iran (and the Syrian regime as well), it is difficult to expect them to become key partners in the coalition.

3. Moreover, the American campaign, however long it lasts, is also **prone to entanglements, which are integral to the struggle against terrorism.** For example, it may increase the motivation of ISIS, global jihad organizations and supporters of ISIS around the world **to respond to the aerial attacks with terrorist attacks**; it may lead to **unintended casualties among the civilian population** as a result of the ongoing aerial attacks; **the US may be drawn into situations not included in the strategy announced by President Obama and his aides** (such as additional American troops getting more deeply sucked into the Iraqi morass and perhaps even the Syrian morass). All of the above are liable to **lead to domestic criticism and in Western countries if things go wrong** (and they are liable to go wrong), if only because of the very complex, fluid, volatile and changing nature of the civil wars in Syria and Iraq.

4. Beyond all those difficulties, **ISIS is a consequence of the disintegration of Syria and Iraq, a part of profound and powerful processes that have occurred in the Middle East in recent years.** The processes, known as the Middle East upheaval, **have changed the face of the regional political map as it was shaped after World War I and remained for nearly a century.** A new order has not yet emerged to replace nation states that have collapsed, and many opposing political and social forces are fighting for power. This is the nature of the morass from which ISIS and other jihadi organizations emerged, and until **the morass has been drained, a process that may take many years, it will be impossible to eradicate the weeds.**

Evaluation of ISIS's weaknesses

5. In recent months, ISIS has managed to brand itself in the Arab-Muslim world and in the West as a **powerful terrorist organization with exceptional capabilities.** Its military successes, its governmental consolidation and the fact that it has been joined

by organizations and operatives, versus the weakness of its enemies and rivals, have fed this image, in some cases leading to **ISIS's enhancement beyond its actual power and capabilities.**

6. However, an analysis of ISIS's power and patterns of action indicates the organization's weaknesses and a certain vulnerability which the US might take advantage of. **Is main weaknesses are**:

A. **The large gap between ISIS's actual power and its pretensions:** ISIS has a **small core of operatives** (their number is estimated at between 25,000 to 31,000) through whom it controls **the millions of residents** and **significant parts of the territory of Iraq and Syria.** The small number of its operatives may make it difficult for ISIS to defend itself against massive military ground initiatives, if and when regular forces that are superior in terms of size and quality are deployed against it. Moreover, if ISIS's military power weakens significantly, **ISIS may find it hard to impose effective control** over the local population over time, **let alone realize its far-reaching ambitions** (taking over Iraq and Syria and other countries).

B. **The weakness of the coalition put together by ISIS in Iraq:** In ITIC assessment, it is a loose coalition composed of Salafist-jihadi organizations that have been joined by Sunni tribes and Ba'athist Iraqi military personnel and officials from the time of Saddam Hussein. There is no ideological adhesive bonding them, and the cooperation between them is based on a convergence of interests, centering on hostility to Shi'ites and the central government in Baghdad (which is perceived as Shi'ite-affiliated). In addition, ISIS's excessively brutal methods and its attempts to enforce an extreme version of Islamic law **alienate it among its allies**, which may abandon it when circumstances change and the momentum of ISIS's military successes is brought to an end. The participation of tribes from the province of Al-Anbar in western Iraq in the fighting against ISIS alongside the Iraqi army, and disagreements that deteriorated into violent clashes between ISIS and a large tribe in the area of Deir al-Zor, illustrate the difficulty of preserving the coalition over time.

C. **The large number of enemies versus the lack of significant allies in Syria:** In the Syrian arena ISIS is forced to fight against the Syrian regime, while simultaneously having to cope with rebel organizations and the Al-Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda's branch in Syria), both of which are hostile to it. Most of the Syrian population controlled by ISIS does not identify with its ideology and with the

brutal coercion of its Islamic code of conduct. The Syrian regime, Iran and Hezbollah are hostile to ISIS and may try to harm it when circumstances permit. Moreover, the religious-sectarian schism in Syria may make it very difficult for ISIS to expand its control to other areas populated by those who are hostile to it (i.e., areas populated by Alawites, Kurds or Druze).

D. **The centrality of ISIS's leader:** ISIS has a **centralized hierarchical** structure **revolving around the charismatic character of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi**. He is the head of the Islamic Caliphate and is the final arbiter on military, religious and governmental matters. He appoints ISIS's leadership and institutions him and their dependence on him is absolute (as far as the ITIC knows, there is no second in command who may inherit all of al-Baghdadi's powers in an organized fashion). Therefore, should **al-Baghdadi be out the picture, it could shake ISIS and weaken it significantly, even if it does not lead to its collapse.**

E. **ISIS's economic vulnerability:** ISIS's governmental and military capabilities rely heavily on **its high revenues from the infrastructure, mainly the oil infrastructure** (oil refining and smuggling oil products to areas not under ISIS's control). **An effective campaign against petroleum product smuggling and its production system may weaken ISIS at the military level** and impair its ability **to provide the local population with a governmental alternative.** The United States is aware of that and from the start of the campaign has focused its aerial attack on the oil infrastructure held by ISIS. That, however, is insufficient. In the fight against the petroleum product smuggling networks, the United States will require the close cooperation of **Turkey** and the **Kurdish autonomous region** and, if possible, of **the Syrian regime** as well, **to block the smuggling ISIS uses.**

F. **ISIS's ideology: ISIS represents a radical Salafist-jihadi interpretation of Islam** dating back to the Middle Ages (the Hanbali school). Although it is **perceived as attractive by many young Muslims today, it school of thought is not accepted by most Muslims.** Many clerics in the Arab-Muslim world and in Muslim communities in Western countries object to both its radical interpretation of Islam and ISIS's acts of cruelty and brutality presented in the media. Most Muslims accept the moderate schools of thought. Therefore, military measures against ISIS **must be accompanied by a battle for hearts and minds** designed **to foster moderate Islam**, which finds expression in the

Shafi'i and Maliki schools. **Egypt** (which is the target of a terrorist campaign) can play an important role and has indeed announced that it will support the fight against ISIS **by providing an ideological Islamic response to the worldview it represents.** In Western countries, the battle for hearts and minds must **cultivate the moderate streams in the local Muslim communities, coupled with further steps to reduce the sense of alienation and discrimination among them.**

7. In ITIC assessment ISIS's **main weakness is its limited power base within the Sunni population that either cooperates with it or surrenders to its authority.** Its collaborations with Sunni tribes and other Sunni power centers are a marriage of convenience based on temporary common interests, which may change as the political and military situations in Iraq and Syria change. Success in the military campaign against ISIS, coupled with an American policy of providing **massive assistance to influential figures and groups among the Sunni population in the areas under ISIS's control**, as the United States did in the past in Iraq, **may bear fruit in the campaign against ISIS.**

8. **If the US and its allies continue the campaign against ISIS**, investing a significant military effort in it over time, have the wisdom to take advantage of ISIS's weaknesses and not be deterred by serious side effects liable to accompany the campaign (casualties, terrorism, criticism from within and without), **then, in ITIC assessment, the campaign against ISIS may also have positive results. They will be more modest than the high expectations set by the United States, but they are more realistic.** In ITIC assessment, realistic expectations are the **weakening of ISIS** (as opposed to its destruction); **curbing the momentum of its expansion in Syria and Iraq** and possibly reducing its territorial assets; **improving the self-defense capabilities of local forces in Syria and Iraq and of the various countries in confronting** ISIS's terrorism **(in the West and the Middle East) and responding more effectively to the foreign fighters who travel to Syria and return to their countries of origin.**