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Defeating IS: Will the Obama strategy succeed?

By Ahmed S. Hashim

Synopsis

Obama's six-point plan for the defeat of the Islamic State (IS) promises more than it can achieve. It is a recipe for continued disaster. Can the strategy be reinforced?

Commentary

ON 10 SEPTEMBER 2014 President Obama laid out his strategy for dealing with IS. First, it called for significant expansion of the aerial bombing campaign in Iraq. Since mid-August airpower has succeeded in blunting the forward momentum of the IS lightning advance. It has even allowed the dispirited Iraqi Army and the vastly overrated Kurdish Peshmerga, to push back IS from some of the territories it had previously conquered. However, in places like Tikrit the Iraqi Army's Special Forces have been unable to budge IS from its gains.

Problems with airpower

There are problems with overreliance on airpower as a solution to the militants. IS members have learned the lessons of airpower against concentrated ground forces. They have begun to disperse, to tunnel, to camouflage and to go to ground in the cities. Airpower can degrade. Degradation of IS is no substitute for its extirpation and the uprooting of its entire system of control over territory, people and infrastructure. If IS transforms into a 'subterranean animal,' it will regress from mobile lightning war back to pure terrorism, a tactic in which it is thoroughly adept.

Second, the strategy calls for the training and equipping of the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga. Training and equipping host nation forces by an external power has had its successes and failures. In Iraq the United States looks set to throw more good money after bad as evidenced by the disgraceful failures of the Iraqi Army – on which the U.S. had already spent \$24 billion – in June and July 2014. Two IS battalions with a total of 800 men took Mosul in June from two Iraqi divisions with a combined strength of 30,000 men.

The Iraqi Army is a victim of the failures of the body politic: continued sectarian tensions, promotion on the basis of ethno-sectarian kinship ties rather than professionalism, corruption on a massive and grotesque scale, poor command, control and communications systems because of the politicians'

mistrust of the officer corps. The U.S. could throw all the best equipment in the world at the Iraqis but it will not make a difference until the societal problems of the country are addressed.

The Kurdish Peshmerga are better disciplined than the Iraqi Army, though organisationally not in much better shape. They have relied too much on the historical memory of being vaunted guerrilla fighters against various Iraqi regimes. The name 'Peshmerga', those 'who face death' was evocative of their courage and tactical prowess. They were defeated by IS in June as well. They are not an innovative or well-trained force able to deal with a wide range of military contingencies from guerrilla warfare to mobile quasi-conventional 'hybrid' warfare they recently faced.

The Peshmerga are not united but are split between the two Kurdish political parties that dominate the region. There is no unified command and control system. The Kurdish Peshmerga are more likely to benefit more quickly than the Iraqi Army from U.S. largesse and training. Political and strategic considerations dictate that the U.S. cannot focus on making the Kurds combat capable ahead of the central government in Baghdad.

Bombing Syria: accentuated problems

Third, the strategy calls for bombing in Syria. The same problems associated with bombing Iraq apply to Syria. The problems may be accentuated because IS has embedded itself more deeply in eastern Syria. Moreover, is the proposed bombing campaign in Syria really about weakening IS or about weakening the regime of Bashar al-Assad? Many in the U.S. hope for the destruction of the regime; this would be a deviation from the need to focus on the jihadists.

Fourth, the strategy calls for training and arming the Syrian rebels. Which Syrian rebels? The U.S. is enamoured with the cliché moderates that it has used with respect to the Middle East since it entered that region decades ago. The Syrian rebels are not moderate – three years of savage civil war have seen to that – and most are feckless and incapable of dealing with IS.

Fifth, the strategy calls for getting a coalition of European and regional allies on board in the fight against IS. What needs to be worked out from the outset is a clear division of labour. The U.S. must exercise clear leadership and ask each country what it can contribute to the struggle, being clear that its most capable allies: Britain, France and Australia should and will be at the 'pointy end of the spear' alongside the U.S. in taking the fight to IS.

Sixth, the U.S. says it will not put troops on the ground and that it will not seek any modus vivendi with the Syrian and Iranian regimes.

Needed: a more robust strategy

Western airpower and a reliance on local ground forces whose weaknesses are evident will not achieve even degradation of the IS system of control. Any use of drones must be carefully weighed in advance so that drones do not end up creating more enemies on the ground among the civilian population. What is required is the presence of Western ground forces with a small footprint in both Iraq and Syria.

The U.S. and its Western allies have the most capable Special Operations Forces in the world. They devastated Al Qaeda. The decapitation of IS leadership and of its personnel can be done most effectively by ground forces. Moreover, ground forces will enable the U.S. and its allies to work to 'decouple' the Sunni tribes and former insurgents away from IS. This will require the U.S. to put to use the recent historical memory of working with the Sunni community when they jointly fought the jihadists between 2006 and 2009.

IS cannot be defeated purely by military means. The U.S. must engage politically and diplomatically with the Kurds and the central government in Iraq. The Kurds can be rewarded for their cooperation in defeating IS. This cannot come at the territorial expense of Iraq as this will only reinforce Sunni grievances since they will stand to lose the most in the territorial carve-up in the north. Robustly coaxing Baghdad to carve up political positions and economic largesse along equitable lines must be implemented.

Ignoring or bypassing Syria and Iran is due either to pure petulance or pressure from U.S. allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia to keep these so-called 'rogue states' at bay. It is strategically myopic. Engaging Iran does not mean appeasing it; rather it means warning it not to engage in machinations that are at variance with US efforts to rebuild the Iraqi body politic and military along national and not sectarian lines.

Syria cannot offer much help against IS as it is over-stretched and 'morally' suspect, but a policy of supporting the opposition is fraught with danger. The 'moderate' opposition will turn on Assad and ignore IS, which they, in effect, have been doing. The non-IS jihadists will watch as their two opponents fight each other and as the U.S. deals with IS. The non-IS jihadists – many are affiliated with Al Qaeda - must not emerge as the winners in this melee. They need to be targeted and destroyed as well.

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