

The United States, Iraq and the Islamic State: Challenges and Policy Options

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Tensions in the Middle East have reached new heights in recent months as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as IS or ISIL) seized further control over the Northern regions of these two countries. The Sunni extremist militant group appears intent on marching towards Baghdad, ousting current Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and reforming Iraq and its neighbouring areas into a pro-Sunni Islamic state. ISIS also appears determined to execute any citizens in the region that will not convert to Islam and join their fight. Facing yet another crisis in Iraq, the United States cannot rely on the al-Abadi government and the Iraqi military to repel ISIS forces alone. After all, Al-Abadi only recently took office from former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki after his predecessor faced widespread criticism for dividing the country in favour of the Shia majority.

Alternatively, the United States certainly cannot again risk committing significant American ground military divisions to such an uncertain and hostile situation in Iraq. Many commentators suggest rightly that the U.S. 2003 invasion of Iraq, the installation of a pro-American government and its later evacuation at least in part encouraged ISIS extremists to undertake its current aggressive campaign in the first place. Even then, the current ISIS threat has sparked U.S. military officials to begin talking about the possibility of escalation and reintervention. '[ISIS] is beyond anything we have seen, and we must prepare for everything,' U.S. Defense

Secretary Chuck Hagel warned on 22 August 2014, ‘and the only way you do that is that you take a cold, steely hard look at it and get ready.’

For the United States, ISIS presents difficult and limited policy choices. Returning U.S. combat forces to Iraq has been rejected categorically by U.S. President Barack Obama and his Secretary of State John Kerry, preferring to encourage local Iraqi and Kurdish forces to lead counter-offensives against ISIS. Obama proudly returned all U.S. combat forces from Iraq in 2011 and has repeatedly stressed that any new American campaigns there will be limited in scope. As part of this cautious approach, he has instead recently authorised a series of selected air strikes on ISIS targets in an effort to repel its advance and assist the Iraqi military to consolidate its forces as well as improve Iraqi morale. These airstrikes have been accompanied by humanitarian aid drops to fleeing Iraqi citizens. As of late August, the United States military has undertaken approximately ninety airstrikes on ISIS targets and in so doing assisted local Iraqi and Kurdish forces in retaking control of the Mosul Dam, an important piece of infrastructure in Northern Iraq.

While it is unlikely that no American response short of another full-scale ground invasion or the deployment of nuclear weapons will be decisive in the short-term, the Obama Administration should be applauded for its cautious and incremental approach to the Iraqi Crisis. After the disastrous U.S. occupation of Iraq during the 2000s, the American public will certainly be anxious to avoid any further military involvement in the Middle East unless it is absolutely necessary to protect U.S. interests in the region. Past U.S. involvement in Iraq also demonstrated that there is no guarantee that future military involvement will ensure long-term, or even short-term, peace and

security for the embattled country. Even in light of the tragic news that American Journalist James Foley was beheaded by ISIS forces in direct retaliation to recent American bombing raids, that in itself should not be cause to escalate American military intervention beyond targeted airstrikes.

Questions over reintervention in Iraq are dividing Americans deeply. Although there is strong support against American reintervention, terror acts like Foley's execution changed American opinion over whether the United States should return to Iraq. A USA Today/Pew Research Center Poll conducted in August 2014 suggested that approximately 40% of the public think that the United States bears a responsibility to 'do something' about the violence. This response was a noticeable increase from a poll conducted a month earlier, when the Center recorded data that about half of the country saw no U.S. responsibility to act.

Even then, Americans who see a responsibility to act are still concerned over an expanded military commitment in Iraq less than three years after the United States withdrew its combat troops. The August poll suggested approximately 51% of people were more concerned that the U.S. will again entrench itself in Iraq. About a third of those polled, 32%, say that their greater concern is that the U.S. will not go far enough in stopping the Islamist militants. In short, there appears to be no solution that the Obama Administration can adopt that will cater to such deeply divided public views in America.

What else, then, can the United States do short of redeploying ground forces? In conjunction with targeted airstrikes, Washington should also continue to assist the Iraqi military in surveillance, information gathering and strategic planning. So far, Obama has heeded this message in 'leading from behind.' Even before American warplanes were deployed, the United States sent

several hundred U.S. military advisers to train and support the Iraqi government in repelling the ISIS advance. Pentagon Spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby also announced that the U.S. began air surveillance missions over Iraq—originally up to 35 per day, although this number is now increasing—to monitor ISIS movements. In conjunction with targeted airstrikes, these efforts are perhaps the best military courses of action available presently to the United States government relative to the financial cost and risk to American lives.

The real major foreign policy problem, so far as the Obama Administration is concerned, is the lack of a broader post-occupation strategy for Iraq and the Middle East since combat forces returned to the United States in 2011. The Administration has struggled to define what its overall mission objectives are in light of the new ISIS threat, other than to stress continually that U.S. ground forces will not be redeployed. This is where Obama's cautious approach faces its biggest challenge: if Washington announces it is determined to defeat ISIS decisively it must necessarily escalate its military involvement because the current targeted airstrike campaign will not meet this goal. Yet, if the U.S. backs away from further involvement in Iraq, it will likewise be criticised for not doing enough to prevent what is now a severe humanitarian crisis. Alongside Foley's execution, newspaper reports and social media discussions detail countless atrocities performed by ISIS militants against Iraqi citizens that is quickly reaching genocidal proportions, thereby prompting greater public demand that something more be done by the U.S. government.

As part of this problem, the United States has lacked a policy that transcends national boundaries, especially when ISIS activities are not contained to one country. To address this shortcoming, one option is to work towards mutual agreement with

other regional actors on dealing with the ISIS threat, or at the very least, encourage policy solidarity on each country's military and diplomatic efforts. For example, the ISIS threat presents a unique convergence of interests between the United States and Iran. Washington and Tehran rarely see eye to eye on strategic issues in the Middle East, although there is a growing consensus that ISIS represents a mutual security threat that might be dealt with co-operatively. While the U.S. remains rightly unwilling to deploy combat forces, Iran has already sent Revolutionary Guard divisions into Iraq to safeguard Al-Abadi's government and prevent the dissolution of the country into either sectarian factions or a pro-Sunni extremist state. On the other side of the coin, the United States' advanced military reconnaissance technologies offer Iraqi and Iranian forces surveillance support that both of their militaries currently lack.

U.S.-Iranian cooperation, however small, should be welcomed. Increased bilateral dialogue between the two countries might repair some of the trust lost recently over the contentious development of Iran's nuclear weapons program. Co-operation might also provide a foundation for a future multinational agreement in the Middle East over a regional fight against terrorist organisations. However, if the United States government plans to work with the Iranians over a solution in Iraq, American policymakers must take an incremental approach and tread cautiously. Steps toward rapprochement with Iran would concern U.S. allies in the region and raise unwanted questions about the U.S. stance on Sunni and Shia political differences in the Middle East. As Obama warned on 19 June 2014, if Iranian intervention is based solely on 'an armed force on behalf of the Shia and if it is framed in that fashion,' the situation would most likely 'worsen'

and damage the prospects for long-term government stability in Iraq.

Iran aside, recent remarks by the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey suggest that combating the ISIS threat in Syria might present another option. ‘Can [ISIS] be defeated without addressing that part of the organization that resides in Syria? The answer is no,’ Dempsey said in late August. He added that ‘it requires a variety of instruments, only one small part of which is airstrikes’ in order to defeat ISIS. Dempsey did not go as far as to announce that the U.S. military might soon deploy forces there, but did say that in order to defeat ISIS, the United States must use ‘all of the tools of national power — diplomatic, economic, information, and military.’

The ISIS threat certainly presents another interesting and unique convergence of interests between the United States and Syria. Both countries have a direct interest in defeating ISIS, with the U.S. focused mainly on ISIS actions and movements in Iraq whereas the Syrian government, led by Bashar al-Assad, has stepped up raids against ISIS militants in its own country. The problem with approaching the ISIS threat from Syria, however, is that it is unlikely that substantial U.S.-Syrian cooperation could be reached. Washington has accused the al-Assad government of allowing ISIS to militarise in its early stages, while in return, Syria is angered by the U.S. support given to anti-government rebels in Damascus and remains sceptical of American intentions in the region. Moreover, it would certainly send a mixed public message for both governments to suddenly appear to be working together in light of the mutual hostility between one another during the ongoing Syrian Civil War. Nevertheless, any sort of regional cooperation should not be discounted entirely. Common ground might pave the way for finding a peaceful solution, or at the very

least, encourage better communication between the two countries. For now, ISIS is a mutual and growing threat to all governments with interests in the region.

Alternatively, it might be possible to secure Israeli support for American action in Iraq in return for further military and diplomatic assistance in Gaza. The current Israeli-Palestinian Crisis has become another undesirable mark on Obama's foreign policy record in the Middle East. His Administration has been accused strongly by the Republican Right of doing little to support Israel and finding a peaceful solution to the crisis after repeated attacks by both Israel and Hamas. While the situation in Israel is as equally delicate and volatile as the situation in Iraq—and, to be sure, there will be no simple solution to either one of these difficult crises—working toward any form of mutual cooperation between the United States and Israel in Iraq should certainly be explored. American concerns over the situation in Israel are ever present, so for Obama, cooperation with Israel might even become a case of 'killing two birds with one stone'.

In the end, the United States again finds itself caught between a rock and a hard place on policy options for Iraq and the Islamic State. There will simply be no straightforward or easy solution. On the one hand, doing nothing is not an option. U.S. targeted airstrikes are well underway even though there is no certainty that these efforts alone will force ISIS to crumble. Moreover, a failure to act opens the Obama Administration to domestic criticism over its inability to protect U.S. interests abroad and prevent a potential genocide. On the other hand, full scale military intervention would be too costly, risky, and unlikely to meet long-term U.S. objectives in Iraq. Uncertainty over Iranian and Syrian involvement also complicates matters further for

Washington, especially in any potential exchange of military information or cooperation.

With minimal options available, the best course of action presently is continued selective airstrikes against ISIS targets and military assistance limited to ISIS surveillance and advising the Iraqi government. Cooperation with other regional actors should also be considered, but done so incrementally and cautiously. Cooperation with Israel is perhaps a viable option, although Israel is likely to be too preoccupied with the situation in its own country to send any significant aid to the U.S. cause in Iraq. Additionally, even though it is unlikely to occur at all, any covert American discussions with either the Iranian or Syrian government on ISIS should be treated just as cautiously as the current U.S. approach to Iraq. In any event, the ISIS threat continues to grow daily and the United States must decide quickly upon the response it will take. Hopefully, this response will be cautious, incremental and implemented through a broader strategic lens

About the Author

Andrew Kelly is a PhD student at the University of Western Sydney. He specialises in American, Australian and New Zealand foreign policy, but also has a secondary interest in East Asian and Pacific history. His current research examines American, Australian and New Zealand relations in the Asia-Pacific during the early to mid 1950s.