

POLICY BRIEF

**RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR THE NEW
ADMINISTRATION**

A Strategy Toward Defeating ISIS

Ambassador Edward P. Djerejian, Director, Baker Institute for Public Policy

The Islamic State is a threat to every country in the Middle East and to the international community at large. With this common enemy, a coherent strategy and international coalition must contain and destroy ISIS' command structure as a terrorist organization that occupies territory in Syria and Iraq, and that has proven its capacity for terrorist attacks internationally. However, a successful campaign against ISIS is far from guaranteed and will require a better understanding of radical jihadist groups and a balanced strategy that applies post-9/11 lessons to counter them. This international coalition must be one in which every member is committed to contribute effectively to the goal with political, economic, intelligence, and military support. It cannot be in name only and for the half-hearted.

DEFINING A STRATEGY

The key elements of a coherent strategy for defeating ISIS would involve both a nearer-term coordinated counterterrorism policy with a military component and a longer-term geopolitical approach to address the underlying causes of radical jihadism in the broader Middle East. In this latter respect, U.S. strategy should consider the geopolitical effects of the struggle against ISIS, including the role of Iran and Russia and the situation of failing states in the region.

We must understand that this is a struggle between the forces of moderation and extremism primarily within the Muslim world of some 1.6 billion people. It is a struggle of ideas on what constitutes the true face of Islam and Muslim society. ISIS and other radical groups seek to establish themselves as credible participants in this debate.

The United States and international community cannot determine the outcome of this struggle, but can try to support whatever forces of moderation exist in these countries and societies to help further marginalize the extremists. We should learn from history that Western involvement and intervention in the Middle East has had some long-term negative consequences. Therefore, we must address the current challenge intelligently. The deficits in the region are well known: the lack of real political participation, faulty educational systems, deficient economies, systemic corruption, high rates of youth unemployment, and human rights abuses. It is the primary responsibility of the region's countries and societies to address such issues by ending civil and sectarian conflicts and establishing credible and efficient governance. Accordingly, our approach should be based on a true understanding of the forces at play in the region and a clear definition of what we support and oppose. The United States should take the lead in this international effort.

A basic statement that would frame a strategic approach to the challenge of extremism could be as follows:



The key elements of a coherent strategy for defeating ISIS would involve both a nearer-term coordinated counterterrorism policy with a military component and a longer-term geopolitical approach to address the underlying causes of radical jihadism in the broader Middle East.

This policy brief is part of a series of recommendations from the Baker Institute for the incoming president's administration.

We differ with those who—whatever their religion—practice terrorism, resort to violence, reject the peaceful resolution of conflicts, oppress minorities, preach intolerance, disdain political pluralism, or violate internationally accepted standards regarding human rights. Simply stated, religion does not determine, positively or negatively, the nature of our relations with other countries. Our quarrel is with extremism per se, and the violence, denial, intolerance, intimidation, coercion, and terror that accompany it.

Within the framework of these considerations, we seek to help resolve regional conflicts and promote sustainable regional stability. Equally important, we seek to promote political and economic reforms in the broader Middle East, with a keen appreciation of the culture and traditions of the region's societies and countries. This is a long-term goal that could help bolster the political economies of the region and stem the appeal of extremists who exploit popular frustrations.

See more policy briefs at:

www.bakerinstitute.org/policy-briefs

This publication was written by a researcher (or researchers) who participated in a Baker Institute project. Wherever feasible, this research is reviewed by outside experts before it is released. However, the views expressed herein are those of the individual author(s), and do not necessarily represent the views of Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

© 2016 Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy

This material may be quoted or reproduced without prior permission, provided appropriate credit is given to the author and Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.

Cite as:

Djerejian, Edward P. 2016. *A Strategy Toward Defeating ISIS*. Policy Brief: Recommendations for the New Administration. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.

Within this strategic concept, specific policies could be articulated that coordinate nearer-term counterterrorism programs and longer-term strategic goals of marginalizing extremists. But it is important that both approaches move forward concomitantly, lest we face further policy failures. That is why it is critical that the United States and its partners in and outside of the region come to common understandings on the strategy and the specific requirements for translating words into deeds. Containing and trying to destroy radical groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS through military and counterterrorism operations are essential and must be pursued aggressively, but they are not sufficient to reach the overall goal of marginalizing the region's extremists. Islamist radicals effectively use religion as a tool to attain their political ends: the destabilization and destruction of both the "near enemy" (the regimes in the Middle East) and the "far enemy" (the secular international community). Their goal is to establish regimes or a "caliphate" in their image of Islam.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS, TAKING ACTION

To reach a political settlement in Syria is a daunting challenge given the specific and differing political interests of the players inside and outside of Syria. What is needed is a deeper understanding of the domestic and international parties involved in Syria—their interests, motivations, strengths, and limitations—and an evaluation of where they align with our own. The U.S. must be pragmatic in pursuing partnerships that help accomplish its key interests: counterterrorism, regional and international stability, and humanitarian relief for the Syrian people. Looking at the longer-term, a tenet of U.S. policy toward Syria must be good governance. Political, economic, and social exclusion by a regime toward its people is ultimately destabilizing. In seeking solutions for Syria, policymakers should pursue a system of sustainable inclusion of Syria's multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society within the country's territorial borders. Along with the defeat of ISIS, this goal should be promoted by the U.S. with the regional and international actors involved in Syria.

To obtain a consensus on a strategy with a broad-based coalition will require strong leadership, especially on the part of the United States. As recent terrorist incidents demonstrate, the brutal turmoil in Syria, Iraq, and the region as a whole has consequences far beyond the borders of the Middle East. But this is an opportunity for bold and strategic diplomacy. Russia faces a real threat of Islamic extremism within the Russian Federation. Western countries and Israel are targeted as major enemies. Arab regimes and Iran are targeted by Al-Qaeda and ISIS as "impious." Regional leaders in the Middle East, therefore, have a major responsibility to counter radical jihadist ideology and their militant agenda.

The challenge is great. The time has come for a coherent strategy to guide operational policies, lest we be reduced to merely responding to one lethal event after another in merely a crisis management mode.