

POLICY BRIEF

11.19.15

A Strategy Toward Defeating ISIS

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The reaction to the horrific attacks by the Islamic State (ISIS) in Paris, in Beirut and over Sinai has largely ignored the important strategic dimension in the fight against violent Islamist groups. The attacks underscored the new direction of the ISIS threat and provide the opening of a new opportunity to engage the international community and regional countries to confront, contain and defeat the terrorist organization.

ISIS is a threat to every country in the Middle East, albeit to differing degrees, and to the international community at large. With such a common enemy, a coherent strategy and international coalition can be built to contain and destroy its command structure as a terrorist organization that occupies territory in Syria and Iraq and has proven its international outreach, as the attacks in Paris tragically demonstrate. However, a successful campaign against ISIS is far from guaranteed and will require a better understanding of ISIS and a balanced strategy that applies the post-9/11 lessons to counter violent Islamist extremism. This international coalition must be one where 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. With the marked change in ISIS' strategy in recent weeks to strike beyond its "borders," regional countries may converge on their threat perceptions of the group.

The key elements of a coherent strategy 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 radicalism in the broader Middle East.

Here we must understand that this is a generational struggle within the Muslim world of some 1.6 billion people between the forces of moderation and extremism. There is a struggle of ideas on what constitutes the true face of Islam and Muslim society. ISIS seeks to establish itself as a credible player in this debate. Yet when it comes to ISIS and its brutality, there is massive condemnation within the Muslim world.

The international community cannot determine the outcome of this struggle, but it can try to support whatever forces of moderation exist in these countries and societies in order to help further marginalize the extremists. We should have learned from history that the legacy of Western involvement and intervention in the Middle East has had some negative consequences (e.g., the colonial division of the region after World War I and the Sykes-Picot agreements, the unbridled support of autocratic regimes during the Cold War, and the consequences of the 2003 invasion of Iraq). So we need to address the current challenge intelligently. The deficits in the region are well known: Namely, the lack of real political participation, faulty educational systems, deficient economies, systemic corruption, high rates of youth unemployment and human rights abuses. Accordingly, our approach should be based on a true understanding of the forces at play in the various countries 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:



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.

Within this strategic concept, specific policies could be articulated that coordinate the nearer-term counterterrorism programs and the longer-term strategic goals of marginalizing the 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 allies in and outside of the region come to common understandings on what the strategy is and what the specific requirements are 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 the overall goal of marginalizing the forces of extremism in the region. Islamist radicals effectively use religion as a tool to attain their political ends — the destabilization and destruction of the “near enemy,” i.e., the regimes in the Middle East and the “far enemy,” i.e., the secular international community. Their goal is to establish regimes or a “caliphate” in their

image of Islam. ISIS has an Islamic millennial “End of Days” doctrine that it propagates with some success as a recruiting tool.

The Syrian crisis is the problem from hell and enabled ISIS to establish the headquarters of its “caliphate” in Raqqa in Syria. 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 for the Geneva Initiative participants to come up with a minimum consensus of all the major parties to confront and destroy ISIS’ territorial grip in the country, establish a cease-fire and initiate a political transition between the opposition groups and the Syrian regime — with a clear understanding that at the end of the transition there would be no role for Bashar al-Assad and his key lieutenants — while allowing for proportional Alawite representation in any future government, along with the other sects and parties in Syria. Barring such a solution, the Syrian people will suffer continuing conflict, displacement and humanitarian disaster.

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 the most recent terrorist incidents in Paris on November 13 once again 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 has a real threat of Islamic extremism within the Russian Federation. China is targeted by Islamic extremist groups who consider Xinjiang province in Western China as “Eastern Turkmenistan.” Western European countries and Israel are targeted as major enemies. Arab regimes are targeted by Al-Qaeda and ISIS as “impious.” Regional leaders in the Middle East, therefore, have a major responsibility in coordination with the international community to embrace this challenge and translate that strategy into intelligent and effective operational measures on the ground.

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 just a crisis management mode.

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Cite as:

Djerejian, Edward P. 2015. *A Strategy Toward Defeating ISIS*. Policy brief no. 11.19.15. Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, Houston, Texas.