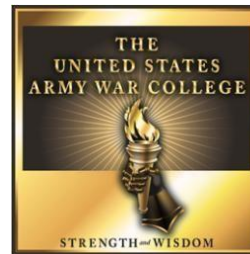


# Developing U.S. Strategies for ISIL and the Middle East

by

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United States Army War College  
Class of 2015

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Since 2001, the United States has led a multinational war on terrorism and expended significant blood and treasure replacing corrupt regimes with fragile, democratic institutions. Yet, in just a handful of years, deteriorating conditions in Iraq threatens to erode the hard-won gains achieved in the early days of the military campaign. Towards that end, the United States should renew efforts to resolve the underlying political problems in Iraq and Syria as part of its long-term strategy to degrade and destroy the Islamic State. Military operations should be conducted as part of a whole-of-government approach, but Coalition military action is just a supporting role to the more important diplomatic efforts. Absent new political frameworks, military action is irrelevant. Additionally, U.S. and Coalition efforts must be actively managed below the national policy level. The existing strategy, if nested within a larger diplomatic effort, balances risk and reward over the long-term and offers the greatest opportunity to succeed.





## **Developing U.S. Strategies for ISIL and the Middle East**

States are motivated to attack each other and to defend themselves by the reason and/or passion of the comparatively few who make policies for states and of the many more who influence the few.

—Kenneth N. Waltz  
Author, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*<sup>1</sup>

Since before 2001, the United States has had four principal objectives of U.S. policy: ensuring security, maintaining prosperity, leading a peaceful and cooperative world order, and respecting universal values.<sup>2</sup> These overarching national security requirements are generally achieved by balancing regional interests and developing an integrated strategy advancing multiple, yet occasionally competing, priorities. For the past fourteen years, the United States has led a multinational war on terrorism and expended significant blood and treasure replacing corrupt regimes with fragile, democratic institutions. Today, deteriorating conditions in Iraq threaten to erode the hard-won gains achieved in the early days of the military campaign. Syria's civil war further destabilizes the region, as anti-government rebels and Islamist militias continue fighting for town-by-town control, triggering an even greater regional humanitarian crisis. In just a handful of years, then, conditions in Iraq and Syria have created, for the Middle East, the very conditions America's War on Terror was designed to prevent.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, U.S. efforts are increasingly focused on the President's goal to destroy the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) – as if ISIL were the problem. Unless the underlying political disputes are resolved, conditions for regional conflict will only continue to grow, because nothing will have fundamentally changed. This situation is all the more tenuous because, despite their apparent similarities, solutions for one problem may exacerbate the other and add fuel to the growing proverbial fire. This paper will

frame the problem by exploring the relationship between recent events and the Islamic State's growth. Then, a brief overview of past and present policy sets the stage to better understand U.S. regional strategic efforts, before linking those efforts to the turmoil crippling Iraq and Syria today. Next, a return to the President's strategy creates the opportunity to explore the underlying Iraqi and Syrian problems, and the resultant disconnect between U.S. policy and its military strategy. Finally, briefly examining four strategic alternatives and their utility provides a way of understanding the depth of these interconnected problems before discussing recommendations to guide future policy efforts.

### Recent Events and the Islamic State's Growth

As the United States withdrew combat forces from Iraq in 2011, the Arab Spring sparked sudden, unexpected complications across much of the region. In Syria, anti-government protests quickly turned deadly as Assad's regime clamped down in a predictably brutal manner. Instead of stamping out protests, however, the regime's violence galvanized resistance and led to widespread rebellion.<sup>4</sup> Within a handful of months, attacks between Syrian rebels and the Syrian military escalated into open civil war. Syria's instability, coupled with rapidly deteriorating security and political conditions in Iraq, set ideal conditions for exploitation culminating in the overwhelming return of Al-Qa'ida in Iraq. The emergence of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) turned an already complex situation on its head, and projected the region onto an unexpected course. Today, ISIL controls much of northern Syria and northwestern Iraq and represents a direct, non-existential threat to U.S. interests.<sup>5</sup>

On September 10, 2014, President Obama announced that the U.S. goal was to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIL by working with coalition partners to attack ISIL

targets, build partner capacity within Iraq and among select Syrian resistance groups, eliminate ISIL funding and recruitment, and provide humanitarian assistance to those displaced by the ongoing fighting.<sup>6</sup> This four-pronged approach was intended to halt ISIL's momentum in an effort to buy time necessary to improve partner capacity and begin regaining lost territory. President Obama and other senior leaders describe this problem as generational, meaning the attitudes and behaviors necessary to transform the region and create self-sustaining stability will take decades to develop. It follows, then, that in order to achieve its objectives, assuage regional challenges, and realize the goals underlying its National Security Strategy, the United States must develop a strategy involving the right mix of coalition, joint, and interagency resources to defeat ISIL while laying the foundation necessary to achieve long-term stability in the Middle East.

One of the popular definitions of strategy taught at the U.S. Army War College holds that strategy is the “calculated relationship between ends, ways and means.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, strategy is developed by answering three basic questions: what do I want to do (interests); what resources do I have available (means); and what is the best way to use what I have to get what I want (ways)? These questions are at the heart of every strategic dilemma, because advancing interests in one area may come at the expense of another. In the case of ISIL and the instability in Syria and Iraq, the challenge is all the more vexing because, despite their linkages, the solution to one problem may inflame the other.

### Roots of American Strategy

The relationship between instability, conflict, and perceived weak or ineffective governance is hardly new. Instability is often a precursor for conflict – particularly in

"authoritarian client states."<sup>8</sup> In simple terms, instability creates the potential for conflict, and conflict has long been anathema to U.S. and international economic and policy interests. For example, by the mid-1950s, U.S. policy makers firmly believed instability would lead to Communism or, at best, set conditions necessary for its spread among institutionally weak nations.<sup>9</sup> As a result, American policy makers established a dual approach of conducting direct action against communist agitators and providing foreign aid designed to address the causes of instability.<sup>10</sup>

Terrorism is often linked to those same conditions, characterized by "the much broader enabling environment of bad governance, nonexistent social services, and poverty that punctuates much of the developing world."<sup>11</sup> Yet, when scrutinized closely, development efforts are failing to yield results necessary to generate long-term stability. In the last twenty years, gross domestic product per capita in many developing countries has more than doubled – yet world-wide income inequality continues to grow.<sup>12</sup> These trends suggest development efforts result in greater potential instability and increasing numbers of disaffected and disenfranchised people. Additionally, research increasingly paints an undeniable link between development and liberal values, which are often at least initially in conflict with societal norms in developing countries.<sup>13</sup> Although development efforts exert stabilizing influences on democracies, the economic transition from client to market based policies disrupts normal relationships and replaces accepted behaviors with unfamiliar insecurities.<sup>14</sup> Because development efforts are predominantly executed by Western nations, this social and economic turbulence leads to resentment and anti-Western attitudes and gives rise to the West's perceived encroachment on local cultures and values.<sup>15</sup> Development is

meant to address insecurity and improve government capacity by lessening the impact of poverty, food shortages, insufficient healthcare, resource scarcity, and unemployment. Yet, despite the many benefits of development, adjustments to cultural norms and new distributions of wealth create social turbulence and increased instability – at least among those whose positions have not yet improved or continue to be relatively deprived.

Nevertheless, within the United States there is a clear belief that the primary threat to U.S. security comes from fundamentally weak states, and that the U.S. cannot, "...continue to let failed states fester."<sup>16</sup> This threat is further exaggerated by the conviction that terrorists gravitate towards poorly governed and badly managed countries. President George W. Bush said:

The events of September 11, 2001, taught us that weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states. Poverty does not make poor people into terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak institutions, and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.<sup>17</sup>

By 2006, the relationship between instability, terrorism, democracy, and American national security was laid out in the overview of the 2006 National Security Strategy, which says, "The goal of our statecraft is to help create a world of democratic, well-governed states that can meet the needs of their citizens and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system. This is the best way to provide enduring security for the American people."<sup>18</sup> In 2008, then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice reiterated America's focus on instability, characterizing governments that are "too weak or poorly governed" as threats to the stability of the international order (emphasis added).<sup>19</sup> She continued by stating that "democratic state building" represents a

compelling need dictated by national interest, becoming a key component of U.S. strategy. In short – if weak or ineffective governance leads to instability, and instability sets conditions necessary for terrorism – then democratic values and ideals offer the solution. Today’s strategies are less dependent on kinetic operations than they were a decade ago, and, as the 2015 *National Security Strategy* reveals, the United States remains committed to democracy and development as its primary long-term counter-terrorism tools.<sup>20</sup>

### Understanding the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant traces its roots to a Sunni insurgent group at the forefront of anti-Coalition efforts shortly after the invasion of Iraq. What began under Abu Musab al Zarqawi as Tawid wal Jihad, grew into Al-Qa’ida in the Land of the Two Rivers (commonly referred to as AQI by Coalition forces).<sup>21</sup> From the outset, AQI’s terror campaign was meant to dampen support for the Iraqi government, encourage Coalition partners to leave Iraq, and bring personnel and resources to the organization. After Zarqawi’s death, Al-Qa’ida in Iraq’s leaders took the organization in a new direction and created the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) – this time under Iraqi leadership.<sup>22</sup> Rather than targeting government and Coalition forces, however, this new terrorist network targeted Iraq’s Sunni population. ISI’s tactics, meant to prevent Sunni support of coalition and Iraqi efforts, had the opposite effect. By 2007, Sunni chiefs in Al Anbar began working with coalition forces and actively fighting ISI. At the same time, Coalition forces surged into Baghdad and other key cities, effectively curtailing ISI’s operational reach. Yet, by 2009, as Coalition forces began consolidating in advance of their 2011 withdrawal, the Islamic State of Iraq once again took advantage of the widening security vacuum and started conducting coordinated attacks.<sup>23</sup>

In 2010, leadership passed to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who began consolidating power and actively increased his operational tempo and reach inside Iraq. In early 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq in the Levant along with the creation of, and merger with, the al-Nusrah Front – an Al-Qa’ida affiliate in Syria.<sup>24</sup> By the summer of 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant conducted a series of increasingly coordinated attacks across much of northwest and central Iraq, and began consolidating power in the eastern part of Syria.<sup>25</sup> By the summer of 2014, Islamic State fighters seized Fallujah and portions of Ramadi before turning their operational momentum north and taking Tal Afar, Mosul, and Tikrit.<sup>26</sup> Many of these territorial gains were precipitated by a withdrawal of Iraq’s military who appeared overwhelmed by ISIL’s rapid advancement. As Iraqi forces continued withdrawing from northern Iraq, Kurdish leaders dispatched Peshmerga forces to Kirkuk and gained control over the city and its long-contested oil fields.<sup>27</sup>

#### Iraq – Isolating Minority Sunnis Sets the Stage for Instability

While much of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’s momentum can be tied directly to weak or ineffective governance in Iraq and Syria, its roots lie squarely in the sectarian conflict reignited shortly after the collapse of the Iraqi government in 2003. At the time, U.S. policy makers hoped Iraq’s newly emerging democratic institutions would evolve into an all-inclusive government. Some of the Coalition Provisional Authority’s early decisions, like dissolving the Iraqi Army and the wide ranging de-Baathification process, however, disenfranchised Iraq’s Sunni communities, pushing them further away from government participation.<sup>28</sup> To make matters worse, because Iraq’s Sunnis were largely boycotting the political process and targeting those few Sunnis who were not, Sunni interests were quickly marginalized once efforts to establish a new

government gained importance and momentum. By late 2005, Iraq's Sunni population mobilized to defeat the constitutional referendum – and nearly succeeded.<sup>29</sup> The political damage, however, had been done. By boycotting so much of the political process and targeting Sunni politicians who dared participate in the transitional government, Iraq's Sunnis found themselves with few leaders possessing the political clout necessary to develop and project a unifying voice. More alarmingly, they found a government increasingly dominated by Shiite and Kurdish leaders easily influenced by Iran.<sup>30</sup> In short, Iraq possessed a constitution the Sunnis did not support, a government they barely participated in, and a political environment dominated by foreign influence.

Still, Al-Qa'ida in Iraq's aggressive tactics against the Sunni community in 2007 pushed tribal leaders closer to U.S. and Iraqi interests and made political reconciliation appear possible. After some early successes partnering with tribal forces in Al Anbar, the U.S.-led coalition unveiled the much larger "Sons of Iraq" program, essentially taking credit for harmonizing Sunni and Iraqi efforts.<sup>31</sup> More importantly, Maliki's government started cracking down on Shiite militias, many of which were linked to ongoing sectarian violence. Finally, by the end of 2008, Iraq's parliament approved the Provincial Powers Law, paving the way for greater decentralization and vesting additional powers in provincial governments.<sup>32</sup> From the U.S.-led perspective, conditions were set for political reconciliation. Sunni tribal leaders were becoming increasingly involved in governance, Iraq's senior leaders cracked down on Shiite militias, Iraq's central government appeared willing to cede authorities to local and regional bodies, and everyone was fighting Al-Qa'ida.



## U.S. Withdrawal and the Widening Sectarian Split

By June 2010, conditions deteriorated in large part because Maliki's government never made good on its 2008 promises.<sup>33</sup> Maliki's party failed to earn as many seats as the Sunni-heavy Iraqi Nationalist Party, which should have signaled new national leadership.<sup>34</sup> Yet, just several months before, the Iraqi Supreme Court reinterpreted the constitution to allow parliament's 'winning coalition' to be formed after the election, condemning the country to six months of fragmented, ineffective governance as dominant factions tried to solidify control. Eventually, Prime Minister Maliki struck a deal with Moqtada al Sadr's faction and regained control over Parliament. In an effort to prevent further fracturing, senior leaders carved out an agreement that supported second terms for Iraq's President and Prime Minister, while guaranteeing the Ministry of Defense and other cabinet positions to the Iraqi Nationalist Party.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, when Maliki unveiled his new cabinet, he withheld nominations for the Ministries of Defense, Interior, and State and National Security. His decision to place acting ministers in these critical security institutions reinforced sectarian fears among the Sunnis and signaled renewed efforts to consolidate authority.<sup>36</sup>

Although many thought these fears sensationalized, Prime Minister Maliki's own son led the raid to arrest Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi shortly after U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq.<sup>37</sup> This led to another Sunni government boycott and additional concessions from Maliki's government in order to bring the Sunnis back. The reprieve and return to governance was short-lived, though – in part because of Maliki's continued resistance to empower regional governments.<sup>38</sup> After President Talibani's stroke in late 2012, Maliki moved against the Sunni finance minister, sparking wide-spread protests among Iraq's Sunni communities.<sup>39</sup>

## Governance Unravels

For the first few months of 2013, anti-government protests and demonstrations were common within most of Iraq's Sunni communities. Because Iraq's security forces were predominantly Shiite, confrontations between protestors and government forces inflamed tensions and invited retaliation.<sup>40</sup> In late spring, Iraqi security forces raided a protest camp in Hawijah, killing approximately 40 civilians and sparking a firestorm that soon swept across western Iraq.<sup>41</sup> Sunnis withdrew from Parliament and the United States again pressured Maliki to stabilize the situation. Once again, Iraq's politicians turned to the Provincial Powers Law to calm tensions and reduce sectarian fears. Prime Minister Maliki pushed through amendments giving shares of oil revenue and promising additional autonomy to the provinces.<sup>42</sup> Maliki eventually offered additional concessions aimed at curbing abuses of authority and eliminating some of the de-Baathification rules, but none of these led to reconciliation.<sup>43</sup>

As a result, the security situation continued to deteriorate. By late 2013, the newly formed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant was conducting frequent operations against Iraqi security forces. After one particularly deadly attack, Prime Minister Maliki ordered the arrest of Ahmad al-Alwani, another Sunni legislator.<sup>44</sup> When the Prime Minister later ordered government forces to shut down a Sunni protest in Ramadi, elements of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant surged to their aid. Islamic State forces quickly took control of Ramadi, Fallujah and a number of smaller western towns.<sup>45</sup>

## ISIL Expands Its Footprint

Although ISIL's assault on western Iraq was initially supported by disenfranchised Sunnis, tribal leaders appeared to prevent widespread rebellion and

actively worked with Maliki's government to repel the invaders.<sup>46</sup> By January 2014, militia and tribal forces had helped regain most of Ramadi but could not eject ISIL forces from Fallujah.<sup>47</sup> In June, conditions took a dramatic turn for the worse after thousands of Islamic State fighters from Syria joined their forces in Iraq. Once Iraqi Security Forces abandoned posts and property, resistance melted away and ISIL took control of Mosul.<sup>48</sup> Iraqi Security Forces' abandonment of Mosul set the stage for the coming weeks as ISIL pushed further south, taking Tikrit and pressing east into the Diyala province.<sup>49</sup> By late summer 2014, Islamic State fighters entered territory protected by the Kurdish Regional Government, easily dislodging Peshmerga fighters and prompting tens of thousands of civilians to flee. ISIL's ability to rapidly approach, surround, and control large portions of Iraq, combined with the growing humanitarian crisis, prompted the United States and its western allies to respond.

#### Syria – Assad Maintains Control

The history behind Syria's problems is just as fragmented and complex as the situation in Iraq. Four years ago, anti-government protests in Syria led to increasingly violent government responses. Yet, the more the government fought to suppress protests and restore order, the more they fomented unrest. By June 2011, Syrian Army defectors and other local fighters formed armed insurgent groups and actively fought government forces.<sup>50</sup> By February 2012, the back-and-forth violence became so widespread the conflict was widely recognized as civil war with Syrian President Assad's government squaring off against a number of disparate factions.

President Assad's government has been accused of countless atrocities, including using chemical weapons. By 2012, however, the government appeared to stop using ground forces to assault most of the turbulent areas. Some analysts believe

this decision was tied to at least limited desertions by Assad's infantry, a majority of which were Sunni Arabs.<sup>51</sup> Instead of seizing urban areas, the government typically surrounds and lays siege to towns and cities – effectively controlling access and, in many cases, limiting utility services, medical care, and basic necessities.<sup>52</sup> Because many of these sieges last years – or until the town collapses – victims refer to the practice as, “tansheef al bakhar,” which means draining the sea to kill the fish (the U.N. refers to the strategy as “surrender or starve”).<sup>53</sup> Once the town is encircled, the government uses a variety of indirect and other explosive weapons to punish neighborhoods linked to opposition groups. When attacked, government forces respond with overwhelming, indiscriminate force targeting the civilian population.<sup>54</sup> U.N. reports also highlight pro-Assad paramilitary groups like the National Defense Force and foreign, external support from Hizbollah and Iraq's Shiite militias.

Syria's most recent presidential election was June 2014. Although the U.S. and other western allies reject the election as fraudulent, Assad claimed victory with 87% of the vote.<sup>55</sup> According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, more than ten million people – or approximately half the country's population – have been displaced, and the civilian death toll is in the hundreds of thousands.<sup>56</sup>

### Opposition and Rebel Groups (Anti-Assad)

Syria's civil war was initially characterized by hundreds, now thousands, of independent opposition groups representing a variety of grievances, beliefs, and tribes. Still, anti-government forces generally fall into one of two primary camps: rebel groups supporting and supported by one of the political opposition groups, and Islamist or Jihadist groups advocating religious governance based on Sharia law. According to current estimates, there are between 75,000 and 135,000 armed insurgents actively

fighting Assad's regime and each other.<sup>57</sup> The sheer number of rebel groups and their differing agendas creates internal problems and complicates external support.

Together, these groups would be able to leverage resources and present more consistent challenges to the regime. Divided, their individual vulnerabilities make them susceptible to exploitation by the government and other armed factions.

Today, the U.S. government recognizes and supports one political opposition group and two armed rebel coalitions. In 2014, the United States recognized the Syrian Opposition Coalition as the legitimate Syrian opposition government and extended mission status to their office in the United States.<sup>58</sup> Because the Syrian Opposition Coalition participated in diplomatic negotiations with Assad's government last year, other groups reject their claims and continue fighting for control.<sup>59</sup>

Much of United States' materiel support is extended to various armed groups aligned with the Supreme Military Coordination Council of the Free Syrian Army.<sup>60</sup> By mid-summer 2014, though, rivalries and other differences appeared to be fragmenting the council, further complicating U.S. efforts. More alarmingly, U.N. reports suggest groups associated with the Free Syrian Army are committing torture, murder, and attacking pro-Assad civilian populations.<sup>61</sup> Some of these reports are doubtless spurring U.S. efforts to vet, equip and train select opposition groups more carefully. Yet, some rebel leaders believe U.S. policy will eventually create warlords whose interests are less freedom and democracy and more personal ambition.<sup>62</sup> The United States also supports Kurdish People's Protection Units, which were created after Assad redeployed his forces from predominantly Kurdish areas to more important towns.<sup>63</sup> Last year, these militia groups established their own administration in Syria's northern

territory and actively fight government, anti-government, and jihadi forces in areas under their control.<sup>64</sup> Regardless of where they are, however, rebel opposition groups find themselves fighting on two fronts – one against the regime and another against Islamist/Jihadist factions.

### The Islamic Front (Anti-Assad)

Islamist groups have always been present within the loose assortment of armed rebel groups actively opposing the Assad regime. As the civil war deepened and ideological differences surfaced, however, many Islamist groups distanced themselves from the otherwise secular opposition. As its name implies, the Islamic Front wants to replace Assad's regime with an Islamic government and prosecute elements of Assad's security apparatus. They are also the most powerful armed group in northern Syria – but some analysts believe ideological and operational differences create vulnerabilities that may fracture this large coalition.<sup>65</sup>

Last year, the Islamic Front and members of two other Islamist organizations publicly castigated the Syrian Opposition Coalition – claiming the opposition had not earned the right to represent Syrian interests because it was not actively engaged in armed conflict.<sup>66</sup> Interestingly enough, although the Islamic Front actively boycotted last year's presidential elections, its leaders protected the process by prohibiting attacks on polling places and voters.<sup>67</sup> The Islamic Front rejects ISIL's claim to Syrian territory, and is actively fighting ISIL for control.<sup>68</sup>

### Jihadist Groups (Anti-Everyone)

Today, there are two principal Jihadist groups actively fighting in Syria – the Al-Qa'ida affiliate Jabhat al Nusra, and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. On the

surface, both groups have much in common with the Islamic Front - except the Islamic Front believes in the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria.

In the early days of the Syrian civil war, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (ISIL's leader), actively encouraged armed resistance, but his calls for a regional war and a regional Islamic state soon put him at odds with Syrian Islamist groups.<sup>69</sup> Like the Islamic Front, Jabhat al Nusra rejects Baghdadi's claim for the caliphate and openly fights ISIL within Syria. In some ways, ISIL represents a greater threat to rebel and Islamist groups than Assad's forces. As a result, some Islamic Front subordinates and secular rebels have coordinated attacks and other operations with Jabhat al Nusra in order to actively oppose ISIL.<sup>70</sup>

U.N. and U.S. reports continue to depict Jabhat al Nusra as a competent, lethal opponent. Their success and operational prowess continues to attract support from other factions and brings additional resources and foreign fighters.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, ISIL has proven its ability to take advantage of instability, dislodge opponents, and establish its own form of governance while going toe-to-toe with opposition militaries.

#### U.S. Targets ISIL

The President's strategy against ISIL has been characterized as Iraq-first, devoting the lion's share of resources and support to the Iraqi government in order to stall ISIL's advance and regain lost ground.<sup>72</sup> U.S. military efforts are directed by General Lloyd Austin, Commander of United States Central Command, through Lieutenant General James Terry, Commander of Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve. Late last year, President Obama authorized deployment of roughly 3,100 U.S. personnel, most of whom will conduct "train and assist missions" with Iraqi

Security Forces and Kurdish Peshmerga units.<sup>73</sup> Lieutenant General Terry expects as many as 1,500 coalition partners to augment U.S. forces in the coming months.<sup>74</sup>

Although the Obama Administration insists constitutional and statutory authorities are already sufficient to authorize current operations, on 11 February 2015 the President submitted a draft proposal to Congress for the Authorization for Use of Military Force against ISIL. If approved, the new proposal would authorize the use of force deemed “necessary and appropriate” for a period not to exceed three years, while terminating authorities currently exercised under the 2002 Authorization for Use of Military Force against Iraq.<sup>75</sup>

At the strategic level, General (ret) John Allen is the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL and coordinates much of the multi-national effort. Today, more than 60 countries are participating in the U.S.-led coalition, conducting operations along five lines of effort: supporting regional military partners; stopping the flow of foreign fighters; cutting off financing; providing humanitarian support; and countering ISIL’s messaging.<sup>76</sup> The United States advocates a peaceful transition between President Assad and an as-yet undefined transitional government, and has publicly denounced the notion of coordinating with Syrian forces.

### The Problem

Despite this large multinational coalition, U.S. efforts to degrade and destroy the Islamic State appear to be solving the wrong problem. No one can deny ISIL’s overwhelming brutality nor overlook their claims against Syrian and Iraqi sovereignty – yet degrading and destroying ISIL will not resolve the problems enabling their prominence. Clausewitz was famous for having described war as “...the continuation of policy by other means.”<sup>77</sup> War is the militarization of policy – the physical manifestation



of an unresolved conflict. It follows, then, that unless the underlying political dispute is resolved, nothing will fundamentally change and conditions for conflict will remain. This disconnect between military strategy and political end-states is all the more alarming because of the similarities in the conflicts within Iraq and Syria.

### Iraq - 2015

Today's Iraq is reminiscent of turbulent 2007, only without the large multinational coalition keeping a lid on the worst of the excesses. Politically, the country is fractured along sectarian lines now more than ever. Increasing sectarian violence, coupled with the Sunni insurgency, led to an overwhelming parliamentary change by delivering Shia Islamists control of parliament with 55% of the seats.<sup>78</sup> While the Kurds were able to maintain control over their territories – albeit with U.S. help – they took control of Kirkuk and its adjacent oil fields under the auspices of preventing ISIL's control. Shiite militias, many supported by Iran, are actively patrolling and, in many areas, have taken over the Iraqi government's security responsibilities.<sup>79</sup> What began as democratization in 2003 turned into authoritarianism in 2014.<sup>80</sup> Yet, control of the state's political apparatus is only part of the equation – the state's ability to deliver essential services is the other.

When a state fails at its essential functions, its legitimacy may falter. In such circumstances, it follows, then, that state legitimacy is a function of the state's link to public services – the more essential the state's apparatus is in delivering services and enhancing quality of life, the more legitimate its governance becomes.<sup>81</sup> Taken a step further, the theory suggests the state becomes the central focus for delivering services and enhancing life, creating a sense of national identity as a precursor to nationalism.<sup>82</sup> Prime Minister Maliki consolidated power and used state institutions as the political battleground for sectarian conflict. The state's consistent inability to deliver services to

all segments of Iraqi society led to even greater fragmentation and polarization. After all, if state legitimacy is tied to delivering services and enhancing quality of life – then whatever agency accomplishes this in the absence of the government gains legitimacy.

This is today's Iraq, where millions of disenfranchised Sunnis have long looked to their own tribes and militias for support, many of which are now sadly receiving aid from the Islamic State. The Kurds still enjoy the autonomy guaranteed them by the Iraqi constitution, and have improved their position by 'protecting' Kirkuk (a situation sure to create problems if the more pressing issues of civil war and ISIL are resolved). Finally, the Shiite communities in Iraq have, at least for now, come together to face Iraq's (and Shiism's) existential threats and once again empowered their militia forces. Many of these are remnants of the same militias whose quests for 'vengeance' in the early days of Iraq's liberation ignited the sectarian war still being fought today.

#### Syria - 2015

Despite long odds, Assad and his regime continues to weather the civil war within the country and international pressures without. Part of this is due to the fractured nature of the opposition, because there *is* no singular opposition. It is fairer to say there are multiple opposition groups, each with its own agenda, interests, and ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>83</sup> By most accounts, the regime retains support from many urban Syrians and some of the Kurds (although the absence of government troops is allowing the Kurds to lay the groundwork for autonomous rule).<sup>84</sup> Infighting among the rebel groups and conflict with Islamist and Jihadist organizations prevents the opposition from becoming strong enough to challenge Assad's rule at a national level. As a result, Assad faces less internal pressure to offer political

concessions and chooses, instead, to wear down the resistance and pit factions against one another.

For its part, the international community remains divided on Syria – or at least Assad’s Syria. Although U.S./Russian efforts to remove and destroy Syrian chemical weapons received widespread support, involvement in Syria’s civil war is met with much less enthusiasm. Part of the reason is simple – which group is empowered in a post-Assad government? Secular and Islamist opposition groups may periodically join forces against the Islamic State, but are predominantly occupied fighting the regime and each other. Both have been accused of torture and murder, and both contribute to the widespread humanitarian crisis affecting millions of Syrians today. Secular groups ostensibly support working with Western diplomats to devise a solution, yet Islamist and Jihadist groups reject external influence and refuse to participate. And, although the United States has publicly denounced Assad’s right to govern, the international community has fallen short of endorsing a violent overthrow.

### Understanding Civil War

While most agree that Syria is in the middle of a civil war, some policy makers consistently refuse to apply that label to Iraq.<sup>85</sup> Although there is no universally accepted standard for determining whether a conflict is a civil war, there are widely accepted criteria that aid analysis. For instance, the term civil war is commonly applied to armed conflict within a state’s borders, in which the government, as a combatant, “sustains and reciprocates violence.”<sup>86</sup> This definition is often augmented by reference to a certain number of deaths, usually 1,000 – some argue that number is cumulative while others suggest it represents an annual level of violence.<sup>87</sup>

This definition suggests the violence in Iraq results from civil war. Some will argue that ISIL's multi-state presence and involvement precludes declaring a civil war – the argument is largely one of semantics. Iraq's civil war may be exacerbated by ISIL, and Iraq's civil war may be prolonged because of ISIL. Yet, Iraq's civil war did not start because of ISIL – it has been ongoing since 2004.<sup>88</sup>

Based on commonly accepted definitions, then – Iraq and Syria are in the middle of civil war. At best, these civil wars will be confined to Iraq and Syria, yet it's possible these sectarian struggles will ignite a region-wide conflict. Economic theorists suggest the onset of civil war has less to do with governance or ethnicity and is, instead, a function of economic opportunity costs.<sup>89</sup> As Nicholas Sambanas noted in a 2001 study that was part of a larger World Bank sponsored project called “The Economics of Criminal and Political Violence”:

These economic theories view war as the outcome of an expected utility calculation: potential rebels evaluate their expected gains from war, given their grievances, and compare these expected gains with the expected losses, which include the opportunity costs of forgoing productive economic activity. Rebellion is therefore a rational decision. What determines whether rebellion will be observed is the financial liability of a rebel organization, which depends on the material benefits of rebellion. Warring parties are assumed to be rational though not infallible, war is assumed to generate private and public gains and losses that are unevenly distributed among the parties, and private gains explains why war may be rational for some groups when it is collectively irrational.<sup>90</sup>

Yet, research suggests not all civil wars are the same. What happens if civil war is rooted in ethnicity, where conflict is defined as, “episodes of violent conflict between governments and national, ethnic, religious, or other communal minorities (ethnic challengers) in which the challengers seek major changes in their status?”<sup>91</sup> In these cases, politics, not economic opportunity costs, becomes the catalyst for war. Ethnic

civil wars, then, are more often caused by struggles to protect ethnic identity and political rights, and are actually more likely in an ethnically fragmented society.<sup>92</sup>

The distinction between ethnic and non-ethnic civil wars is an important one, because research shows that ethnic based civil wars last longer than non-ethnic based conflict by a margin of 60 percent.<sup>93</sup> This suggests participants in ethnic civil war face significant war termination challenges – meaning the conditions necessary to end conflict peacefully take longer to achieve. When applied to civil war, bargaining theory and conflict termination suggests three conditions necessary to end these wars: the spoils of war must be divisible; government and rebel groups must perceive the same eventual end state based on relative strengths; and both sides can enforce (or at least live up to) terms in a peace agreement.<sup>94</sup> It is no wonder that conflict in Iraq and Syria continues to rage. In Syria, rebel groups believe they can wear down the government's resistance and force a bargain (the Syrian Opposition Coalition has been officially recognized by the U.S. government and has already participated in one internationally sponsored peace talk with President Assad's regime). Syria's rebels are unlikely to accept an agreement leaving Assad in power, and will not expect Assad's regime to honor cease-fire agreements. In Iraq, twelve years of mistrust, government neglect, and reciprocal sectarian fighting has eroded Sunnis' faith in unified Iraq and democracy. Every connection between the Iraqi government and Shiite militias, between the Iraqi government and Iran, and every crackdown on Sunni communities simply increases Sunni insecurity and reinforces their sectarian plight.

Both countries are fighting ethnic civil wars, which suggests the conflicts will be drawn out longer than non-ethnic conflicts. Both are fighting for ethnic identity and

political representation, making it less likely that simply improving economic opportunity through development will matter (as if that were a simple endeavor). Both conflicts feature groups consistently able to attack (and win) against government forces, increasing the rebels' perceived chances of success and decreasing their willingness to settle for less. Both were spawned through perceived acts of government aggression, making it harder for rebels to trust the government and commit to peaceful resolution.

### U.S. Options

The President's policy to "degrade and destroy" ISIL may only be marginally successful absent the more important diplomatic strategies necessary to address grievances fomenting the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars. Some suggest a level of security must be restored before diplomacy can work, and they may be right. Security, though, will not be guaranteed merely by replacing Islamic State forces (particularly in areas belonging to rival factions). The instability and lack of governance allowing ISIL to take power and assume state-like authorities will not suddenly be resolved in ISIL's absence. What, then, takes ISIL's place? This must be the focus of U.S. strategy, not the kinetic formulas necessary to degrade and destroy the Islamic State. Strategies emphasizing one country over another (e.g. Iraq over Syria) will be less successful than an integrated, coordinated approach to isolate Islamic State forces and re-establish control in both countries.

The United States can exert tremendous power and influence on geopolitical problems, yet few realistic options will achieve end-states necessary to preserve U.S. regional interests. In order to achieve its interests, American policymakers must choose the degree of involvement – essentially balancing ends, ways and means against potential risks – and continually reassessing progress. The decision to become

involved has already been made. As a result, there are several strategic choices to consider, if for no other reason than evaluating their utility in relation to each other.

### Nation-Building

Although few policymakers are actively considering a nation-building strategy for Iraq and Syria, just seven years ago the United States embraced the notion of democratic nation-building, proudly linking those policies to national security and national interests. Yet, while the benefits of democratic proliferation, development, and nation-building efforts are easily appreciated – they are far harder to achieve. Such objectives often require a mix of civil and military lines of effort to create or maintain peace and governance in openly (or potentially) hostile areas.<sup>95</sup> In other words, these operations are usually divided between the military actions necessary to create security and the civil-military actions necessary to provide governance.

As the U.S. experience in Iraq and Afghanistan showed, military conditions are often easier to set than they are to hold on to – an uncomfortable truth learned before the U.S. Civil War and repeatedly reinforced long after. In 1898, at the end of the Spanish-American war, Secretary of War Elihu Root understood social changes in Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines would take generations to accomplish, as did the Army's most senior officers charged with carrying them out:

Ultimately, the nation's soldier-administrators had but two methods they could use in uplifting America's insular wards. Persuasion and incrementalism, though the more enlightened strategy, proved frustrating, time consuming, and offered no guarantee of success. Compulsion, while certainly quicker and easier, often bred hostility and rejection. These were the horns of a dilemma on which American officials, both within the military and without, were destined to find themselves in many of the country's future nation-building endeavors.<sup>96</sup>

As it stands today, there is no feasible way to reignite nation-building efforts – even if that were the desired strategic goal. Doing so requires the United States to rebalance the already unbalanced sectarian tensions spreading rapidly across the region. Shiite-led government forces in Syria continue to crack down on rebels and Sunni Islamists across the state. Iraq’s Shiite militias continue to wage sectarian war against an increasingly disenfranchised Sunni minority, and Iraqi Military Forces have increasingly been an unwitting tool of political retaliation. In Yemen, Shiite rebels forced the elected government into hiding and are consolidating their hold over half the country. Arab coalition (Sunni) militaries would almost certainly inflame sectarian agendas even further, yet occupation by Western troops would also prevent stabilization efforts from succeeding. If the conflict in Yemen is any indication, Middle Eastern countries are already lining up along predictable sectarian lines, with Iran supporting Shiite proxy efforts against a growing list of Sunni states.

#### UN Peacekeeping Mission

In order to restart political dialogue in Iraq and Syria – and ensure it does not break down – multinational forces could destroy Islamic State fighters and their allies, reoccupy lost territory, and restore stability. At the same time, UN peacekeepers could protect civilians and begin creating the long-term security necessary for political reconciliation. Peacekeeping operations in the twenty-first century reflect different realities and missions than did the interpositional forces envisioned by the United Nations in the 1950s. Today’s peacekeepers monitor ceasefires, contain and disarm violent groups, escort humanitarian assistance shipments, protect civilians, and provide stability in post-civil war countries.<sup>97</sup>



There are 130,000 peacekeepers deployed to sixteen complex missions around the world.<sup>98</sup> And, although US officials are quick to point to the challenges associated with UN peacekeepers – namely, failures to protect civilians, national caveats, and inoperable equipment – their presence arguably makes a difference to the communities they serve. More importantly, UN peacekeeping missions represent additional opportunities to train, equip, and employ donor forces while preserving U.S. and other highly trained combat personnel for more complex operations. In addition, the scale of this peacekeeping mission brings new importance to U.S. efforts to reform UN peacekeeping policies and may elevate the issue with partner nations.

Because of the challenges tied to ethnic civil war and conflict resolution, UN Peacekeepers could deploy to the portions of Iraq and Syria still under government (and opposition) control. As the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL engages, dislodges and destroys Islamic State fighters, UN Peacekeepers would continue advancing, patrolling, and peacekeeping newly cleared areas. The United States and its allies may have to provide airlift and transportation assets to enable the UN mission, but can integrate those requirements within the broader ‘counter-ISIL’ mission it would lead.

Although a UN peacekeeping force has potential to minimize the sectarian and anti-Western sentiments triggered by Arab or Western militaries, it is doubtful near-term efforts to establish a peacekeeping mission would be approved by members of the UN Security Council. While Russia may have condemned Syria’s use of chemical weapons and supported the associated UN Resolutions, they continue recognizing Assad’s legitimacy. If the United States chooses to pursue a Chapter VI or VII peacekeeping mission, it will need Russian support and cooperation. Unless the United States gives

Russia something it needs, it is unlikely to support U.S. efforts – even if U.S. and Russian interests are somewhat aligned.

### Strengthening/Supporting Moderate Syrian Rebels

In order to prevent Syrian forces from assuming control in areas previously occupied by the Islamic State, the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL could train and equip moderate elements tied to the Syrian rebellion. Moderate rebels may resist efforts to prosecute their rebellion along sectarian lines and may represent the best alternative to the current regime. However, these same moderate rebels continue to fight Syrian Islamist groups, which are also fighting the regime and the Islamic State. Training, equipping, and supporting moderate rebels against any of the hundred or so Sunni Islamist movements could unite the Islamists and create an organization with an equally competitive claim for Syrian legitimacy. More alarmingly, the United States risks creating in Syria the same sort of warlords it sponsored in Afghanistan during (and long after) the Soviet occupation.

Ultimately, success in Syria depends on identifying the right mix of government, rebel, and Islamist participation in a power sharing agreement within a transitional government. Ousting the current regime may yield temporary results, but recent U.S. experience reinforces earlier lessons suggesting that these wars must be resolved politically. At the same time, the U.S. cannot afford to work with, or inadvertently bolster, Assad's credibility. Despite Assad's surprising resilience, rebel, Islamist and Jihadist pressures may yet lead to the regime's collapse. Even if it does not implode, attempts to coordinate anti-ISIL efforts with Syrian officials may create doubt among rebel and Coalition partners and inadvertently reduce pressure against Assad's regime.

## Iraqi Reintegration

It is difficult to imagine that the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL will encounter insurmountable problems ejecting ISIL from Iraqi territory – but this should not suggest that military operations will yield quick results or be complete in just a handful of months. Although the military challenge is perhaps the most-straight forward, it is also the most irrelevant in creating long-term stability. Absent Iraq’s political problems, ISIL would not be controlling most of Western and Northern Iraq. The Global Coalition to Counter ISIL’s chief problem will almost certainly involve synchronizing and coordinating efforts with the U.S. Department of State, and their Coalition peers, whose influence will be necessary to resolve Iraq’s political challenges.

Within Iraq, U.S. efforts could proceed along three broad lines of effort: support to Iraqi Security Forces, support to inclusive governance, and support for Provincial security. Generally speaking, support for Iraqi Security Forces includes actions already undertaken by U.S. Central Command and the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. Yet, if combat efforts are not synchronized within the broader political campaign, they risk widening the political imbalance at the heart of the problem. Absent the combat problem, Iraq’s future depends on negotiating two political hurdles – creating support for (and belief in) and inclusive government, and working with Iraq to develop a new provincial security model.

Support for an inclusive government will require renewed trust between Iraq’s Sunnis and Shiites, and years of broken promises will make that a difficult prospect at best. Still, Iraq’s Provincial Powers Law could provide the framework necessary to resolve the most contentious disputes – at the expense of a strong, centralized authority in Baghdad. Twice, Iraq used the Provincial Powers Law to draw disenfranchised

Sunnis back to the political machinery, and twice it failed to deliver substantial changes. Clearly, the Provincial Powers Law and its promise of guaranteed revenue sharing, greater autonomy, and decentralized control appeals to the Sunni community. If the central government makes good on its promises, it may once again set the stage for reintegration efforts.

It will be equally important to develop a new provincial security model that is less dependent on Iraqi Security Forces and their sectarian militia counterparts. Coalition efforts to train and equip Iraqi Security Forces should continue to emphasize the importance of an inclusive and diverse military, yet should recognize that this same military has too often been a tool of the central government. Coalition efforts could include developing a new version of the initially successful “Sons of Iraq” program from 2007 – perhaps centered on the newly emerging Iraqi National Guard concept. Finally, Coalition partners should acknowledge the cost of creating an additional institutional security layer and leverage international support to offset the additional financial burden. This modest financial support, particularly while oil revenues are near record lows, will help create and sustain a new provincial security model more responsive to local needs and less dependent on Iraq’s centrally controlled forces.

#### Recommendation and Conclusion

War is the physical manifestation of an unresolved conflict, and civil war is the physical manifestation of political disenfranchisement and alienation. If war (or conflict) begins because one side believes violence will yield a better result – then short of one party exhausting itself, conflict only ends when both parties reach a new settlement. In Iraq, years of civil war were perhaps hidden behind the veil of the U.S.-led occupation. In the years since American forces withdrew, many of Iraq’s senior leaders created a

national security system that bypassed traditional controls and placed unchecked authority in the hands of the Prime Minister. Syria's situation is worse; government forces openly clash with rebel troops and routinely target civilians. The prospects for peace are slim – Iraq may never become a stable democracy and Syria's Assad may continue clinging to power. However, the civil wars are preventing stability and security and, without those necessary social conditions, ISIL (or an ISIL-like group) will continue challenging government and opposition groups alike.

### The Nature of Wicked Problems

Today's operational environment is often characterized as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous because of the constant interaction between ever-changing combinations of variables.<sup>99</sup> The same forces driving interdependence and connectedness also link action and consequence in a more global fashion, turning regional problems into worldwide concerns. These wicked problems, as they are often described, represent unique challenges resulting from a confluence of competing needs and interests. In practice, then, wicked problems have no finite solution and frequently trigger unexpected issues, which further complicates the environment.<sup>100</sup> In order to hedge against complexity and uncertainty, today's planners focus on understanding the environment and identifying steps necessary to push towards a different state. Because each environment is unique, strategic leaders must often act in order to identify local effects and gain greater environmental understanding. In other words – wicked problems are not just hard to solve – they demand creative and flexible solutions not often championed by policy-makers.

Today's senior leaders and policy-makers seem to prefer master strategies that enumerate a handful of sequential steps necessary to achieve the desired end-state.

Unfortunately, complex adaptive systems demand equally adaptive approaches that don't lend themselves to ten or twenty year plans. Every action has associated risks that must be managed – yet those risks cannot be managed at the policy level.

### Way Ahead

On September 10, 2014, President Obama announced a four-pronged strategy to halt ISIL's momentum in an effort to buy time necessary to improve partner capacity and begin regaining lost territory. America's senior policymakers and military leaders agree that removing the dangers inherent to the Islamic State will take years – perhaps even decades – while disagreeing on exactly how to execute the complex strategy required to achieve our strategic objectives. Today, the United States and its coalition of 60 countries possess the capacity to attrite the Islamic State and gradually drive it from some of its entrenched positions. In order to change the attitudes and behaviors necessary to transform the region and create the self-sustaining stability envisioned by President Obama, the United States must fix the disconnect between the political end state and military strategy by involving the right mix of coalition, joint, and interagency resources necessary to defeat ISIL while laying the foundation necessary to restore long-term political stability.

Towards that end, the United States should renew efforts to resolve the underlying political problems in Iraq and Syria as part of its long-term strategy to degrade and destroy the Islamic State. Although this strategy requires all elements of the Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental and Multinational team to succeed, it should not be led by the Department of Defense. Military operations should be conducted as part of a whole-of-government approach, but Coalition military action is just a supporting role to the more important diplomatic efforts. Absent new political frameworks, military

action is irrelevant and may make the situation worse. Additionally, U.S. and Coalition efforts must be actively managed below the national policy level. When national security issues become politicized, decisions are made for the wrong reason and showmanship replaces strategy. The existing strategy, if nested within a larger diplomatic effort, balances risk and reward over the long term and offers the greatest opportunity to succeed.

### Endnotes

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

<sup>95</sup> Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine 1860-1941* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, 2009), 4.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>97</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Remarks by Ambassador Power, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, at the American Enterprise Institute on UN Peacekeeping Reform", November 7, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.usawcpubs.org/docview/1622003360> (accessed March 17, 2015).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Stephen J. Gerras, ed., *Strategic Leadership Primer* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2010), 48.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 36.