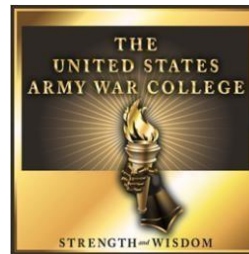


Fallacies That Must Be Exposed: Reframing Counter ISIL Strategy

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Abstract

The current strategy against ISIL is best described as containment plus with a lead from behind approach. There is a gap between the rhetoric and reality of the proposed endstate to defeat ISIL. The strategy employs ill suited proxy forces that are committing atrocities against the people they liberate. The strategy also attempts to win slowly and avoid stability operations. Though an effective degrade strategy, it cannot achieve the desired end state of destroying ISIL because of a weak Iraqi Security Force and limited U.S. means and resources. Current strategy also fails to address the root causes of the conflict, offer lasting political solutions, or win the information war. To correct these deficiencies, U.S. leaders should reframe the problem set and better align ends, ways, and means with the following strategic adjustments. Utterly defeat ISIL using rapid, decisive, kinetic and non-kinetic means. The Coalition must embrace a U.N. led Arab ground force, strike at ISIL's ability to govern, and attack ISIL's ideology more aggressively. To win the peace a new political order should be established, granting semi-autonomy to Sunnis and Kurds, and stabilized by the U.N. led Arab forces. It is also crucial to achieve similar objectives in Syria through diplomacy with Russia and Iran, similar to the P5+1 negotiations.

Fallacies That Must Be Exposed: Reframing Counter ISIL Strategy

On December 6, 2015 United States President Barack Obama publically divulged his updated counter Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIL) strategy.¹ The strategy's goal remained to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL, but the limited efforts to pursue ISIL points toward a strategy that is best described as containment plus, lead from behind, and win slowly. The strategy employs proxy forces, few U.S. boots on the ground (BOG), and a heavily restricted air coalition. This approach creates a wide gulf between the President's stated objectives and the resources and methods the U.S. employs: a tension between rhetoric and reality. While the strategy may effectively degrade ISIL, its limited character will only yield limited results. In other words, current U.S. counter ISIL strategy lacks the necessary ways and means to destroy ISIL. It is a pathway that creates significant risks, as the world can ill afford the dangers stemming from ISIL's slow decline. The next President must implement a more coherent strategy to destroy ISIL. J. Boone Bartholomees provides a model that breaks down strategy into declared, actual, and ideal containers. Using his framework, this paper reframes the ISIS problem by identifying the fallacies and gaps between declared and existing strategy, then offers recommendations for better strategic coherence that aligns U.S. efforts and resources with its goals.²

To begin with, it is important to define strategy. Although there are many definitions, according to The U.S. Army War College, strategy is "The skillful formulation, coordination, and application of ends (objectives), ways (courses of action), and means (supporting resources) to promote and defend the national interests."³ Another definition states "strategy is simply a problem-solving process. It is a common and logical way to approach any problem."⁴ A revised US strategy toward ISIL must

clarify the scope of the problem, align ends, ways, and means and apply a comprehensive approach. Before examining “the kind of war on which [we] are embarking,” we must first understand ISIL’s background.⁵

ISIL is not a new phenomenon, as it descended from Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI was an Al-Qaeda affiliate that U.S. and Iraqi forces nearly decimated, including a strike that killed their notorious leader Abu Musab al Zarqawi. Despite losing Zarqawi and his two successors, AQI survived and adapted. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi emerged as the latest leader, but he pursued a new approach that transformed AQI into ISIL.⁶ The would-be caliphate graduated from employing traditional terrorist tactics like car bombings to fielding a hybrid irregular force. ISIL then launched a full-blown offensive into Iraq, capturing the key city of Mosul, Iraq in June of 2014.⁷ Though immensely superior in numbers and weaponry, the Iraqi military crumbled, leaving sophisticated military hardware in their wake as they fled.⁸ In addition to suffering from poor leadership, Shia and Kurdish Iraqis fled the battle, returning home to defend their own people. They did not want to die for their fellow Sunni countrymen in Sunni lands.

The United States’ initial response was underwhelming and primarily consisted of intelligence sharing, command and control, logistics, training, and eventually airstrikes.⁹ Moreover, U.S. leaders severely constrained troop levels. The President and U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) leadership also restricted the air campaign in ways not seen since the Vietnam War. Despite these constraints, air strikes and the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) successfully halted ISIL’s advance.¹⁰ Secretary of State John Kerry highlighted that ISIL “is unable to operate in 20 to 25 percent of the territory it controlled a year ago.”¹¹ Likewise, CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd Austin reported that

ISIL, “is no longer able to conduct large-scale operations [or] seize and hold large swaths of new terrain...the enemy’s focus has shifted primarily to defending territory in Iraq.”¹² Secretary Kerry and General Austin make a solid case for degrading ISIL, but after a year and a half it is not destroyed. Even more concerning, after the ISF recaptured territory, Shia militia committed atrocities against the very Iraqi Sunnis they liberated from ISIL.

Rhetoric versus Reality: Declared Versus Actual U.S. Counter ISIL Strategy

The President and his National Security team’s strategy evolved over time, but the approach remains extremely limited. In the fall of 2014, President Obama declared his desired end state: to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counter-terrorism strategy.”¹³ Despite strong rhetoric, the US commitment remains sparse. In the NSS, the President implicitly endorses an Iraq-first plan and a return to the status quo for the Iraqi political landscape.¹⁴ As in the President’s December 2015 speech, the NSS advocates using indigenous forces and a coalition to counter ISIL.¹⁵ The President then listed four updated lines of effort (LOE) in his December 6, 2015 speech designed to achieve his existing end state.¹⁶

This new outlook maintains the existing desired end state, slightly expands the ways available to U.S. warfighters, but makes no substantive change to the resources allocated to counter ISIL. The President’s first LOE is “to hunt down terrorist plotters in any country where it is necessary.”¹⁷ Though this effort is nothing new, he detailed a subtle but significant adjustment to earlier plans. The President now emphasized attacking “oil tankers [and] infrastructure” beyond ISIL’s do-it-yourself refineries located near Eastern Syrian oil pools.¹⁸ Second, the President continues to “provide training and equipment to tens of thousands of Iraqi and Syrian forces fighting ISIL on the ground.”¹⁹

Third, the President emphasized cooperating with coalition partners “to disrupt plots, cut off their financing, and prevent them from recruiting more fighters.”²⁰ In what may be our most successful achievement so far in the counter-ISIL fight, the U.S. assembled a large coalition of 60+ nations, about a quarter of whom have participated in or are currently participating in the air war against ISIL. Unlike the Iraq invasion in 2003, this coalition contains significant numbers of Arab and Gulf nation partners. Furthermore, the President maintained his commitment to, “airstrikes, Special Forces, and working with local forces.”²¹ Finally, he detailed “establish[ing] a process — and timeline — to pursue ceasefires and a political resolution to the Syrian war.”²² This is a significant shift from failed U.S. attempts to oust Syrian President Bashar Al Assad, but remains a very limited approach.

As stated in the 2016 State of the Union address, President Obama believes ISIL is not an existential threat to the U.S.²³ Conversely, for ISIL this war is about survival. This is key to understanding the administration’s strategy in practice because as the Prussian General and strategist Carl von Clausewitz reasoned, “the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made...in magnitude and also in duration.”²⁴ Put another way, the existential nature of their cause drives ISIL fighters’ fanatical commitment. Meanwhile, in the U.S. we debate troops levels or how much blood and treasure we’re willing to invest. The President stressed, “We should not be drawn once more into a long and costly ground war in Iraq or Syria.”²⁵ Even ISIL and ISIL inspired attacks in Paris, San Bernardino, Brussels, and the downing of a Russian civilian airliner have not convinced the West to commit more resources to the counter-ISIL fight. However, the value of the object is higher for our Middle Eastern partners.

For the Saudis, Jordanians, and Egyptians in particular, their legitimacy, the future of their regimes, as well as their standing in the region are threatened. Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi proposed sending a Middle East ground force to fight ISIL, including armies from Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates.²⁶

Unfortunately, the coalition apparently refused el-Sisi's offer. This may be due to command and control concerns or perhaps the predominantly Shia Iraqi government was unwilling to allow foreign Sunni forces in their country. Likewise, many consider Arab armies better suited for internal deference, not expeditionary warfare.

Nevertheless, el-Sisi's bold initiative was significant as a Middle Eastern solution to a Middle Eastern problem. This plan also holds historical precedent. Between 1812 and 1818 the Ottoman Empire sent an Egyptian army to crush the Wahhabi uprising in the Arabian peninsula, an uprising that ISIL replicates today with its brutal atrocities.²⁷

Despite the rhetoric of "destroy", the reality of actual counter-ISIL strategy is a patient "lead from behind" approach.²⁸ Instead of repeating the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the President prefers fighting through proxy forces. This is advantageous to the U.S. because it is cheap and lessens U.S. BOG. The President fears committing significant U.S. ground forces to Iraq or Syria will further irritate already disenfranchised Sunnis. He argues that "if...the only measure is for us to send another 100,000 or 200,000 troops into Syria or back into Iraq...That would be a bad strategy."²⁹ From his viewpoint, "the great driver of suicide terrorism is not jihadist ideology but [U.S.] occupation."³⁰ It is not only the Sunnis who resent American stabilization, which they view as occupation. The Iranians also perceive a U.S. presence in Iraq as a threat. Yet to date, the Shia have not targeted U.S. forces in Iraq as they did between 2003 and

2011. Perhaps Iran's restraint stems from the P5+1 nuclear agreement--or simply because the U.S. has not tripped potential Iranian redlines.³¹ This paper now turns to "fallacy[ies] that must be exposed," the shortcomings and gaps in the current strategy.³²

Fallacies That Must Be Exposed

On the surface, the actual U.S. strategy resembles a policy of concurrently isolating and rolling back ISIL. A good way to describe this approach is *containment plus*, because in addition to containing ISIL, the coalition is slowly regaining territory and simultaneously attacking ISIL through limited air strikes. Containment proponents offer three rationales: First, containment will "establish conditions by which it destroys itself from within" which is a key to defeating ISIL ideology.³³ Second, containment is cheap compared to full blown invasion followed by years, or decades, of reconstruction and stability operations.³⁴ Finally, champions of containment believe defeating ISIL "is likely beyond U.S. and partner capabilities given the resources and risks that the United States and partner countries have appeared to be willing to bear."³⁵ Additionally, leading the coalition represents a heavy dose of reassurance towards coalition allies.³⁶ While a solid approach for degrading the enemy, containment plus will not, however, lead to ISIL's destruction.

The longer ISIL exists the more legitimacy it gains. ISIL is "emboldened by a purely stay-the-course approach, striking harder and winning over new recruits to its cause."³⁷ Stringing ISIL along also affords it many opportunities such as promoting its ideology, executing further terrorist attacks, expanding into failed or failing states like Libya, and continuing to brutalize and murder their own people. Another reason containment plus falls short of the desired endstate is because it cedes too much recognition and power to the enemy. Containment made sense during the Cold War

because the U.S. and the Soviet Union were comparable superpowers who threatened each others' very existence. There is no such existential threat between ISIL and the U.S.. Finally, containment lacks an expiration date. Recall the containment strategy employed against Saddam Hussein in Operations SOUTHERN and NORTHERN WATCH. Following the 1990 Gulf War and prior to the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, the U.S. and coalition partners enforced United Nations (U.N.) no-fly and no-drive zones in Iraq, for primarily humanitarian reasons. Occasionally, this required the coalition to down Iraqi aircraft and bomb vehicles or military targets within the designated zones. Yet even after a decade, this was only a recipe for maintaining the status quo, not for destroying an adversary.

Like containment, another fallacy of the current strategy is the view that treats ISIL like a terrorist group vice a state-like entity. Many describe ISIL as either the poorest state on earth or the richest terrorist group in the world. The President insists, "ISIL is certainly not a state...It is recognized by no government, nor the people it subjugates."³⁸ On the contrary, whether we like it or not, ISIL thinks and acts like it is a state.³⁹ ISIL has delivered "asphalted roads, filled grain silos, renovated bridges, built traffic circles, and offered medical services (with the exception of sophisticated surgeries)."⁴⁰ These medical services allegedly include polio vaccines.⁴¹ ISIL also harvests resources through "private properties it has seized, the taxes it is collecting, and the oil it is selling".⁴² ISIL's quasi-statehood benefits the West because unlike traditional global terror networks, ISIL has "a 'return-to-sender address'...It fights in large formations with heavy weapons that require supply trains, bases and

communication networks.”⁴³ Yet instead of attacking ISIL as an enemy state, the U.S. led coalition fights ISIL primarily through high-value individual (HVI) targeting.

HVI targeting is a resource intensive tactic disguised as a strategy that abdicates speed and mass.⁴⁴ The time required to find and fixate on a target, to create a persistent stare or “unblinking eye,” typically takes hundreds of hours and negates airpower’s fundamental asymmetric advantage: speed. Ancient strategist Sun Tzu urged his readers to find, “the quickest and most decisive victory over the enemy...through numerical superiority in general or absolute superiority at the decisive point of contact with the enemy.”⁴⁵ Put another way, “the direct annihilation of the enemy's forces must always be the dominant consideration.”⁴⁶

If current resources are primarily allocated to kill one leader at a time, the U.S. is doomed to fail because ISIL is a flat, decentralized organization with more than thirty thousand fighters.⁴⁷ Additionally, HVI hunting, as the U.S. military describes it, absorbs precious resources, especially surveillance and reconnaissance assets. The demand for these platforms is insatiably high because the enemy exploits the U.S. aversion to our own military casualties, as well as civilian casualties by operating in urban areas, near schools and mosques, and by travelling with women and children.⁴⁸ Risk averse U.S. commanders seek certainty before permitting aircrews to strike targets. While morally laudable, if the coalition hopes to destroy ISIL they need to kill ISIL fighters in significantly greater numbers, and much faster than ISIL can replenish them. Despite claims that the coalition has killed as many as 10,000 ISIL fighters in the first year of fighting, the CIA estimates ISIL replaced their losses with new foreign fighters.⁴⁹ In other words, the destroy endstate implies annihilation of the enemy while degrade suggests

attritional warfare is in order. Yet the current strategy's restrictions, caution, and under resourcing preclude effective annihilation or sufficient attrition of the enemy.

Even worse, the "whack-a-mole" aspects of decapitation tactics may actually accelerate Darwinism, in other words the strong survive or more adaptive ISIL leaders replace those killed by coalition drones. We're looking for a means to instantly neutralize an opponent with minimal effort expended, similar to the television series Star Trek where the character Mr. Spock subdued his adversaries by sneaking up behind them and knocking them out with his "Vulcan Nerve Pinch". This is in large part due to John Warden's theories on airpower, which overemphasized the value of enemy leadership, coupled with our casualty aversion.⁵⁰ Or for that matter, as Sun Tzu believed, "Your aim must be to take all under heaven intact."⁵¹ Cutting off the head of the snake is good in theory, unless the snake is a Hydra that grows back multiple heads. For instance, the U.S. killed Zarqawi, in 2006, and later his two successors. Arguably, the world is better off without Zarqawi. Yet three generations later, AQI rose from the ashes and reinvented themselves under Al-Baghdadi. Similarly, during the U.S. Civil War Southern General Stonewall Jackson died from friendly fire. Losing one of its best Generals hurt the Confederacy at Gettysburg, but ultimately the South fought on for nearly two more years.⁵² In another example, the U.S. shot down Japan's best Commander, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, during World War II. This did not end that conflict either. Similarly, U.S. drone strikes certainly degraded Al Qaeda, but even after killing Osama Bin Laden, the terrorist group persists. Clausewitz correctly argued, "Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or

defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the goal of the art of war. Pleasant as it sounds it is a fallacy that must be exposed.”⁵³

The current US strategy, to avoid costly stability or Counter Insurgency (COIN) operations, only allows a way to win the war slowly. It omits a realistic stabilization plan that supports a new vision of the post conflict environment. It is crucial that strategists not fall into the trap of narrowly focusing on winning wars decisively. Instead, they must understand and plan for both winning the war as well as winning the peace. For instance, during the Civil War, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman reasoned, “The crueler [war] is, the sooner it will be over.”⁵⁴ Yet once the war ends, winning the peace can take decades. Take for example reconstruction following the Civil War or the continued presence of U.S. bases in Germany and Japan decades following the conclusion of World War II and the Cold War. Following Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq the U.S. public and politicians have little appetite for stability or COIN operations and associated U.S. casualties unless deemed absolutely vital to U.S. interests.⁵⁵ Out of 10 priority missions listed in Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense, “Conduct Stability and Counterinsurgency Operations” comes in 9th, and reluctantly at that. In particular, “U.S. forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations,” because they are so costly.⁵⁶

Stabilization by the coalition is, nevertheless, imperative to an effective strategy because the ISF is an exhausted force. Proxy forces present several challenges.⁵⁷ Specific to the ISF, as soon as the U.S. trains them, they are thrown into the fire and suffer losses making them an unviable fighting force. Furthermore, ISF desertions are rampant. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter described the ISF as, “a combination of

disunity, deserters and 'ghost soldiers'-- who are paid on the books but don't exist."⁵⁸ Additionally, "The collapse of the Iraqi security forces and the rise of the Shiite militias have weakened Baghdad's already feeble grip on the country and empowered Tehran."⁵⁹ The endemic problems facing the ISF reduce their chances of defeating ISIL as well as their subsequent ability to secure the nation.

Finally, a major omission from U.S. strategy is that neither destroying nor containing ISIL addresses the underlying reasons for the conflict. The causes that created ISIL are deep and run throughout the Middle East. First, there are sectarian aspects to the conflict. As the predominantly Shia ISF recaptured territory, they bulldozed and burned Sunni villages, or allowed the Iranian-backed People's Mobilization Forces to do so.⁶⁰ "Sunni Muslims are being persecuted in Syria and Iraq. This blunt empirical fact...helps explain why ISIS has been so effective in recruiting so many foreign fighters to its cause."⁶¹ The current U.S. goal in Iraq is a return to the political status quo. It is an outlook that offers few methods for changing the political reality of the Sunnis in Western Iraq. The President argues that post-ISIL, the Iraqi government must administer inclusively.⁶² Yet the current strategy offers no way to enfranchise the Sunnis, offering no viable alternative to ISIL.⁶³ Many strategists predict a second "Sunni Awakening" in Iraq, but the strongest tribe, the U.S., left in 2011, leaving Iraq vulnerable to internal strife and threats like ISIL.⁶⁴ Without significant political alternatives for the Sunni, any other strategic options will fail in the long run.

Reframing Counter-ISIL Strategy

The United States needs a new strategy to destroy ISIL that effectively and holistically aligns ends, ways, and means along four new lines of effort. Reframing the current strategy first requires reconsidering the desired endstate. Both casual observers

and regional partners perceive a disingenuous disconnect between the administration's declared end state and the ways and means it employs. Containment plus will degrade, but cannot destroy ISIL due to a weakened ISF and limited coalition means and resources. The easiest way the President, or his successor, can rectify this seam is to simply change the declared end state to, just, containing ISIL. With this change, the new ends align with current ways and means. This is likely an unacceptable position, as politically no U.S. President wants to appear weak. Another option is to split the difference with a declared strategy aiming to first defeat ISIL in Iraq, while degrading ISIL in Syria. Even a delineation as subtle as this would prove more credible and better align ends, ways, and means. If the next administration maintains the current destroy endstate, a better approach is to align ways and means along the following four broad lines of effort detailed below.

Decisive Military Action: Defeat ISIL's Forces and the Perception of a State

To ultimately destroy ISIL, U.S. led forces must decimate the enemy faster than he can replenish himself. Applying Colin Powell's corollary to the Weinberger doctrine, the coalition must defeat ISIL rapidly and decisively on the ground. Such decisive operations require assuming greater risks in targeting, within the confines of the law of armed conflict. This decisive force must attack and discredit ISIL's appearance as a caliphate or state.⁶⁵ Otherwise, we are creating sanctuary for ISIL instead of for the people we aim to liberate. Put simply, the coalition must seize and relentlessly maintain the initiative.

To win decisively, the U.S. should also support Egyptian President el-Sisi's proposed Arab ground force. If employed, this U.N. led Arab force will not only help the coalition liberate Iraq from ISIL but, more importantly, stabilize it afterwards. To facilitate

this force, the U.S. should provide command and control, as is currently the case, and also embed small numbers of U.S. and Western forces to integrate the coalition. Additionally, embedded U.S. forces will improve targeting for airstrikes. Arab forces, like Egypt's, are better trained, equipped, and fresher than the ISF. Another benefit from using Arab ground forces is their linguistic advantage. Even if dialects differ, they are certainly more attuned to the culture. While still seen as outsiders or *Takfir*, Arab forces are certainly less *Takfir* than U.S. forces. Recall that in 1991, Arab forces were assigned to liberate Kuwait. Unfortunately, the presence of Arab forces will intensify local paranoia. However, this is a lesser evil for Iraqis compared to U.S. operations in Iraq between 2003 and 2011.

Many strategists and U.S. presidential candidates quibble about proposed U.S. troop increases. These numbers generally vary from five to thirty thousand.⁶⁶ But these numbers are merely a means, not a strategy. Ultimately, it is Pentagon and CENTCOM leadership who should, based on the new strategy, drive this number. More important than the specific number is maintaining a low profile and keeping ISF and Arab forces in front.⁶⁷ This will increase reassurance to allies without invoking the ire of the population, who tend to view U.S. forces as occupiers. In addition to winning decisively on the battlefield, the coalition must also defeat ISIL ideologically.

Informational Approach: Defeat the Ideology

Many argue that the U.S. and her allies cannot defeat ISIL's ideology, however, history says otherwise. For example, in World War II the Allies defeated Fascism. Likewise, in the Civil War the North defeated not only the South, but an ideology of slavery as well. Both cases, however, required attrition and massive destruction. Consider Union General William T. Sherman's March to the Sea—or the World War II

Strategic Bombing campaign that left Germany in rubble. To a lesser extent, the West also defeated Communism in Europe. There are undoubtedly still Neo-Nazis and more than a billion communists left in the world. Yet ideologies can be reduced to acceptable risk levels.

Defeating or destroying ISIL on the ground certainly helps discredit them, but the coalition must further attack ISIL's messaging to defeat ISIL's ideology. Foreign fighters are lured to ISIL not only to live in the Caliphate under Sharia, but also for "the promise of sex, violence and money." One observer suggests part of the appeal lies in "a narrative of overcoming humiliation, and a chance to recover lost dignity."⁶⁸ ISIL dispenses tens of thousands of Twitter posts daily as well as "Hollywood-style" internet recruitment videos.⁶⁹ The State Department established the "Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC)...to counter online jihadist propaganda," yet the CSCC's effort is fractional compared to ISIL's.⁷⁰ However, according to one CSCC counter-information specialist, "What we have is half a message: 'Don't do this.' But we lack the 'do this instead.' That's not very exciting."⁷¹ Winning the information war is a daunting uphill battle.

To combat ISIL ideology, the coalition should outsource the counter narrative to countries with large Muslim populations and youth bulges, as well as to Syrian refugees. The messaging will be significantly more persuasive if it comes from somewhere other than the U.S. State Department. Additionally, the RAND Corporation asserts, "the most powerful counter-ISIL messages are those delivered by disaffected former fighters."⁷² For instance, "Many former [ISIL] members have come back horrified by the brutality and corruption that they witnessed. We need to find a way for them to tell their stories to

vulnerable youth.”⁷³ The counter narrative should attack the image of ISIL as a so-called, five-star jihad.

To interdict ISIL online, the coalition should destroy cell phone towers and ISIL power networks in order to frustrate ISIL messaging and complicate their efforts to the greatest extent possible. Additionally, former Secretary of State and current Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton recently asked internet companies like Google and Twitter to “[block] or tak[e] down militant websites, videos and encrypted communications.”⁷⁴ The ultimate goal is to drive ISIL “into the margins of digital society.”⁷⁵ Finally, the U.S. and other Western nations likely need significantly more money and people invested in offensive cyber operations to diminish ISIL online. Another key to stemming ISIL’s ideology is to offer political alternatives.

Alternatives to ISIL

Any successful strategy must provide marginalized Sunnis an alternative to ISIL. The Sunnis need an autonomous, or semi-autonomous State that can coexist with the West within the norms of their culture. Unfortunately for the West, the only alternative to ISIL for disenfranchised Iraqi Sunnis is subjugation under an Iranian-backed, Shia Iraqi government. Sunnis in Syria face more of the same with Assad and the Alawites. Sun Tzu would add this: “An encircling force must leave a gap to show the surrounded troops there is a way out, so that they will not be determined to fight to the death.”⁷⁶ The surrounded troops in this case are the Sunni people. An improved strategy gives Sunnis something to fight for other than ISIL and raises the value of the object for our coalition partners and disenfranchised Sunnis. “Washington should accept the fractious reality on the ground, abandon its fixation with artificial borders, and start allowing the various parts of Iraq and Syria to embark on the journey to self determination.”⁷⁷ This is far

easier said than done. But certainly this is a better constructivist recognition of the prevailing cultural challenges than previous failed attempts to turn Iraq into a carbon copy of the U.S. through Wilsonian zeal and vigor.

The passion behind the Shia-Sunni split is probably best dealt with by buffering: “This would mean openly encouraging confederal decentralization across Iraq and Syria devolving powers from Baghdad and Damascus to the provinces while maintaining the two countries’ territorial integrity.”⁷⁸ Convincing the Iraqi, Syrian, and Iranian governments will not be easy, but neither was the P5+1 nuclear accord. A similar example was the Dayton peace accords that ended the Bosnian war.⁷⁹

Embracing Strange Bedfellows

While Russian forces’ arrival in Syria significantly complicated matters, Russia’s involvement also offers tremendous opportunity. With the introduction of Russian forces in Syria--albeit primarily targeted at anti-Assad forces--the U.S. abandoned its failed plan to remove Syrian President Bashar al Assad. Instead, according to Secretary of State John Kerry, several nations agreed on Syria’s sovereignty in addition to defeating ISIL. “Syria’s state institutions should remain intact so we don’t have the implosion that we saw in Iraq.”⁸⁰ Likewise, Kerry emphasized a need for a “credible, inclusive, non-sectarian governance followed by a new constitution and by free and fair, transparent, accountable elections run under the supervision of the United Nations.”⁸¹ Furthermore, the Secretary successfully proposed a “nationwide ceasefire to be initiated in parallel with this renewed political process.”⁸² Also encouraging is the U.S. willingness to work with Russia and Iran on Assad’s place, perhaps temporarily, in Syria’s future.⁸³

The ancient Indian strategist Kautilya is credited with promoting the concept that the enemy of my enemy is my friend.⁸⁴ Kautilya’s thinking can guide U.S. Strategic

planning against ISIL, particularly regarding Russia, Iran, and Syria. The U.S. should continue to work with Russia to defeat ISIL, to replace Assad peacefully, and to prevent an ungoverned space in Syria afterwards. According to Former President Jimmy Carter, “Assad’s only concession in four years of war was giving up chemical weapons, and he did so only under pressure from Russia and Iran.”⁸⁵ This realist, interest-based approach is unlikely to gain much support from Sunni partners, but if tied to the proposal for a Sunni state, it may create a win for everyone involved. Finally, and although beyond the scope of this paper, any reframed strategy must also contend with ISIL in Africa, especially in Libya.

Conclusion

The current strategy against ISIL is, at best, containment plus. The strategy uses a lead from behind approach with ill suited proxy forces that are committing atrocities against the people they liberate. Furthermore, the strategy represents an attempt to win slowly and avoid stability or COIN operations. Containment plus is an effective strategy to degrade ISIL. However, limited ways and means prevent it from ever achieving the desired end state of destroying ISIL. This highlights the dangerous gap between the rhetoric and the reality of the proposed endstate, of ultimately destroying ISIL. This gap is evident to domestic audiences, in addition to our coalition partners and the enemy. Perhaps most problematic, current strategy also fails to address the root causes of the conflict or offer alternative and lasting political solutions to disenfranchised Sunnis in Syria and Iraq. Lastly, the U.S. is losing the information war. To correct these deficiencies and increase the likelihood of destroying or defeating ISIL and winning the peace in the long run, U.S. leaders and coalition allies should reframe the problem set and employ the following strategic adjustments that better align ends, ways, and means.

The U.S.-led coalition must utterly defeat ISIL using rapid, decisive, kinetic and non-kinetic means. Such decisive operations require an Arab ground force, small numbers of U.S. forces providing command, control, and integration as well as assuming greater risk in targeting. This expanded force should strike at ISIL's ability to govern. Moreover, the coalition must attack ISIL's ideology more aggressively by interdicting and countering ISIL's media messaging. Once the battle is won, and the black flags fall in Raqqa and Mosul, winning the peace requires increasing the value of the object for marginalized Sunnis. A new political order should be established, possibly through new Arab developed political boundaries, or through loose federations that grant semi-autonomy to Sunnis and Kurds. This new found peace should be stabilized with the aforementioned, U.N. led Arab forces. It is also crucial to achieve similar objectives in Syria requiring intense diplomacy with Assad's benefactors Russia and Iran, similar to the P5+1 negotiations.

Endnotes

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⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88.

⁶ Kimberly Kagan, Frederick W. Kagan, and Jessica D. Lewis, *A Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State*, Middle East Security Report, no. 23 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of

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⁷ General Lloyd J. Austin, Commander U.S. Central Command, "Operation Inherent Resolve," *Congressional Record* (September 16, 2015), 3.

⁸ Ali Khedery, "Iraq in Pieces: Breaking Up to Stay Together," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November/December 2015).

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¹³ President Barack Obama, "We Will Degrade and Ultimately Destroy ISIL," public speech, The White House, Washington, DC, September 10, 2014, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isil> (accessed September 30, 2015).

¹⁴ Barack Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2015), 10, 16, https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy.pdf (accessed September 30, 2015). Of note, there was only one paragraph in the NSS dedicated solely to ISIL, indicating how little weight ISIL carried for the Obama Administration. Also of note, "Our support is tied to the [Iraqi] government's willingness to govern effectively and inclusively and to ensure ISIL cannot sustain a safe haven on Iraqi territory."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶ Obama, "President Obama Addresses the Nation on Keeping the American People Safe."

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Ibid. More detail from the president, “that is how we’ll achieve a more sustainable victory. And it won’t require us sending a new generation of Americans overseas to fight and die for another decade on foreign soil.”

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³⁶ Juneau, "Containing the Islamic State," 39-41.

³⁷ Jordan Chandler and Peter Feaver, "Obama's Thin Gray Line," *Foreignpolicy.com*, December 2, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/02/obamas-thin-gray-line/> (accessed December 13, 2015).

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