

American Foreign Policy Towards the Islamic State

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Abstract

As the Islamic State evolved, so did American foreign policy and the Obama administration's ability to counter threats such as the Islamic State (IS). The Administration's strategy is comprehensive and utilizes the entire capacity of the US government, its partners, and its membership organizations. The nine core elements are distinct, and each one has ratified national and international policies to demonstrate the proactive pursuit of each line of effort. In looking at statements and resolutions drafted by the UN and G-7, it is clear that the United States is driving the foreign policy discussion in the fight against IS.

It is also clear that the policy-makers behind Operation Inherent Resolve have broken free from the foreign policy axioms that hindered the Bush Administration officials from engaging in effective decision-making. Instead of superimposing liberal democratic ideals on Iraqi institutions, the United States is supporting effective and inclusive governance. Additionally, the United States is no longer of searching for American interests within American values. The US government views the fight against IS to an issue of regional and global security and enlisted its partners in the Middle East, NATO, and the United Nations to support its mission of degrading and ultimately destroying the Islamic State. This paper examines how the United States' failed Iraq policy facilitated the rise of a radical Sunni insurgency, analyzes the United States' foreign policy towards the Islamic State, and offers criticism of American strategy.

About the Author

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Introduction

On June 6, 2014, a convoy of pickup trucks entered the two-man checkpoints in the city of Mosul, a city in the northern Iraqi Nineveh province. Two days later, despite the efforts of four divisions of the Iraqi Security Forces and air support from Western and Gulf nations, the second-largest city in Iraq fell to IS, a jihadist group recently divorced from al Qaeda.

Throughout northern Iraq and nearby Syria, scenarios that American involvement in Iraq were intended to have prevented were occurring. The democratic, liberalized Iraq that the Bush Administration had envisioned was never actualized. The sequence of steps taken by the provisional government had robbed the Iraqi state of its ability to effectively administer services and provide security for their people, aggravating of sectarian conflict. The Obama Administration quickly became cognizant of the scope of the Islamic State and its evolution from an al Qaeda affiliate to a territory-holding terrorist organization with a concrete hierarchy and a hold on a stockpile of weapons and petroleum. Under President Obama, the Administration devised a nine-point strategy that culminated in Operation Inherent Resolve, a comprehensive plan to degrade and ultimately destroy IS.

The Neoconservative Strategy

The problematic nature of American foreign policy in Iraq can be traced back to the factors surrounding the invasion of the Iraqi state in 2003. In his book *Overreach: Delusions of Regime Change in Iraq*, Michael MacDonald offers multiple hypotheses to why President

George W. Bush ultimately called for the invasion of Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein in favor of a democratic regime. He argues that Hussein's Iraq was on the American governmental agenda since the late 1970s, given its strategic importance as a buffer zone between revolutionary Iran and Israel, a source of oil, and a springboard for American influence in the Middle East. MacDonald identifies three groups of supporters for the war in Iraq- neoconservatives, neoliberals, and liberal hawks, all of which ascribed to foreign policy axioms that would fail in Iraq. This broad base of support, including Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Senator Hillary Clinton, believed that American values and American interests were one and the same. They also believed, just as incorrectly, that American values were universal (MacDonald, 2014).

When American-led coalition forces took Baghdad in 2003, Paul Bremer was appointed to the position of Coalition Provisional Administrator. As CPA, Bremer was the top civilian administrator and chief executive in Iraq, and could rule by decree. His role in occupied Iraq has been compared to General MacArthur in Japan and the General Lucius Clay, who was in charge American zone in Germany after World War II. Republicans and Democrats debated on the issue of how how to govern the new Iraqi state. Many stood behind the "fire the coach and keep the team" method, which entailed deposing Saddam Hussein and maintaining the administration and civil service which could be of use under new leadership. Bremer, however, got rid of a majority of the 'team,' disbanding the military and 'de-Ba'athifying' the state by dissolving Hussein's Arab Socialist party, all with the intent of democratizing Iraq. The Ba'ath Party, led by Hussein and composed of socialists and Arab nationalists, had dominated Iraqi politics since 1968. This "disband, de-Ba'athify, democratize" approach weakened the administrative ability of the Iraqi state beyond its already crippled condition due to US-led sanctions (Al-Ali, 2014). The specter of

democracy in Shi'a-majority Iraq inspired fear in the Sunni minority, former Ba'athists, and former military officers. Local Sunni sheiks who had exercised local authority through political deals with the Hussein regime were also wary of changes in the composition of the Iraqi government. This fear of reprisal, combined with a history of violence between factions and the decreased utility of central authority in Baghdad prompted a Sunni insurgency to form, with increased intensity in the tribal areas of the northern Anbar province. Meanwhile, foreign fighters began to flow into Anbar province. These fighters were part of Tawlid al Jihad (Unity of God and Jihad), later Tanzim Qaedat al Jihad fi Bilad al Rafidayn, or al Qaeda in Iraq. They were led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian Sunni radical who had been trained in Afghanistan and was granted a \$200,000 loan by Osama Bin Laden himself (Weiss, 2015).

Counterinsurgency Under Petraeus

In response to the influx of foreign fighters in the Anbar region, General David Petraeus bolstered the counterinsurgency capacity of the American military. First, he ordered the publication of a counterinsurgency (COIN) manual to be distributed to the United States Marine Corps. Then, he evaluated and exploited the political situation in Anbar Province, co-opting the Anbar Sheiks and allying against al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the group that would later become the Islamic State, who had overstepped and alienated the local Sunni sheiks (MacDonald, 2014). AQI was terrorizing the Shi'a population and bombing religious sites, sparking sectarian reprisals that necessitated protection in tribal areas. The sheiks in the Anbar province joined Petraeus's campaign against al Qaeda in what became known as the Anbar Awakening. Petraeus's COIN campaign paved the way for counterinsurgency successes and the reduction of violence in the beginning of 2007.

However, the coalition-Anbari sheik alliance may have contributed to what would become ISIL's "us against the world" mentality, as it separated radical foreign fighters from the indigenous Sunni communities and the tribal networks they claimed to protect.

Meanwhile, the insurgency was evolving in response to leadership changes and death. On June 7, 2006, two US F-16 fighters dropped two 500-pound laser and GPS-guided bombs on al-Zarqawi's safehouse in Baqubah, which resulted in his death (Roberts, 2006). Since the death of al-Zarqawi, a number of emirs (leaders) have succeeded Zarqawi as emir of AQI and its evolved forms. These include Abu Ayyub al Masri, Abu Omar al Baghdadi, and current emir Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. They all remain committed to AQI's objectives of expelling the US from Iraq and turning Iraq and the surrounding region into a Sunni caliphate, but have operated under different names. In October 2006, internet messages circulating between AQI and several smaller insurgent groups referred to the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in western and central Iraq. Eight groups in total, calling themselves the Mujahideen Shura Council, collectively established ISI (Weiss, 2015). Under al Baghdadi's leadership, militants were sent to engage in the Syrian conflict, eventually expanding the mission of the organization and prompting ISI to become ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) or ISIL (the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant). In 2014, al Qaeda general Ayman al Zawahiri disavowed the Islamic State, denouncing any affiliation with Baghdadi's organization (Weiss, 2015). Since that divorce, the US government saw ISIL as a distinct threat, an umbrella organization that captured much of the radical Sunni fighters that emerged in the aftermath of the Iraq war. In June 2014, Baghdadi declared his insurgency a "caliphate," dropping all previous acronyms and becoming the Islamic State.

The Administration's Strategy

Three primary sources were used to determine the objectives of US foreign policy related to IS in Iraq and Syria – G-7 Statement on joint action against IS released by the US Department of State, President Barack Obama's address to the nation on the IS threat, and the Administration's official strategy on countering the Islamic State. All three sources contain similar language and address overlapping policy objectives. The most detailed strategy for countering the IS threat is the administration's strategy, which alludes to nine "core elements" or "lines of effort" that work in harmony towards the destruction of IS. These core elements include supporting effective governance in Iraq, denying IS safe haven, building partner capacity, enhancing intelligence collection, disrupting IS's finances, exposing IS's true nature, disrupting the flow of foreign fighters, protecting the homeland, and providing humanitarian support (White House, 2015). Manifested in policy form, these nine objectives amalgamate into Operation Inherent Resolve, a \$5.6 billion program implemented by the Department of Defense and the Department of State with the goal of destroying IS. In this section I will detail how the United States intends to accomplish each of these regional objectives.

Winning the Material War

The first core element mentioned in the Administration's strategy is supporting effective governance in Iraq. American and coalition support for the Iraqi government is evident in almost every document pertaining to counter-IS efforts. For example, in the G-7 Statement, which was drafted by the member states and the High Representative of the European Union, the ministers "affirm [their] support for the new Iraqi government and encourage Prime Minister al Abadi to rapidly develop and implement his government's National Program as well as an inclusive policy

which unifies the country by representing and defending the interests of all Iraqi men and women” (Embassy of the United States, 2015). The White House Fact Sheet states that “[The United States is] supporting the new Iraqi government on efforts to govern inclusively and effectively.” In President Obama’s address to the nation on the IS threat, he states that he “insisted that additional US action [depends] on Iraqis forming an inclusive government.” Inclusivity in Iraqi politics is a major focal point that the current administration is rightfully concerned with given the incidence of sectarian violence in Iraq and tensions between Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds. After the violent treatment of Sunni communities by former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, fears exist that al Abadi, a Shi’a prime minister, will continue this anti-Sunni policy. Iraqi security forces are also overwhelmingly Shi’a and work with Shi’a militia from Iran. Thus, fostering inclusivity in both politics and the armed forces will calm fears of reprisal from the Shi’a majority in Iraq.

Perhaps the most costly line of effort in the Administration’s counter-IS strategy is the commitment to denying IS safe-haven. In his address on IS, President Obama asserts, “a core principle of my presidency is that, if you threaten America, you will find no safe-haven” (Obama, 2014). To accomplish this, the Administration calls for a “systematic campaign of airstrikes,” spanning both Iraq and Syria (White House, 2014). According to Kenneth Katzman, a specialist in Middle Eastern affairs, the goals of the campaign have evolved from “stopping the advance of Islamic State forces” and protecting American personnel and religious minorities, to supporting military operations. Presently, the airstrike campaign provides support for Iraqi ground forces and also works to destroy IS’s 'logistical and operational capability.' For example, on April 21, 2015, alone, coalition military forces conducted 22 airstrikes within Iraq using fighter, bomber, and 'remotely piloted aircraft'. These airstrikes were used to destroy IS artillery

weapons, vehicles, fighting positions, tactical units, heavy machine guns, buildings, excavators, mortar systems, staging areas, and an IED factory (Department of Defense, 2015). Conceivably, IS's 'safe-havens' are located in larger cities like Mosul and Fallujah. The largest planned offensive in place is a plan to retake Mosul, which fell to IS forces in June 2014. The first phase of the liberation, known as "Fatah" or "Conquest," has begun, with the 15th Iraqi Army division working side-by-side with Kurdish forces in Makhmour to take back neighboring villages and push Islamic State rocket teams further away from American and Iraqi bases. Since January of 2015, the city has been surrounded by Kurdish forces with the intent to box in militants and disrupt supply routes. American airstrikes have been carried out against infrastructural and military targets, including bunkers and armored vehicles (Department of Defense, 2015).

Building partner capacity is a longstanding strategic goal in the broader Middle East region, but is an especially salient one in the battle against IS. The United States relies on military and paramilitary forces both on the ground and in the air to compliment its military strategy. For example, Jordan is assisting in launching airstrikes in Iraq; while in Syria its regional partners include Jordan, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates. On the ground, the United States depends on Iraqi security forces, Shi'a militia, and Kurdish forces to regain territory while providing air support. The program that best demonstrates the United States' commitment to building partner capacity is the \$1.6 billion Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF), which provides for training sites, supplies and equipment for twelve Iraqi brigades. The administration's strategy contains provisions specifying to "[provide] the resources to help reconstitute and develop security forces" (White House, 2015). This includes sending 475 American service members to Iraq to train security forces, as well as to set up National Guard units. President Barack Obama ensures that "these American forces will not have a combat

mission...but they are needed to support Iraqi and Kurdish forces with training, intelligence, and equipment” (Obama, 2014). The G-7 statement by foreign ministers employs more passive language. In it, the ministers “welcome all contributions to improve security, including by means of training and equipment” (Embassy of the United States, 2015). Despite this difference, the influence of the administration’s strategy on joint documents is glaring. One criticism of how the United States builds partner capacity involves the entities accepted into the security coalition. In Iraq, the United States is training Peshmerga militia fighters loyal to the Kurdistan Regional Government who have only temporarily set aside their separatist grievances against the Iraqi government to fight the IS threat. The Central Intelligence Agency has even been granted permission to funnel weapons and equipment from the Iraqi Security Forces to Kurdish forces (Katzman, 2014). In Syria, the administration has considered co-opting what President Obama calls the “moderate” opposition, and what Rear Admiral John Kirby refers to as “vetted Syrians”. What was once a 3-year program to train and equip 5,400 members of the Syrian opposition, using regional partners like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar to “host program activities,” has been stalled. However, the Syrian Democratic Forces and the New Syrian Army remain in the program. The United States is arming and training multiple rebel militias with arguably little promise that they will remain loyal to the United States once the IS conflict is resolved.

One of the major challenges facing the United States and the entire anti-IS coalition is the task of disrupting their financing, which, unlike other jihadist groups, is not primarily funded by foreign donations (Johnson, 2015). In contrast, IS’s main revenue stream comes from selling oil. According to the Congressional Research Service, the United States is pursuing a three-pronged approach to disrupting their finances- attacking revenue streams, restricting their access to the

international financial system, and imposing sanctions on IS officials and their external financial backers. Again, the United States turns to their regional partners, the United Nations, and the military to accomplish these objectives. First, the United States is pushing partners to draft legislation targeting cross-border smuggling networks. Unfortunately, these laws are often unenforced. Military strikes on petroleum collection points and refineries, however, have reduced IS oil revenues from one million dollars a day to several million dollars a week (Katzman, 2014). The United States also aims to curb IS access to Iraqi banks, and works with the Iraqi and international financial community to limit IS's ability to store and transfer money. In September 2014, The United Nations Security Council passed resolution 2178, which worked to prevent the flow of funding to IS. Lastly, the US Department of Treasury identifies and sanctions individuals involved in IS's funding and recruiting efforts. Through this three-pronged approach-- unilateral, regional, and international financial disruption, the United States is constraining IS' funding and supplies.

Winning the Rhetorical War

Beyond material war, United States is also waging a psychological battle against the Islamic State. Three of the nine core elements will be referred to as the heart of the Administration's Strategy - namely, exposing IS's true nature, disrupting the flow of foreign fighters, and protecting the homeland. These objectives are all concerned with the hearts and minds of potential jihadists, and winning the rhetorical war against radical Islam. The United States has expressed their commitment to working alongside partners within the Muslim world to "highlight IS's hypocrisy and counter its false claims of acting in the name of religion" (White House, 2015). President Obama has emphasized IS's "Un-Islamic" nature in multiple speeches, and Secretary of State John Kerry has ceased to refer to IS as the Islamic State, preferring the

Arabic acronym Da'esh (Dawla Islamiyya Iraq wa al-Sham). Delegitimizing IS's message is a critical step in stemming their efforts, which have brought their casualty-to-replacement ratios "close to equal" (Katzman, 2014) The White House describes IS as an organization that is "well-resourced and has demonstrated an ability to recruit and radicalize through social media" (White House, 2015). The Islamic State has published its manifesto online, is active on social media sites like Twitter, and is estimated to have recruited 20,000 foreign fighters globally-3,400 of those from Western countries (White House, 2015). The Brookings Center for Middle East Policy estimates that there are no fewer than 36,000 Twitter accounts supporting IS (Berger, 2015). In response to these efforts, the United States has facilitated the creation and adoption of United Nation Security Council Resolutions 2170 and 2178. UNSCR 2170 calls upon all member states "to take national measures to suppress the flow of foreign fighters..." while UNSCR 2178 requires member states to prevent the "recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of [foreign fighters]" (Katzman, 2014). Additionally, Robert Bradtke of the State Department works with partners in Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East to curtail the flow of foreign fighters from their respective countries (Katzman, 2014).

Curbing the surge of combatants from Western countries is related to the most abstract objective cited within the nine "core elements," which is that of protecting the homeland, the United States. The primary rhetoric in all documents that have referenced the Islamic State released by the US Government is that "if left unchecked," IS could potentially stage an attack on the United States or its allies. For example, the Administration Strategy Fact Sheet states, "if left unchecked, [the Islamic State] could pose a growing threat to the United States and others beyond the region." It also articulates fears about foreign fighters returning to their place of origin. The US Government is "[concerned] that these trained and battle-hardened fighters will

try to return to their home countries and carry out deadly attacks” (White House, 2015). The Islamic State has, in fact, referred to an invasion of the United States, and created images of the jihadist black flag flying atop the White House. They have also referred to the 'Fall of Rome.' Whether this refers to the actual Italian city, the 'American Empire,' or the general Western world is largely unclear. While it is also uncertain whether IS has the resources to organize such an attack, the American intelligence community coordinates with source, transit, and returnee destination countries to monitor threats (Katzman, 2015).

Stemming the Crisis

Lastly, the United States is committed to providing humanitarian aid to assuage the refugee and displaced persons crisis in Iraq and Syria. Since the invasion in 2003, the United States has paired its military efforts in the region with humanitarian aid. Between 2003 and 2012, the US provided 31% of all humanitarian assistance to Iraq, a total of \$36 million (Global Humanitarian Initiative, 2015). In the fight against the Islamic State, the need to provide food, water, and supplies to Iraqis is just as immediate. In August of 2014, as American forces carried out airstrikes on Amirli, a farming community 105 miles north of Baghdad that had been besieged by IS, coalition forces also dropped 10,500 gallons of fresh water and 7,000 MREs (meals ready to eat). In Erbil, another city in northern Iraq, ethnic Yazidi refugees under the protection of Kurdish forces received 5,300 gallons of drinking water and 8,000 MREs (Griffin, 2015). Much of the aid provided to Iraq is coordinated through the United Nations. A Strategic Response Plan, initiated by the United Nations in 2014, requested \$3.7 billion in aid (Global Humanitarian Initiative, 2015). The United States is also the single-largest donor of humanitarian aid for those affected by the Syria crisis. USAID estimates that 7.6 million Syrians are internally displaced, and 3.9 million Syrians are displaced to neighboring countries. Since fiscal year 2012,

the US Government has provided Syria over \$3 billion in humanitarian assistance (USAID, 2015). Displaced populations also put pressure on the Lebanese, Jordanian, and Turkish governments. The infrastructures that are in place are inadequate to accommodate the thousands of refugees in neighboring countries' schools and hospitals. Although the United States is a leader in providing humanitarian support to both nations, donor countries have failed to keep up with what USAID calls "the biggest humanitarian emergency of our era."

Conclusion

As the situation in Iraq deteriorated, it became clear that the missteps of the coalition government led to a burgeoning Sunni insurgency that preyed on the populace's fears of Western imperialism and ethnic reprisal. From the ashes rose Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi's self-declared caliphate, and in response, the Obama Administration has forged a comprehensive strategy to counter the Islamic State. The nine core elements of Operation Inherent Resolve seek to broaden the anti-IS coalition and foster regional cooperation. They draw upon American resources both inside the government and around the globe, and seek to destroy IS's capacity to recruit, reap profits, and secure territory. In an effort to learn the mistakes of neoconservatives and the coalition government, there is an emphasis on political stabilization within the Iraqi state. Operation Inherent Resolve has drawn criticism from those who believe the administration should not "cut deals" with opposition and separatist elements, however, it ensures that our allies possess local knowledge that coalition forces from the United States and Europe do not. Through pragmatism, and fighting terror for the sake of global security rather than installing democracy, Operation Inherent Resolve acts as a blueprint for battling the new paradigm in world terror, the Islamic State.

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