

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 44
Number 3 *Parameters Autumn 2014*


Article 6

Fall 9-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Ross Harrison, "Towards a Regional Strategy Contra ISIS," *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (2014), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2726.

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CONFRONTING THE “ISLAMIC STATE”

Towards a Regional Strategy Contra ISIS

Ross Harrison

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ABSTRACT: A Regional strategy with three essential elements is needed to defeat ISIS. The first involves rolling it back in Iraq and Syria by attacking its capabilities and strategies. The second is to contain it by helping fortify weaker Arab countries that might be at risk. The third is to influence the relationships between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, and Iran, countries whose efforts will be required to defeat ISIS and end the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.

On the eve of the 13th anniversary of the horrific 9/11 attacks, President Barack Obama delivered a primetime televised speech in which he identified the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL, also widely known as ISIS) as a significant threat to the United States, its allies and the overall stability of the Middle East. He also articulated several pillars of a counterterrorism strategy to “degrade, and ultimately destroy ISIL.”¹

ISIS represents a threat with three different faces. To the United States and its western allies, it is a terrorist organization. However, for Arab states, ISIS represents an insurgency without political boundaries that threatens the survival of countries [such as Iraq, Syria and Libya] in the midst of civil wars, puts at risk weak states desperately trying to avert civil war, like Lebanon and Jordan; and poses a challenge to the legitimacy of even stronger states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia. When examined from a regional perspective, ISIS represents the spearhead of a broader movement threatening to sunder the Arab political order that has existed since the end of World War I, and potentially threatening non-Arab states such as Iran, Turkey and even Israel.

Any strategy to eradicate ISIS must take into account the threat’s three essential aspects. To deal with it, the United States will need the capability to fight ISIS using military means, but also to strengthen the military and political capacity of individual Arab states at risk. Moreover, it will need to move beyond country-specific approaches towards a regional effort to manage the relationships between competing powers, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, all of which have contributed to the instability that has allowed ISIS to flourish.

The Nature of the Threat

In the wake of 9/11, the US Department of Defense greatly increased its capacity for dealing with asymmetric threats such as al-Qaeda. United States Special Operations Command, and under it, Joint Special Operations Command, along with other parts of the military,

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1 Statement by the President on ISIL, *Office of the White House Press Secretary*, September 10, 2014.

have enhanced detection, surveillance and response capabilities against non-state opponents. However, ISIS is a hybrid organization. It uses a combination of terrorist and conventional military tactics and, atypical for asymmetric opponents, it holds large swaths of territory (in Syria and Iraq) over which it has imposed sovereignty.

Other unique aspects of ISIS could bedevil the United States and its coalition partners. First, US-led military operations against ISIS are taking place against the backdrop of civil wars in Syria and Iraq, with the additional complication that ISIS has conflated these conflicts by essentially erasing many of the border areas separating these countries. Military operations taking place within the context of two civil wars are likely to be fraught with unprecedented degrees of complexity. Unfortunately, military operations cannot be sealed off completely from the civil wars; and unintended consequences from these operations could exacerbate the conflicts and inadvertently strengthen opponents the United States has vowed to undermine. For example, the air battle now raging against ISIS in Syria in support of the Kurds could very well reinforce the Assad regime which President Obama claimed in 2011 must be replaced.²

Second, the US government may think it is battling only ISIS, but the threat comes from a broader political movement which military means alone cannot defeat.³ Reducing western influence in the region, upending what is perceived by some to be an oppressive order in the Arab world, and erasing artificially imposed boundaries between Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon transcend ISIS's battles in Iraq and Syria. These efforts have broader mainstream appeal, even among those who abhor ISIS's brutal methods.

Third, we are not just facing a threat from ISIS, but a proliferation of jihadist groups with shifting coalitions. The new al-Qaeda elite group Khorasan has now aligned with Jabhat al-Nusra, another al-Qaeda affiliate.⁴ Rivalry between ISIS and al-Qaeda could result in new coalitions and even new groups. Beyond the Middle East, groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Shabaab in Somalia have established strongholds from which to attack local populations and US interests. Defeating ISIS may be necessary, but insufficient for eliminating the threat to the United States, and its allies in the region. In fact, the consequence of defeating ISIS may be the strengthening of other groups, the spawning of new ones, or the formation of new formidable coalitions between existing groups.⁵

Some Pundits argue the threat from ISIS is exaggerated, as the group has too many internal conflicts and external enemies for it to

2 Scott Wilson and Joby Warrick, "Assad Must Go, Obama says," *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2011.

3 Michael Ryan, "Al-Qa'ida: Time to Engage the Deep Battle," *Middle East Institute*, August 2, 2013, where he insightfully describes Al-Qa'ida as a movement, not merely an organization. This insight can also be applied to the case of ISIS.

4 Dina Temple-Raston, "Al-Qa'ida Reasserts Itself with Khorasan Group," *NPR Radio*, October 3, 2014.

5 See Ross Harrison, "Defeating the Islamic State Militarily is Only Half the Battle," *The Middle East Institute*, October 3, 2014.

sustain itself.⁶ There is some validity to this claim. The leadership consists of both religious ideologues and those from more secular, Ba'athist party backgrounds. A potential exists, therefore, for a split between the various factions, particularly as the group comes under increased pressure from the military coalition arrayed against it. Moreover, the assumption a sustainable polity can be built on a jihadist Sunni Islamic identity has yet to be proven, not to mention the dangers of overextension should ISIS advance and try to expand its boundaries further.

While the Islamic State could prove vulnerable over time, in the short to medium term it can continue to wreak havoc, destroy lives, sunder communities and make it more difficult for Syria and Iraq to emerge from their civil wars intact. The United States cannot afford to assume ISIS will somehow extinguish itself in time to save the Middle East from even more destruction and instability.

Confronting ISIS requires military responses in Iraq and Syria which the United States is now leading, but they must be wrapped in a broader regional strategy. This regional strategy should include efforts to strengthen the military and political capacities of Arab states, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Egypt. It should also include a regional level initiative to secure cooperation between major powers, namely Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Iran to resolve the bloody civil conflicts in Syria and Iraq that feed ISIS. This regional strategy also requires military efforts by the Defense Department be reinforced by coordination with the State Department and other agencies within the executive branch. Absent this coordination, military actions alone are unlikely to be effective.

The Military Response

In the initial stages of the military campaign it appears the attacks against ISIS have been tactically successful. With help from Kurdish spotters and the Iraqi military the campaign has protected the Yazidis stranded on Mount Sinjar. The campaign has also fortified the Kurdish Peshmerga in its fight against ISIS, preventing the fall of Erbil. Thus far it has also helped thwart ISIS's attempts to overrun Syrian Kurdistan, in particular the town of Kobani on the Turkish border. Airstrikes in Iraq have also dislodged ISIS from the Mosul dam area, and spared large areas of Iraq, including Baghdad, from the threat of flooding.

It appears the focus of the military campaign has been to degrade ISIS's capability, attacking what is believed to be its base in Raqqa, Syria, and slowing down and even rolling back its advances in Iraq. Early successes notwithstanding, the military campaign is not being waged on an inanimate object, but against a savvy, sophisticated, albeit brutal, opponent. ISIS will likely adjust its strategy to the tactics used against it. Even before the American-led coalition commenced operations, ISIS dispersed its forces and resources, apparently in an attempt to avoid exposing its center of gravity to attacks capable of throwing it off balance.

In addition to compromising ISIS's capability, it is also critical for the United States to ascertain its strategy and devise plans to disrupt it. It is important to understand ISIS's strategy for Iraq is very different from

⁶ For an example see Steven Simon, "Who Will Win in Iraq?: ISIS Will Fail in Iraq, and Iran Will Be the Victor," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2014 and "Why ISIS is Not al-Qaida" *MSNBC*, September 11, 2014.

its Syrian strategy, defying a one-size-fits-all military approach. In Syria, ISIS is using a “direct competitive strategy,” simultaneously attempting to outmaneuver other jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, the weaker secular groups which until now have been receiving modest US assistance, and the Assad regime.⁷ It has taken advantage of the splintering of political and militia groups that occurred over the course of the civil war. ISIS has also flourished due to its ability to combine brute force with the skillful use of modern technology to attract recruits. Moreover, it has advanced because of its prudent use of resources such as, earning revenue by selling oil to the Assad government, as well as to Turkey via the black market.

Within this competitive game, the relationship between ISIS and the Assad regime is ambiguous, perhaps even symbiotic. At one level they are sworn enemies; at another level they derive some benefit from each other. ISIS benefits from Assad’s assault on competitive rebel groups, while the Syrian regime benefits from the presence of ISIS by being able to position itself as the only force capable of preventing an Islamic terrorist takeover, something it artfully uses to justify its brutal methods over both secular and Islamic rebel groups.

In Iraq, ISIS’s strategy is quite different. It involves less a direct competitive strategy against the Shi’i-led Iraqi government in Baghdad, and more a weakening of the government “indirectly” by increasing the intensity of sectarian violence between Iraqi Sunnis and Shi’i, creating chaos and turmoil throughout the country and turning disenfranchised Sunnis into recruits.⁸ In other words, while the ultimate goal of ISIS in Iraq may be to topple the government in Baghdad, it is trying first to marginalize it and challenge its legitimacy before attacking it directly. By turning up the heat of the civil conflict, it weakens the government, creating a political vacuum and a opportunity for growth. This approach allowed it to expand into Sunni strongholds such as Anbar almost unopposed.⁹

The United States and its coalition partners need to take these differences in ISIS’s strategy into account. In Iraq, the challenge is inherently more political than it is in Syria. The key in Iraq is to try to disrupt ISIS’s indirect strategy by working, not just to increase the Iraqi government’s military capacity, which according to retired General John R. Allen, coordinating the international coalition, could take up to a year, but also its political capacity.¹⁰ It may be too late to woo Sunni tribal leaders and former Iraqi military officers back into the fold of the government, but some positive developments could open up a pathway for increasing the political and military capacity of the Iraqi government. The new government in Baghdad, led by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, seems to be willing to govern more inclusively, notwithstanding the fact that, like former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, he comes from the Shi’i Dawa party. Another hopeful factor is that the major regional players

7 Ross Harrison, *Strategic Thinking in 3D: A guide for National Security, Foreign Policy and Business Professionals* (Potomac Books, 2013), chapter 4 for an analysis of direct strategies.

8 *Ibid.*, chapter 3 for an analysis of indirect strategies.

9 Liz Sly, “Al-Qaeda Force Captures Fallujah amid Rise of Violence in Iraq,” *Washington Post*, January 3, 2014. The Islamic State was an Al-Qaeda force until Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qa’ida disavowed the group, throwing its support to the al-Nusra Front instead.

10 Kirk Semple, “Coalition Leader Warns of Long Fight Against ISIS in Iraq,” *The New York Times*, October 3, 2014.

coalescing around the new prime minister seem to be Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States are working towards increasing the political capacity of the Iraqi government to help break the momentum of an ISIS advance.¹¹ In order to build momentum, the United States needs to continue to play a strong lead role.

In Syria, US strategy is unclear and seems to be limited to using air power. The problem with this approach is the secular rebel groups vetted by the United States are divided, weak, and unlikely to be an effective fighting force on the ground to augment US-led operations from the air. Since President Obama has pledged no "boots on the ground," the US military has little choice but to continue to train and support these rebels. The United States must also ramp up support for the Kurds, who have proven to be more reliable and viable fighting forces against ISIS.

Ultimately, the Obama administration must develop a cogent strategy for how to deal with the Assad government. An undefined strategy is not problematic in the early phases of an operation, but over time it will need to be clearer, particularly if attacking ISIS and other jihadist rebel groups emboldens the Assad regime to launch more brutal attacks on the very secular rebels the United States needs in the fight against ISIS. The Obama administration may be faced with the reality that the Assad regime may be the only viable force for fighting ISIS from the ground. Since the administration has been clear it will not cooperate with the Assad government, US policymakers will likely face a dilemma.

In addition to such external challenges, the United States has a difficult organizational task ahead. Compounding the challenge of disrupting ISIS in two different theaters of war, managing the coalition of over 60 countries will likely become increasingly unwieldy over time. While only a handful of these countries are actively involved in the US-led air campaign, coordination will become more difficult, as interests between the United States, its Arab, non-Arab, and even its Western allies start to diverge. As military campaigns wax and wane, it is likely the domestic politics in each country will put strains on the coalition.

What should the United States do to plan for this contingency? First, there needs to be a "whole of government" approach to the conflict. Managing the coalition will require unprecedented degrees of collaboration between the Department of Defense, Department of State, and the intelligence community. Second, the United States must have the capability to manage more transactional, issue-specific coalitions as opposed to the firmer alliances of the Cold War. Turkey is an example. Although a fellow NATO member, it has been a reticent ally on many issues, including ISIS. Due to domestic considerations involving the Kurds, issues with Syrian refugees, and the fact ISIS held hostage 49 of its diplomats, the country was reluctant to join the coalition until recently. Finally, on October 2, 2014, the Turkish Parliament authorized the military to engage. Tensions will need to be managed, particularly since Turkey has pushed for attacks on the Assad regime, while the United States at least for now is limiting its focus to ISIS. This is just one example of the complexity of managing relationships with coalition partners.

11 Michael Georgy and Ahmed Rasheed, "U.S. Ready to Help New Iraq Leader, Iran Welcomes Choice," *Reuters*, August 13, 2014.

Containing the Spread of ISIS

ISIS poses not only a military challenge to Iraq and Syria, and a terrorist threat to the United States, but also strains the legitimacy of political boundaries of the region, potentially posing threats to Lebanon, Jordan and even Egypt. While these governments have to develop their own political response to ISIS, the United States can help prevent ISIS's military and terrorist expansion into these states. Efforts should be tailored to the needs of each state, complementing the ongoing military campaigns against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

Jordan, part of the US-led coalition, has already faced pressure from its own Muslim Brotherhood, which is opposed to the government's role in air raids in Syria and Iraq. This speaks to the fact that the biggest threat to Jordan from ISIS is not from across its borders, which are protected by a well equipped and trained military, but from within. The threat of an ISIS cell forming within the country is a possibility for which the Jordanian government needs to prepare. One of the major challenges in terms of government capacity is the Syrian refugee situation in Jordan is outstripping its resources and infrastructure. More aid from the United States and Gulf Arab states will be needed, in addition to the \$300 million the United States already gives to the Jordanian military annually.¹²

While ISIS has limited capacity to challenge the borders of Egypt, it could attack the regime from within through disaffected cells of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the wake of the overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi in 2013, Egyptian government forces killed over a thousand protesters from the Brotherhood, driving its leaders and followers underground. ISIS could penetrate the more radical factions within the Brotherhood, or directly infiltrate Egypt through the lightly defended Sinai Peninsula, creating convenient beachheads from which to attack the regime.¹³

For now, Egypt has the means to defend itself against attacks from ISIS. The Egyptian military is capable and well trained. It appears to have wide support from the Egyptian people, and President el-Sisi seems to be popular, at least among secular groups.

That said, the political response necessary to avert an advance by ISIS would be a slow but deliberate rehabilitation of the Muslim Brotherhood into the political realm. Egypt will be better able to thwart attempts by ISIS (and other jihadist groups) to threaten the country if the Brotherhood is part of the opposition, rather than underground where it can plan attacks on the regime with ISIS.

The United States has limited immediate leverage with which to influence Egypt on this issue, particularly since Egypt's main financier, Saudi Arabia, shares el-Sisi's contempt for the Brotherhood. However, with some persuasion and economic incentives, el-Sisi may conclude the threat from jihadist groups demands a change in his position regarding the Brotherhood.

12 David Schenker, "Countering the ISIS Threat to Jordan," *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2014.

13 "Reining in Egypt's Military Aid," editorial, *The New York Times*, October 4, 2014.

The country that has little wherewithal for defending itself militarily or even politically is Lebanon. It has been rattled by years of civil war in Syria, and controversy over Hezbollah's involvement in that war on the side of the Assad regime. Also, it is internally fragile, and has been destabilized by the large number of refugees from Syria who now reside in the country. It has already suffered the savagery of ISIS. During this past summer the Lebanese town of Arsal was briefly occupied by ISIS, and more recently it was reported that several Lebanese Army officers were beheaded.¹⁴

Since Lebanon lacks the infrastructure and internal cohesion to defend itself, and is the weakest link in the chain of vulnerable Arab countries, it needs help from the outside. What can the United States and others do? The United States has already given the Lebanese Army, an institution which presently has broad based respect in the country, an emergency infusion of weapons.¹⁵ Moreover, in early 2014 the Saudis gave the Lebanese Army a \$3 billion subvention.¹⁶ More stunning even, the Iranian National Security Council announced in September it would award a grant to the Lebanese Army.¹⁷ The United States can work with the Saudis and Lebanese Army to make sure these resources are best deployed. It could also work with the Saudis and other Gulf Arab states towards increasing support for Lebanon's security sector.

As much as the United States and its international and regional partners can help Arab governments increase their internal capacities to thwart the expansionist efforts of ISIS, there are limits to what can be done by outsiders. The main impetus for defensive political action against ISIS must come from the Arab states themselves. While the United States can provide military and other forms of assistance, it can not completely inoculate the Arab world from the effects of ISIS. The efforts of the United States need to be augmented by political action on the part of governments in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon towards building legitimate institutions and political processes. Without political will and adequate responses from the Arab states, US aid is likely to be ineffective.

Another thing the United States cannot and should not attempt to do is play a role in the question of political identity in the Arab world. ISIS has raised the stakes by subordinating tribal, ethnic and Arab identities under a jihadist variant of Sunni Islamic identity. Questions regarding state-based Iraqi and Syrian identities and the sectarian divides between Sunni and Shi'i can only be addressed by Iraqis and Syrians. Also, whether an underlying Arab nationalism, which seemed fleetingly apparent during the headier days of the Arab Spring, can be a unifying force is something only Arab leaders and their constituents can answer. Failure to address the question of political identity in the Arab world could mean leaving it to ISIS and the broader jihadist movement to answer.

14 Hwaida Saad and Rick Gladstone, "Border Fighting Intensifies between ISIS and Lebanon," *The New York Times*, and "ISIS Executes Second Lebanese Soldier," *The Daily Star*, September 7, 2014.

15 Diah Hadid, "US Delivers Military Aid to the Lebanese Military," *Time Magazine*, August 29, 2014.

16 Anne Barnard, "Saudi's Grant to Lebanon Seen as Message to US," *The New York Times*, January 6, 2014.

17 "Iran to Give Military Grant to Lebanese Army: Official," *Reuters*, September 30, 2014.

However, the United States can play a critical role. In addition to increasing their defensive capabilities and nudging them towards political inclusion, the United States should encourage its Arab partners to engage politically on issues related to Iraq and Syria. As the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars evolve, there will be non-Arab stakeholders, namely Turkey and Iran, involved in trying to shape governments in these two countries, or even dealing with border realignment. It will be necessary for an Arab bloc, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, to have a seat at the table. The United States should use its convening capacity to facilitate.

Forging Regional Cooperation

While Saudi Arabia and Iran seem to be in agreement on some issues regarding Iraq and ISIS, this development is recent. The civil wars in Syria and Iraq which spawned the formation of ISIS were fueled by proxy conflicts between these same regional powers. Saudi Arabia, which has backed Syrian rebel groups against the Assad regime, waged a proxy battle against Iran, which backed Assad. This dynamic extended to Iraq as well, where Iran was a benefactor of former Prime Minister Malaki, and his Shi'i Dawa party, while Saudi Arabia lent support to many of the Sunni rebel groups who were in opposition, some now aligned with ISIS.

Since these civil conflicts have escalated, and spawned destructive groups like ISIS, Iran and Saudi Arabia appear to be working in tandem, or at least no longer at cross purposes. Both countries, along with the United States, "encouraged" former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Malaki to step down and gave early support to his replacement, Prime Minister Abadi. Iran went so far as sending its own Quds force of the Revolutionary Guard Corps to Iraq to help fight against ISIS. Also, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister visited Saudi Arabia in August of 2014 to discuss with the Saudi Foreign Minister threats to regional security, like the rise of ISIS and the growing instability in Iraq and Syria.¹⁸ Moreover, Iran seems to have tacitly accepted US airstrikes in Syria, as long as the regime of President Assad is not targeted. Further collaboration between the major powers of the region will be necessary to stabilize Iraq and Syria and defeat ISIS.

The cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is informal, and still deep-seated animosities persist. Thus, joint efforts to subdue the civil wars in Iraq and Syria could prove fleeting. The Syrian and Iraqi conflicts are already shifting the distribution of power between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt, potentially straining cooperation. A collapse or further weakening of Syria and Iraq could attenuate Iran's sphere of influence, specifically threatening to truncate the Shi'i arc that extends from Tehran through Damascus and to Hezbollah in Lebanon. In other words, the strategic windfall Tehran experienced with the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime could now become a strategic liability. The longstanding airtight alliance between Iran and Syria may be fraying as well, despite Iran's stated commitment to the survival of the Assad

18 "Iran Deputy Foreign Minister to Visit Saudi Arabia," *Reuters*, August 25, 2014.

regime.¹⁹ While this could reduce Iran's ability to meddle and increase its willingness to play a constructive role, such a challenge to its regional preeminence could instead raise the perception of threat in Tehran, making it more, not less, recalcitrant with respect to Iraq and Syria.

While Iran's position as a regional power could be undermined by the havoc in Syria and Iraq, Egypt's star could be set to rise. Egypt's relative standing in the region is likely to increase given the power vacuum in Iraq and Syria, and el-Sisi's cautious yet clear desire to play a regional role. While still economically hobbled, Egypt has already taken the lead in negotiating the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, and joined with the United Arab Emirates in attacking Islamic militants in Libya.²⁰ Egypt's regional involvement, particularly when backed by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states, could cause jitters in Tehran, making future cooperation on tackling ISIS more difficult.

During this period of instability, the United States should influence relationships between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Egypt, with the goal of keeping cooperation from being derailed. The United States is in a unique position to manage some of the rough spots that could arise from changes in the distribution of power in the region, enhanced by the clout it derives from being the head of the military coalition in the battle against ISIS. This role becomes easier once there is more clarity on the nuclear issue with Iran. Nonetheless, the threat that ISIS poses to the region creates an opportunity for collaboration between Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. If successful, the resultant cooperation between these countries could greatly contribute to defusing the conflicts in Iraq and Syria and prove an effective regional challenge to ISIS.²¹

Skeptics of the United States ability to cool regional tensions should remember the acrimony between Iran and Saudi Arabia, while deep-seated and historical, did not develop in a geopolitical vacuum. Past US policies exacerbated the tensions between the major regional powers in recent years. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the toppling of Saddam Hussein, created a vacuum through which Iran almost effortlessly projected power into the Arab world, a development that directly challenged Riyadh's regional ambitions. Later when the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, tension between Iran and Saudi Arabia spilled over into competition for influence in Syria and Iraq, creating a proxy war dynamic. The United States further reinforced this tension by treating Saudi Arabia as a bulwark against Iranian ambitions.²²

A change in US strategy towards working constructively at the regional level, the deft use of diplomacy, and the possibility of a thaw in relations with Iran, could have a positive effect on relationships between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt, something that could directly defuse the conflicts in Iraq and Syria and help beat back ISIS.

19 Ruth Sherlock and Richard Spencer, "Syria Crisis: Support for Assad Starting to Fade as Allies become Disillusioned by Setbacks," *The Telegraph*, September 14, 2014.

20 Anne Gearan, "Egypt and UAE strike Islamist Militias in Libya," *The Washington Post*, August 25, 2014.

21 Ross Harrison and Shahrokh Fardoust, "Time for a U.S. Regional Strategy for the Middle East," *The National Interest*, May 25, 2014, where we discuss the prospects and challenges of a regional approach to the Middle East.

22 Ibid.

Conclusion

The President's strategy for destroying ISIS contains many of the pillars needed for success. It involves air attacks on key positions, protection of forces arrayed against ISIS on the ground, humanitarian assistance, and a broad based counterterrorism coalition.²³ But if we think of ISIS as an insurgency movement, in addition to being a terrorist group, it becomes apparent we need more than military responses. Political and diplomatic strategies will also be necessary, and will need to operate at different levels. The first is working with individual Arab states particularly susceptible to penetration by ISIS on their political and military responses to this insurgency. The second is working diplomatically at the regional level, trying to collaborate with the major powers which, while once may have been a big part of the problem, now seem to be a key part of the solution. This task will be a difficult, though not insuperable. The civil wars in Syria and Iraq, and the emergence of the marauding and destructive ISIS has for now created a convergence of interests, which while possibly ephemeral, is nonetheless unprecedented.

To prevent this opportunity from passing, the United States must push back ISIS militarily. But it also needs to rally Arab support for taking political ownership of an insurgency threatening the regional order. It must also develop a regional framework to build cooperation towards the eradication of ISIS.

²³ Statement by the President on ISIL, Office of the White House Press Secretary, September 10, 2014.