

CUT DOWN THE BLACK FLAG

A PLAN TO DEFEAT
THE ISLAMIC STATE

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SECURE FREEDOM STRATEGY NO. 2

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—EXECUTIVE SUMMARY—

The vital national security interests of the United States are threatened by the existence of the Islamic State (IS) as a declared Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, and by its continued expansion worldwide. Its barbaric imposition of shariah law has: left tens, and maybe hundreds, of thousands dead; created hundreds of thousands of refugees; and forced millions to live under its oppressive rule.

Of particular concern to the United States is the fact that IS actively calls for, and has inspired, attacks in our homeland. Its exploits and successes are exacerbating the threat posed by the Global Jihad Movement (GJM), of which it is just one manifestation—if a particularly toxic and dangerous one.

Current attempts to defeat the Islamic State or degrade its operations have had limited effect. The abiding, active threat the organization poses—combined with the dangers associated with increasing Iranian involvement in Counter-IS operations—requires a change to U.S. strategy.

RESURGENCE OF THE VANQUISHED FOE

The American military and its Iraqi allies defeated the precursor to IS, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), during the Surge and Anbar Awakening phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). The Sunni tribes in Anbar province formed paramilitary units and joined with U.S. and Government of Iraq (GoI) forces to break AQI's reign of terror. These tribal leaders were promised that the United States would ensure the new federal government of Iraq treated the minority Sunni population fairly. The same promises were also made to the Kurdish minority in order to get them to join the new government.

The U.S. policy of disengagement and eventual withdrawal of combat forces greatly lessened the ability to deliver on those promises. The majority Shia government in Baghdad became increasingly hostile to the interests of the Sunni tribes and the Kurds. Revenues were not shared, construction projects were not funded and resentment among the Sunni tribes grew stronger, while the Kurds retrenched and became increasingly independent. The Sunni areas provided a fertile ground for the rebirth of the insurgency now known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In this document, they are simply called the Islamic State (IS).

CURRENT STATE OF THE FIGHT

The military actions of IS have been largely successful, although they have encountered major setbacks in some pitched battles. Overall, they control large swaths of eastern Syria and western Iraq and have essentially erased the border between the two countries in those areas. The capture of Ramadi, the provincial capital of Anbar province in Iraq, was a major victory that placed IS in close proximity (60 miles) to Baghdad.

GoI forces have been largely ineffective in dealing with IS. In many cases, they have been driven from battles, abandoning in the process large quantities of U.S.-supplied military equipment and weaponry. The American role has primarily been to provide training and air support for the GoI troops as there has been a prohibition against combat operations. The result has been some, limited destruction of IS equipment, including captured U.S. weapons. But little progress made in dislodging IS from the areas it has seized.

Restrictions placed on American operations and airstrikes have been a cause of frustration among both U.S. forces, Iraqi troops, and the government of Iraq they support. This has led to an increased reliance by the Iraqis on Iran for military leadership, equipment, troops and fire-support. U.S. airstrikes require an often-lengthy approval process that is typically denied when the possibility of civilian casualties is considered unacceptably large. IS understands our rules of engagement and takes advantage of them by, among other things, operating as closely mingled with the civilian populace as possible.

Consequently, the very policy designed to avoid civilian casualties is actually at risk of causing *more* dead civilians. For example, the government of Iraq cannot count on U.S. air support when needed, so they are now operating with Iranian heavy artillery and rocket forces. These weapons are inherently less accurate than American precision strikes and the Iranians and GoI are considerably less concerned about causing collateral damage. This will be increasingly problematic as efforts to retake Ramadi place majority-Shia units (i.e., GoI troops, Shia militias and Iranian personnel) in direct conflict with Sunni fighters and, even more disastrously, the local Sunni civilians.

The entrance of Iranian military forces and related Shia militias within Iraq also creates the possibility that Iranian control could move deeper into Iraq and potentially Syria. Iranian dominion over Sunni tribal areas and the attendant, increased threat to the free flow of oil and commerce in the region creates the potential for a larger Sunni versus Shia hot war. Both IS and Iran are enemies of the United States and are part of the larger Global Jihad Movement. Thwarting their success and territorial expansion is a necessary first step in our efforts to defeat this broader jihadist enterprise.

The Kurdish Peshmerga forces have been quite successful in resisting IS attempts to attack Iraqi Kurdistan. They rallied after initial IS penetration, pushed them back and have now secured their territory. The Kurds remain vulnerable to renewed aggression by IS, however, due a lack of military supplies and equipment being delivered to them as promised from Baghdad. This adds to their numerous grievances with the GoI and increases their insistence on having an independent state of their own.

A PLAN TO DEFEAT THE ISLAMIC STATE

These combined factors affect vital U.S. security interests and require that Congress consider and debate an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) to shape a more acceptable situation.

The United States should use military action, though, in concert with other instruments of national power—including diplomatic, intelligence and economic ones—to accomplish the following outcomes:

1. Elimination of the Islamic State as a functional governing entity and Caliphate in Iraq and Syria.
2. Prevention of Iranian expansion into Sunni regions of Iraq and Syria.
3. Self-determination for the three distinct population groups:
 - a. Allow for separate and autonomous regions for Kurds and Sunnis in existing federal Iraq;
Or
 - b. Full partition of Iraq into separate Shia, Kurdish and Sunni states.
 - c. Potential integration of Sunni areas of Syria into a new Sunni nation.

The five Courses of Action (COA) detailed in the monograph are primarily military-based and offer a range of options for affecting the outcome in Iraq and Syria. They should be considered within a whole-of-government approach to defeating the Global Jihad Movement, and in coordination with the other competing and complementary U.S. goals in the region.

The Center for Security Policy advocates Course of Action Tribal Engagement (TE) to accomplish the desired outcomes: A strategy of arming and operating with the Sunni tribes and Kurdish forces; an aggressive use of Special Operations Forces (SOF); and [increased air operations and embedded combat advisors in support of the GoI.] The Center also supports the self-determination of the distinct population groups of Iraq and borders based on those decisions.

ELIMINATION OF THE ISLAMIC STATE AND PREVENTION OF IRANIAN EXPANSION

The populace in the Sunni regions has been largely neutral, although in some cases actively supportive of IS. The tribal leadership, however, is not aligned with the extreme ideology of IS. They have already begun offering their own militias to fight the Islamic State, but having little military equipment and even less training poses severe problems. The upside is they know exactly who the IS fighters and supporters are and can identify and isolate them so that they can be removed.

Arming these tribal militias through Baghdad will be difficult as the GoI correctly views an armed Sunni region as a threat to its sovereignty over the area. That sovereignty has been effectively ended by IS, though, and if

GoI, Shia militias and Iran try to restore it as an area under Shia dominion, the Sunni insurgency will simply continue.

The United States should train, arm and support the operations of anti-IS Sunni tribes using Special Operations units to defeat our mutual foes. Such assistance should occur outside GoI control if Baghdad will not cooperate. This serves two important objectives: First, defeating the Islamic State; and, second ensuring that the Iranian-led Shia axis does not.

The United States should also train, arm and support the operations the Kurdish Peshmerga utilizing Special Operations units—some of which have operated there since the 1990s. Kurdistan is effectively a separate nation now and it could serve as an actual ally for the U.S. Kurdish forces are not likely to move out of their homeland to fight IS, but helping them secure the area and its vital oil reserves is a positive step toward regional stability. It would also offer a safe location from which U.S. forces can plan and conduct other operations in the region.

U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) are an under-used asset in the fight against IS. Their operations tempo can and should be increased. There is enough actionable intelligence to generate raids and the operations themselves will generate more actionable intelligence. They will also put IS leadership off balance and make its communication and operations more difficult.

U.S. training and support for GoI forces should continue but must be modified to make it effective. Iraqi units have performed poorly in actions against IS and have abandoned large amounts of US-supplied equipment. U.S. embedded advisors should be assigned to operational GoI units to provide command and control, fire support coordination and other assistance.

ENABLING SELF-DETERMINATION AND STABLE BORDERS

The Iraqi government operates as a sovereign entity, but has little or no control over the Sunni or Kurdish regions; a de facto partition of the country essentially exists. The Kurds and Sunni do not trust or wish to be ruled by the Shia- dominated and Iranian-influenced central government. The United States should support greatly increased autonomy and eventually self-determination for both of these distinct populations. The current borders are remnants of the colonial era and do not offer a path to a stable future. Recognizing the situation on the ground as well as the wishes of the people in the region could allow the sectarian violence to subside.

A PLAN TO WIN

The current U.S. strategy has failed and the situation will not improve without major changes to America's commitment, rules of engagement and tactics. Adopting the strategy recommended in this plan offers a chance to topple the Islamic State, as well as contain Iranian expansion.