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## Terrorists, Insurgents and the Lessons of History

by Richard Lim

### Introduction

After 13 years of war and an estimated \$1 trillion<sup>1</sup> in wartime spending, the United States finds itself once again engaged in a deadly struggle with a brutal terrorist group halfway around the world. The violent rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has shattered the perception that the tide of war is receding. ISIS' ability to fight and conquer territory and its willingness to commit atrocities, evidenced by multiple beheadings, have alarmed the American people and compelled the U.S. government into action.

ISIS, however, represents just the latest threat from Islamic extremism. After the events of 11 September 2001 (9/11) the national debate centered on how best to protect the nation from further attack. Academics and pundits debated endlessly on the proper response to terrorism. In 2002, the United States declared that its primary national security objective was “to disrupt and destroy terrorist organizations of global reach.”<sup>2</sup> The U.S. government then undertook its largest reorganization since the dawn of the Cold War and invaded (and reinvaded) two nations as part of the war on terror. After years of war and defense spending, however, terrorist groups are as active and deadly as ever. Questions remain as to how the United States failed to anticipate the rise of ISIS and how to contain the threat.

The situation in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East involves complexities far beyond the scope of this analysis. This study does, however, identify a major gap in the current national debate: the lack of historical context and data. Terrorism is a recurring historical phenomenon that predates the 20th century. Hundreds of case studies exist, even in the past 40 years. In fact, one major American think tank has identified at least 648 terrorist groups since 1968.<sup>3</sup> Despite the wealth of data, the present discourse continues to overlook the lessons of history.

History, of course, does not provide clear-cut answers for today's challenges. Indeed, every terrorist group is different. However, a study of the phenomenon of terrorism reveals broader trends that can inform the national debate. The historical data support much of the present national discourse and provide warnings about the realities of the current struggle against ISIS—realities for which the United States is unprepared. With its extremely high capacity to fight and to govern, ISIS is as serious a threat to American interests as any terrorist group we have seen. When it comes to such groups, history teaches that:

- The United States cannot waste any time in assisting the Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian rebel forces to expand their own capacity to fight and govern, since ultimate success, historically, rests upon the local actors to defeat the enemy.
- The United States and its partners must be prepared to engage ISIS for much longer than the national debate has indicated and to defeat the group in such a way as to prevent its reconstitution.
- The United States should incentivize the Iraqi government to engage with the Sunnis and take clearly defined actions to gain their trust.

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- The United States must provide comprehensive military assistance, to include ground, air and sea forces, to combat ISIS in support of Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian rebel forces.
- The United States must work with its partners to increase divisions within ISIS' ranks and to alienate it from the local population and other jihadist groups.

## ISIS

Al Qaeda and its affiliates—along with Lashkar-e-Taiba, Boko Haram, Abu Sayyaf and many more such groups—continue to plot terrorist attacks around the world. However, it is ISIS that has captured America's attention. The United States perceives ISIS as a dire threat to its interests due to the group's effectiveness on the battlefield, advanced governance capacity and willingness to commit atrocities. ISIS has repeated its desire to wipe out existing state borders to build the Islamic Caliphate that its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi declared in June 2014.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, ISIS has:

- a demonstrated capability to defeat its enemies and aggressively acquire territory. In Iraq, ISIS successfully engaged the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Peshmerga and has taken control of Mosul, Baiji, Tikrit, Hawijah, Fallujah, Tal Afar and Sinjar. In Syria, ISIS has fought the Syrian government, Syrian rebels and al Qaeda-affiliated groups and has taken control of Raqqa, Manbij, Ash-Shadadi, Markadeh, Abu Kamal and al-Bab.<sup>5</sup> In addition, ISIS affiliates have carried out attacks in Lebanon.<sup>6</sup> ISIS has taken control of numerous industrial assets, including the Mosul Dam (temporarily), 40–70 oil wells in Iraq<sup>7</sup> and the Taqba Dam in Syria. Sixty percent of Syria's oil fields are now held by ISIS.<sup>8</sup> ISIS is said to control 35,000 square miles of land—an area roughly the size of Jordan—and about a third of the territory in Iraq and Syria.<sup>9</sup> These successes are, in part, due to the growing number of fighters filling ISIS' ranks; that force was initially estimated at 10,000 but revised upward by the CIA in September 2014 to 20,000–31,500.<sup>10</sup>
- a demonstrated capability to build state institutions and provide services and education for recruits and the local populations. Consistent with its desire to build a caliphate, ISIS is building the capacity for governance. In its de facto capital, Raqqa, and in other territories, ISIS has developed institutions for Islamic outreach, Shari'a law, elementary education, law enforcement, courts, recruitment and tribal relations. ISIS has also created the Department of Muslim Services, which provides humanitarian aid, bakeries, water and electricity for the local population.<sup>11</sup> There are even orphanages and offices for consumer protection.<sup>12</sup> The provision of these services helps to increase the local population's dependence on ISIS, further embedding its power.

ISIS' unique governance capacity results from its access to resources and funding networks. The group has developed a sophisticated funding system that relies on oil sales, taxation and looting. With its control of oil wells and a sophisticated network of middlemen, ISIS generates \$1.2 million per day in oil revenue. Unlike other terrorist groups, ISIS is less dependent on private funds from individual supporters, making the paper trail harder to track.<sup>13</sup>

- a demonstrated willingness to commit atrocities. ISIS has become identified worldwide with videos of gruesome beheadings. Starting with American journalist David Foley's execution in August 2014, ISIS has posted multiple beheading videos, provoking shock and outrage around the world. Cruelty, however, has been a hallmark of ISIS since its inception. After gaining a measure of control over Raqqa in 2013, in its first public act ISIS executed three civilians in the city's main square.<sup>14</sup> ISIS has had no compunction in executing prominent rival figures, including an al-Nusra emir, and in committing atrocities against minority groups.<sup>15</sup> During the well-known Sinjar massacre in August 2014, ISIS slaughtered hundreds of Yazidis, including women and children.<sup>16</sup> Religious minorities in ISIS-captured territories have been expelled or persecuted by laws prohibiting freedom of speech and worship, confiscating their property and imposing an oppressive *jizya* tax.<sup>17</sup> Stories of rape, torture and mutilation have followed in ISIS' wake.<sup>18</sup>

## The Stakes

The American people are no strangers to terrorist groups. However, ISIS' capabilities represent a unique threat to the United States' vital interests. ISIS' ability to conquer territory and build competing state institutions exceeds

that of al Qaeda and threatens the integrity and stability of the nations in the region. Its acquisition of almost a third of Iraq's and Syria's territory has increasingly destabilized both nations. In the event of their collapse, ISIS could threaten the territorial integrity of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel.<sup>19</sup> An ever-expanding caliphate would increase the momentum of the worldwide jihadist movement and provide large swaths of territory for training terrorist recruits to attack Western interests just as the Taliban provided safe haven for al Qaeda to plan the 9/11 attacks. In addition, it may potentially trigger a Sunni–Shi'ite civil war in the heart of the Middle East, which would result in violent spillover and profoundly affect the global economy. Finally, it would almost guarantee a massive humanitarian crisis as whole populations in the region would be subject to severe atrocities. These developments would increase pressure on the United States to intensify its military involvement and aid its allies in the Middle East.

In addition, the conflict with ISIS represents a critical test of America's ability to defend itself against future threats. As described in the United States Army Operating Concept of 2014, ISIS displays many of the characteristics that are anticipated in future threats: emergence due to weak governance and communal conflict, operation among and control of civilian populations and use of social media and cyberspace to affect public perception.<sup>20</sup> So long as failed or failing states exist, nonstate actors with these characteristics will have safe haven. The United States Fund for Peace's *Fragile States Index* identifies 66 nations with "Very High Warning" or worse ratings as potential failed states.<sup>21</sup> Given that so many nations are at risk of failure, it is likely that similar threats will arise in the future. The American response to ISIS, therefore, will signal to the world its resolve to meet these threats.

## **American Response**

The United States strategy to defeat ISIS consists of four key parts. First, the United States will continue a systematic campaign of airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq and in Syria. Second, the United States will increase support to forces fighting ISIS on the ground, specifically to Iraqi and Kurdish forces as well as to the Syrian opposition. This would include American forces who will assist with training, intelligence and equipment but will not have a combat mission. Third, the United States will utilize its counterterrorism capabilities—which include cutting off funding and stemming the flow of foreign fighters—to prevent ISIS attacks. Finally, the United States will provide humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians displaced by ISIS.<sup>22</sup>

Some have criticized the decision to rule out "boots on the ground" in the face of an adversary that has conquered and entrenched itself in large swaths of territory. Others believe that reliance on the currently ineffective Iraqi forces and Syrian rebels is doomed to failure. This debate, much like that which has occurred since 2001, is largely devoid of historical analysis.

## **Historical Lessons**

### ***External Intervention***

The 2008 RAND study *War by Other Means*, by David C. Gompert and John Gordon IV, looked at 89 insurgencies since World War II. The study defined "insurgency" as a movement "in which opponents of the established governing authorities use violence and other means to wrest the support of the population away from those authorities."<sup>23</sup> Of course, insurgency groups and terrorist groups are not necessarily synonymous, as terrorism is a tool that an insurgency group may or may not use against the established government. However, since ISIS does appear to conform to RAND's definition of an insurgency group, the historical data are useful.

According to the RAND data, of the 89 insurgencies that occurred since World War II, 29 featured outside intervention. The United States was the outside intervener in eight of the cases; 21 of the 29 cases consisted of direct intervention (e.g., ground troops, bombings) while eight cases consisted of indirect intervention (e.g., money, advisors). The data indicate that governments receiving direct assistance from an outside intervener are no more likely to defeat the insurgency than governments that receive no significant assistance. In fact, only 19 percent of governments aided with outside intervention won, while 24 percent lost. This contrasts with a 36 percent win rate and a 27 percent loss rate for governments that received no outside help. Outside intervention was more closely correlated with a mixed settlement result, which occurred 38 percent of the time. Governments that received significant indirect intervention did even worse than average, winning 25 percent and losing 50 percent of the time.<sup>24</sup>

The historical data also indicate the importance of a military response in defeating an insurgency. While the 2008 RAND study *How Terrorist Groups End*, by Seth G. Jones and Martin Libicki, emphasizes internal policing and counterterrorism work as the key to defeating terrorist groups, it also found that when those groups became strong enough to conduct an insurgency, a military response becomes increasingly necessary. The data indicated that military force was four times more effective than policing/counterterrorism at defeating insurgency groups.<sup>25</sup>

**Historical Lesson #1:** The RAND results indicate that, historically, the effect of external intervention against an insurgency is limited. The path to victory appears to be determined less by the assistance from the intervening state and more by the military response of the state in which the insurgency is occurring. This historical trend should give pause to American policymakers as they craft a strategy to defeat ISIS. The current United States strategy includes providing support to the Iraqi and Kurdish forces as well as to opposition forces in Syria's civil war. History indicates that, in the long term, victory will rest more on those forces' ability to defeat ISIS and develop their own capacity for governance than on U.S. intervention. Therefore, the United States must increase assistance to Iraqi and Kurdish forces and the Syrian opposition in both warfighting and governance capabilities.

The current CIA effort to train and supply the Syrian rebels, in particular, has been long-delayed and limited. A force of only 5,000 rebels is being envisioned to counter ISIS, despite estimates that 15,000 will be necessary.<sup>26</sup> Only after years of civil war in Syria is the United States providing a \$500 million package to train the rebels. While the delay, in part, results from the need to vet the fighters for any ties to extremists, it is also due to hopes of negotiating a political solution to remove Syrian president Bashar al-Assad from power.<sup>27</sup> This hope, however, is unrealistic given Syria's rapidly deteriorating situation, and training and aid must be increased and expedited to Syrian rebels that will specifically increase their warfighting capability.

The importance of the Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian rebel forces does not diminish the role that the United States can play in fighting ISIS. The simple truth is that those forces are simply unable to counter ISIS at this time.<sup>28</sup> The United States, therefore, must expedite a dual-track policy, bearing the military load in the short term to prevent ISIS' expansion, while investing heavily in sufficient numbers of Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian forces to increase their capacity to fight and govern in the long term.

### ***Duration***

RAND's analysis in *How Terrorist Groups End* determined that successful counterinsurgency campaigns last an average of 14 years while unsuccessful ones last an average of 11 years. In fact, about a quarter of insurgencies defeated by the government last more than 20 years.<sup>29</sup> In addition, terrorist groups that initially suffer defeat can either reconstitute or splinter off into multiple groups after the fact. RAND determined that, of the 648 terrorist groups identified since 1968, slightly more groups (21 percent) splintered off or reconstituted and continued terrorist activities than were defeated outright (20.7 percent).<sup>30</sup> These include two Islamic groups: Darul Islam (DI) in Indonesia, which splintered off into Jemaah Islamiyah (JI),<sup>31</sup> and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria, which was defeated and eventually reconstituted into the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) or, as it is currently known, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).<sup>32</sup> Indeed, with the reconstitution of insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq in the past decade, America has learned these lessons the hard way.

**Historical Lesson #2:** Patience and national will must be maintained in order to defeat insurgencies since, on average, they require about a dozen years to defeat and may even reconstitute after the fact. Administration officials are only beginning to acknowledge that the campaign against ISIS is likely to extend into the next presidency. Some Pentagon planners have estimated that the effort could last three years.<sup>33</sup> History, on the other hand, tells us otherwise. When the discussion is expanded beyond ISIS to Islamic extremism in general, it is clear that this generational struggle requires a long-term national commitment. U.S. leadership must honestly communicate the stakes and the potential duration of the conflict against ISIS and Islamic fundamentalism. Otherwise, the American public may have unrealistic expectations about how and when the conflict will be concluded and may find itself disillusioned and unwilling to sustain the commitment required for victory.

### ***Engaging the Local Population***

The Indonesian government's successful response to the DI uprising that began in 1948 is instructive for confronting Islamic extremists today. The rebellion lasted a little over a dozen years (consistent with RAND's

findings on duration) and was ultimately crushed in the early 1960s. Like ISIS and current Islamic groups, DI was strongly jihadist and absolutist. Unfortunately, DI revived in the late 1960s and 1970s and eventually developed into JI (consistent with RAND's findings on reconstitution/splintering), which still exists today.<sup>34</sup>

While the Indonesian government's response incorporated a heavy military component, it also sought to win over the local population through flexible and creative means. By February 1952, the government had initiated a "politico-psychological" strategy in which social and religious leaders were co-opted to persuade the population not to support the rebels and amnesty was strategically offered to and accepted by rebel troops.<sup>35</sup> The government had success specifically in the Aceh region, where it recruited Muslim community groups and local Muslim legal scholars known as ulemas to convince the local population to turn against DI. In addition, certain local groups were recruited into military service as advisors and guides.<sup>36</sup> Finally, in October 1953 the government appointed as governor S.M. Amin, who was welcomed by the Acehense as someone sympathetic to their concerns and supportive of local economic development.<sup>37</sup> Although the conflict initially developed into a stalemate, by mid-1954 the rebellion in Aceh was virtually defeated. Military assistance was pulled back in Aceh, leaving the regional police force in charge of maintaining law and order.<sup>38</sup>

**Historical Lesson #3:** Clear signals of engagement between the government and the local population are critical to winning support away from terrorist groups. The Indonesian government took specific actions to pursue local religious authorities, appoint sympathetic leadership and incorporate local elements into the military force. By taking these actions, the government mitigated DI's appeal among the local population, which was a critical factor in achieving victory.

The past decade of war has provided many lessons learned for engaging local leadership. It is critical to identify individuals who are trusted by the local population. As described by a recent report by the Institute for the Study of War (ISW):

We must avoid the trap of assuming that groups we have recognized necessarily represent the populations that matter. Our experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and many other places over the past decade should have taught us not to rely on the advice, still less the leadership, of expatriates or leaders based outside of the countries in conflict. At the end of the day, populations look first to those leaders who stay and fight with them.<sup>39</sup>

As important as it is to recruit local leaders, it is also critical to engage the population at large. Unfortunately, the recent history of Iraq has been marked by increasing distrust and violence between the Sunni and Shi'a populations. Sunnis continue to denounce the 2003 de-Baathification law that allows the government to exclude many Sunnis from government employment. Since America's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has become increasingly authoritarian, promoting a government that favors Shi'ites and disenfranchises minority Sunni groups. Maliki's arrests of Sunni leaders, including Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi and associates of Finance Minister Rafia al-Issawi, were perceived as sectarian moves that outraged Sunnis and sparked protests throughout Iraq.<sup>40</sup> During some of these protests, government forces responded with deadly force, as it did in Hawija, where dozens of people were killed.<sup>41</sup>

Sunni grievances against the Iraqi government are fueling support for ISIS. The Iraqi government must mitigate that support by refraining from measures that alienate Sunnis. For example, strengthening the largely Shi'ite Iraqi forces at the expense of Sunnis and targeting Sunni leaders would further increase tensions. In addition, the new Iraqi government under Haider al-Abadi must take measures that signal the inclusion of the Sunni population. This includes building community groups that incorporate Sunnis, Shi'ites and Kurds, recruiting all sides to fight together against ISIS and/or requiring coalition governments to incorporate different leaders from different sects beyond the current arrangements. The United States must focus on tying assistance to the Iraqi government with clearly defined actions to gain the trust of Sunnis. ISIS' support base will not be undermined unless a truly inclusive Iraqi state emerges.

### ***Comprehensive Military Strategy***

The current U.S. strategy to degrade and destroy ISIS, as highlighted above, rules out the use of ground troops in favor of air strikes and reliance on Iraqi forces and the Syrian opposition. However, given the current state of

those forces and the limited effect of airpower, it is unclear how effective this strategy will be with ISIS' acquisition of territory. American history cautions against relying chiefly on airpower. Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster (Director, Army Capabilities Integration Center/Deputy Commanding General, Futures, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command) has argued that, in the Vietnam War:

The notion that airpower alone could solve the complex military and political program of Vietnam was based in ignorance and advocacy by airpower zealots.... It remained unclear how bombing targets in North Vietnam and using massive airstrikes in the South against an enemy who was intertwined with the noncombatant population would help to establish conditions conducive to ending the war.<sup>42</sup>

In *Dereliction of Duty*, McMaster explains how U.S. civilian advisors in the Vietnam War overestimated the impact airpower would have on the North Vietnamese government.<sup>43</sup> He notes that airpower proved insufficient to inflict the losses that would satisfactorily affect the behavior of Ho Chi Minh's regime. ISIS' extremist ideology and its composition of fighters who have been hardened by a decade of war suggest that it has a high capacity to sustain losses. By undertaking primarily an air campaign, the United States is potentially succumbing to the same failed strategy that was used in Vietnam.

In contrast, the Indonesian effort against DI in the 1950s and 1960s utilized large land forces with heavy artillery under a special military command, as well as air and naval strikes. Ground forces were required to perform missions—including engaging the enemy in large units and isolating and starving their forces—that were critical to victory and could not be performed by air and naval forces. As Indonesian scholar Leonard C. Sebastian notes, “The Army owed its success partly to the fact that it was able to bring more troops into action.... Counteroffensives by the Army were able to drive the Darul Islam troops out of [the cities and towns] with relative ease.”<sup>44</sup>

**Historical Lesson #4:** Reliance primarily on airpower is not likely to be sufficient to degrade and destroy ISIS, especially since it has acquired large swathes of territory. In fact, neither airpower nor landpower can be effective alone. The effectiveness of airpower declines as ISIS targets inevitably disperse. The use of ground forces can help force the enemy to mass together to defend themselves on their territory, increasing their vulnerability to attacks from the air. This type of comprehensive approach is more likely to provide multiple dilemmas to the enemy and increase their exposure to attack.

Indonesia's successful efforts against DI show the effectiveness of a comprehensive approach that encompasses land-, air- and seapower against an Islamic terrorist group. Given the recent failures of the Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian rebel forces, it is critical that U.S. forces engage ISIS with a comprehensive strategy for the time being. Only after a training program succeeds in building up large numbers of competent Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian rebel forces can they begin to take over the combat mission from the U.S. military. Even then, while local forces could provide landpower, U.S. air- and seapower can continue to remain engaged in the region so as to maintain the comprehensive strategy.

### ***Exploiting Internal Divisions***

Like ISIS, GIA in Algeria advocated for the establishment of an Islamic state and committed atrocities against the government and the civilian population. The group emerged from elements of the outlawed Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) party in 1992 and, like ISIS, consisted of hardened fighters experienced in challenging a foreign superpower (specifically, in the Soviet–Afghan war).<sup>45</sup> GIA's brutality embarrassed rival jihadist groups and led to a greater conflict within the Islamic movement than with the Algerian government. These similarities, along with Algeria's success against the GIA, make it highly instructive to the present situation with ISIS.

In many ways, GIA largely defeated itself. The group made the early decision to attack civilian as well as military targets. Its leader, Antar Zouabri, issued a fatwa against the entire Algerian population, prompting groups like Ayman al-Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad to disavow GIA's tactics.<sup>46</sup> FIS formed a rival group, the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS); the civil war that raged in Algeria in the 1990s was largely due to the struggle between these two groups, resulting in an overall death toll of 150,000.<sup>47</sup>

As GIA suffered from the civil war and was isolated from the population, the GSPC emerged from it in the late 1990s, eschewing attacks on civilians. At the same time, the wider Islamist movement grew more moderate, even allowing women's participation in the political and economic process.<sup>48</sup> While GSPC eventually evolved into

AQIM (which pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden) and the jihadist movement continues in Algeria, GIA itself collapsed and remains an example of how internal divisions in an Islamic movement can prove self-defeating.

**Historical Lesson #5:** Internal divisions within a jihadist movement can often severely hamper its effectiveness, especially if the divisions lead to a public break with other jihadist groups. These divisions can be enhanced if one group's level of brutality alienates it from other groups as well as from the local population. The history of the GIA suggests that this level of extremism is difficult to sustain in the long run, as it will win over few friends and puts pressure on the group to rely solely on its military momentum.

Similarly, ISIS has estranged itself from rival groups, most evident in its split with al Qaeda in February 2014. ISIS has fought al Qaeda's affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra on the battlefield and even executed one of its prominent emirs in Raqqa.<sup>49</sup> Its tactics and atrocities have shocked even the most hardened terrorists.<sup>50</sup> In addition, ISIS has failed to convince jihadist scholars in the Middle East that its caliphate and ideology are grounded in sound Muslim principles.<sup>51</sup> Although ISIS and al-Nusra now appear to be cooperating, there is evidence to indicate that their initial split caused major splinters throughout the Islamic extremist world, as we are seeing in the Pakistani Taliban.<sup>52</sup>

In Raqqa, ISIS' top leadership is composed of Iraqi, Saudi and Tunisian figures, with Egyptian, European, Chechen and Syrian fighters in secondary ranks. Its foreign fighters include recruits from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. Most of ISIS' foreign recruits are segregated from the local population, due to tremendous backlash from native Syrians at their presence.<sup>53</sup> In fact, several jihadist groups, including the fundamentalist group Ahrar al-Sham, released a statement lambasting the presence of the foreign fighters in Syria.<sup>54</sup>

ISIS' foreign composition and brutal policies make it vulnerable to isolation from the broader jihadi movement as well as from the population it engages. While ISIS is currently benefiting from recent military successes, heavy-handed tactics are gaining it more enemies. The United States should seek to exploit this potential for isolation by working with local Iraqi and Syrian officials to expose the atrocities committed by ISIS and clearly delineate the differences between ISIS' ideology and mainstream Muslim doctrine. Local government institutions should take the lead in this public information campaign, so that it is not seen as an American propaganda effort.

## **Conclusion**

The historical data, of course, cannot answer all questions about defeating ISIS. For example, ISIS has built a sophisticated funding network that differs dramatically from those of the jihadist groups of recent history. In addition, the dynamic and complex relationships among Iran, Israel, Turkey and other nations in the region and their impact on the fight against ISIS make it difficult to apply broad principles derived from historical analysis. Despite these caveats, history does warn policymakers to consider the duration, intensity and breadth of the commitment necessary to counter the present threat.

The United States must face the reality that a comprehensive military effort to defeat ISIS in cooperation with Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian rebel forces is necessary and will likely last well into the next administration. Half-hearted measures and further delay will only strengthen ISIS' position and ensure confrontation at a later date in which the United States is at a greater strategic disadvantage. Commentators who believe that the United States should wash its hands of the Middle East and allow the nations of the region to handle ISIS by themselves are betting that those nations have the willpower and capability to do so—an assumption that has little merit in light of recent events. Only a major national commitment will defeat ISIS and signal to the world that the United States stands ready to confront the threats of the future.

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