



Insight

What to Do About ISIS

RACHEL HOFF | JANUARY 28, 2016

Summary

- The current strategy to degrade ISIS is failing to meet the ultimate goal of destroying the terrorist organization.
- A better strategy requires more American military resources in addition to strong diplomatic and political efforts.
- Congress should not limit the ability of the commander-in-chief to use all means necessary to defeat ISIS and protect U.S. national security.

Introduction

Eighteen months have passed since the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as ISIL, Daesh, or the Islamic State) declared a global caliphate. The U.S.-led air campaign against ISIS began shortly thereafter and has served as the cornerstone of the Obama Administration's strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the terrorist organization. Progress in the fight to defeat ISIS has been slow, leading to many questions about whether the current strategy is enough.

In his final State of the Union [address](#), President Obama said the strategy to defeat the terrorist organization is working. He trumpeted the 10,000 airstrikes so far as well as efforts to "cut off... financing, disrupt their plots, stop the flow of terrorist fighters, and stamp out their vicious ideology." But even an intelligence report commissioned by the White House reportedly [predicted](#) that ISIS "will spread worldwide and grow in numbers, unless it suffers a significant loss of territory on the battlefield in Iraq and Syria."

This piece will evaluate current efforts as well as a variety of proposed alternative strategies

for combating ISIS. It will also consider various proposals for legally authorizing the use of force against ISIS. Not surprisingly, many of these alternatives come from current legislators as well as those running to be America's next commander-in-chief.

Authorizing Military Force

In the State of the Union, the president also called upon Congress to authorize the use of military force against ISIS. The recent terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino have [revived](#) bipartisan calls for Congress to pass war powers specifically for the fight against ISIS. From a legal perspective, the Obama Administration's actions to combat ISIS have fallen under the Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) that Congress passed three days after 9/11. That 2001 AUMF authorized the use of "necessary and appropriate force against those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons." This broad language has allowed Presidents Bush and Obama to use force against the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, and ISIS, in addition to other Islamic extremists.

At the request of Speaker Paul Ryan, House Republicans have [begun](#) efforts to consider a new AUMF specifically for ISIS. While it seems clear that such a measure would [not pass](#) in the Senate, the debate highlights widespread dissatisfaction with the Obama Administration's current strategy to defeat the terrorist group.

Current Strategy

The White House presented its [strategy](#) to defeat ISIS in September 2014. At that time, the strategy was focused primarily on Iraq, though operations have since spread to [Syria](#) and [online](#) as well. The core elements of the administration's stated strategy, however, remain the same: denying ISIS a safe-haven with airstrikes; supporting governance; partnering with regional actors; collecting intelligence; disrupting financial support; countering ISIS's narrative; stemming foreign fighters; protecting the homeland; and delivering humanitarian aid.

The president's strategy also rules out certain options in the fight against ISIS. The [AUMF proposal](#) he [presented](#) to Congress in February 2015 specifically states that it "does not authorize the use of the United States Armed Forces in enduring offensive ground combat operations." Additionally, the White House AUMF is time-limited - it would terminate three years after its enactment, unless reauthorized.

Amidst questioning from critics of the strategy, the administration has been clear that two

other options are [off the table](#) as well: a no-fly zone in the air above Syria and safe zones (or buffer zones) on the ground in Syria.

What's Missing

The current U.S. strategy to degrade ISIS falls short of the goal to ultimately destroy the terrorist organization. Defeating ISIS will require a greater commitment of military resources, including sending more trainers and advisers and embedding ground troops. The recent [deployment](#) of some 50 special operations forces to Syria to augment the 3,500 U.S. troops in Iraq is not sufficient to provide the support local forces need.

Airstrikes are only as effective as their targeting. In order to more precisely direct airstrikes against ISIS troops and assets, the coalition needs better intelligence about ISIS positions. Producing this kind of intelligence requires forward-deployed air controllers to call in targeted air strikes.

Therefore, in terms of the AUMF, it would be a mistake for Congress to authorize the president to use force but limit the means by ruling out ground troops. Time limitations are also problematic, as they give the use of force an expiration date and allow the enemy to simply wait out U.S. operations. While it seems true that the president has the legal authority he needs under the 2001 AUMF, any new authorization specifically for ISIS should avoid such restrictions.

Congressional Proposals

Early last year, Representative Adam Kinzinger [introduced](#) an [alternate AUMF](#) for ISIS that removes the restrictions from the president's proposal. Kinzinger's bill would authorize the use of force "as the [p]resident determines to be necessary and appropriate" against ISIS. This AUMF does not have a specific clause limiting its duration.

In the wake of the Paris and San Bernardino terrorist attacks, several legislators have introduced AUMF proposals:

Representative Adam Schiff introduced an [AUMF](#) that authorizes the use of "all necessary and appropriate force" against ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and the Afghan Taliban. The legislation would repeal the 2001 AUMF and automatically sunset in three years.

Senator Lindsey Graham [introduced](#) an [AUMF proposal](#) last month that would not limit U.S. operations against ISIS "in terms of time, geography, or means." He believes that any successful strategy to defeat ISIS must involve forces on the ground and that specifying an

expiration date would only embolden the enemy. Graham's AUMF would allow the United States to combat ISIS not just in Iraq and Syria but wherever it spreads – and also to battle ISIS online.

A bipartisan, bicameral group of four legislators [introduced](#) an AUMF that would authorize force only to protect the lives of American citizens and to provide military support to regional partners. This bill would prohibit the deployment of “significant U.S. ground troops in combat” – except to protect the lives of American citizens from imminent threat. It would remove the authority for the 2001 AUMF to be used as legal authority to fight ISIS and would expire in three years.

Alternative Strategies

Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has [articulated](#) a three-part approach to combating ISIS: first, defeating the terrorist group in the Middle East; second, dismantling its global infrastructure of support; and third, disrupting plots and radicalization in the United States. Her proposed strategy is very similar to the White House plan, focusing on increasing coalition airstrikes, using special forces and avoiding sending ground troops, and supporting political reconciliation and stability in Iraq and Syria. Departing from the White House's strategy, Clinton supports the development of a [no-fly](#) zone in Syria, in cooperation with regional partners.

[Senator Marco Rubio](#) and [Governor Jeb Bush](#) have both outlined similar plans to defeat ISIS. Rubio and Bush support air strikes but differ from the White House in that they would forward deploy air controllers to call in air support. They also support embedding U.S. troops with local forces. Rubio and Bush both support establishing a no-fly zone over Syria as well as safe zones on the ground. Their strategies call for directly providing arms to Kurdish forces and supporting Sunni tribes. Both plans focus on supporting political stability and countering Iranian influence.

Senator Bernie Sanders has not proposed a comprehensive strategy for combating ISIS. He has, however, [stated](#) that he supports airstrikes and opposes sending ground troops. In an important departure from the White House strategy, Sanders does not believe that the United States should lead efforts against ISIS. Instead, he [argues](#) that leadership should come from Middle Eastern countries most affected by the violence and destabilizing effects of ISIS.

While Donald Trump has not presented a strategy to defeat ISIS, he has said that he does have a plan but will not [reveal](#) it. Trump's statements on ISIS have focused on three main points. First, he has proposed to increase air strikes, [saying](#), “I'd just bomb those suckers.”

Second, Trump has focused on oil, which is an aspect that other proposed strategies do not address. He has [said](#) that he would bomb pipelines and blow up refineries, then take all of the oil. Third, Trump has proposed killing the civilian families of ISIS terrorists, [saying](#), “You have to take out their families.”

Senator Ted Cruz has said that his strategy would be to “[carpet bomb](#)” ISIS. During one of the Republican [debates](#), however, Cruz indicated that he supported increased use of air power against identified ISIS troop positions. This kind of targeted air campaign is [different](#) from the conventional definition of “carpet bombing,” which is usually used to describe indiscriminate bombing. Cruz also supports forward-deployed special forces to direct the air strikes.

Conclusion

To win the fight against ISIS, America must summon its political resolve and back it up with military resources. On the ground, the United States should increase the number of trainers and advisers, strengthen the role of U.S. troops embedded with local forces, and forward deploy air controllers to increase the accuracy of air strikes. Senator Rubio and Governor Bush have presented the plans that would do the most to address the shortcomings of the current strategy and provide the resources necessary to destroy ISIS.

Should Congress vote to authorize military force specifically against ISIS, an AUMF proposal that provides President Obama and future presidents with the authority and flexibility to do whatever is necessary to defeat ISIS and protect U.S. national security is the most sensible course of action.