

# The US Campaign against the “Islamic State”

The US-led campaign against the “Islamic State” in Syria and Iraq is full of internal contradictions, yet nevertheless a logical result of the underlying planning parameters. To understand the campaign, it is imperative to focus on those parameters and to analyze the operation separately for Iraq and Syria.

By Martin Zapfe

Since 8 August 2014, US fighter jets have been attacking targets of the so-called “Islamic State” (IS) in Iraq and Syria. In addition, the US is deploying up to 3,100 soldiers to Iraq in support of indigenous forces. The advance of the IS since June 2014, though long-prepared, nevertheless caught the US by surprise and forced Washington to intervene. For *Operation Inherent Resolve*, US President Barack Obama now set the ambitious target of degrading and ultimately destroying IS.

The US now faces the huge challenge of embedding the use of military force into a stable overall political concept. Notwithstanding frequent criticism, the US approach so far is coherent. Only those who are willing to accept a radical paradigm shift in the region could conceive a fundamentally different strategy – a prospect that even most US critics of the current course abhor, and with good reason. In a highly complex environment, Obama is attempting to preserve core US interests without obstructing the evolutionary development of the Middle East or allowing himself to become ensnared in an unwanted war. However, the operations against the IS are notable for the fact that in Iraq at least, there is a political end-state that would be acceptable for most parties, at least in the short term. For Syria, no such state exists. Therefore, the strategic expediency of military force must be analyzed separately for each country.



After US airstrikes, smoke rises over the Syrian town of Kobani in the Turkish-Syrian border region (18 October 2014). Kai Pfaffenbach / Reuters

Since the start of the attacks, the US has stated clearly that no quick results are to be expected and that the battle against the IS could take years. However, failure could come at any moment. The US-led coalition in Syria is an alliance of the smallest common denominator. It is targeted at a common enemy, but offers no shared vision for the country. In Iraq, on the other hand, the advance of the IS serves both as evidence and as a catalyst of the huge centrifugal forces that are tearing apart the societies of

Mesopotamia. To this commixture is added the involvement of Iran, which also regards its own vital interests as being under threat in Syria and in Iraq. It defends these interests both together with and against the US, while at the same time being engaged in nuclear negotiations with other countries and international institutions. Therefore, and in view of the conflicting dynamics in the region, it is more than doubtful whether the political and military actions of the US will be successful.

### Operation Inherent Resolve

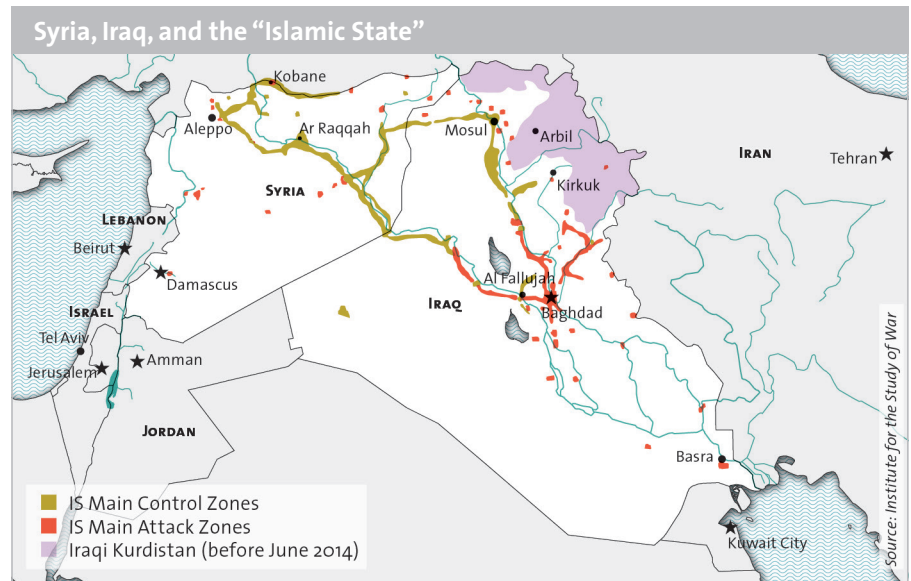
While many were surprised when IS forces occupied the Iraqi metropolis of Mosul by coup de main in June 2014, the rise of the IS is closely connected to the Iraq war that began with the US invasion in 2003. After the US redeployment from Iraq, and following the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011, the organization’s ranks were reinforced, allowing it to capture and control territory and cities in both countries by the spring of 2014. However, it was not until IS forces began to operate beyond Syria and the Sunni heartland of Iraq and posed an immediate threat to the Kurdish capital of Irbil while threatening to massacre religious minorities that the US decided to intervene militarily.

On 8 August 2014, Obama authorized the US Central Command to carry out air strikes against targets in Iraq and Syria. At the same time, Obama announced the deployment of military advisors and soldiers to protect US installations in Iraq. Overall, the White House has announced that up to 3,100 soldiers may be sent to Iraq. Since June 2014, the US military has established an operational headquarters in Baghdad and is actively supporting its allies in the country with advisors. While Obama has so far repeatedly ruled out the active involvement of US forces in combat, this determination is by purpose ambiguous: The military advisors will accompany the Iraqi army into battle, offer advice at the level of

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brigades and above, and certainly also help coordinate the Iraqi forces’ ground operations with US air power.

Within narrow political-strategic constraints, the US air strikes appear to have been effective. They were ostensibly a decisive factor in defending Irbil and in the recapture of the vital Mosul dam. At the same time, they seem to have been instrumental in so far holding the Kurdish city of Kobane (Arabic: Ain al-Arab) in Syria against a determined IS offensive. Moreover, the air strikes are forcing the IS to adapt its operations and logistics. A number of decisions that have been hailed as evidence of military genius are really no more than a logical reaction on the part of the IS – and one that considerably diminishes its military effectiveness. Lightning



raids and vast offensive operations as seen throughout the summer of 2014 are now made considerably more difficult. Additionally, the oil trade, which forms a considerable part of the IS’s economic basis, appears to have been significantly curtailed. The air strikes have at least partially wrested the initiative from the IS.

The US now appears to be concentrating on planning and preparations for a military offensive to recapture a large part of the territory taken by the IS until the end of 2015. To this end, new Iraqi units of the regular armed forces as well as of the Kurdish Peshmerga and newly formed national guard units will receive training and instruction at regional training centers. US advisors will then accompany these units on the battlefield and help to coordinate and control the operations.

So far, the aim has been to stop the IS; now, the objective is to push it back. This raises the question of what to do with the liberated territories and how they can be stabilized. The new national guard units are expected to help secure the re-conquered areas on the regional and local levels. Certainly, relations between these units and Baghdad as well as the religious and tribal leaders will be fraught with tension, which was also the reason for the breakdown of the alliance of 2006 and 2007 between US forces and Sunni tribes against the overly cruel jihadists. Therefore, the Iraqi offensive will likely be much more complex than

the bombing campaign against the IS has been so far.

### Conflicting Logics: Syria and Iraq

War, according to the well-known dictum of Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, is the continuation of policy by other means. Any analysis of the US campaign must therefore study the underlying political goals of the US, in which a distinction is required between the operations in Syria and those in Iraq. While both countries constitute one single theater of operations for *Inherent Resolve*, there is considerable difference between the two in terms of the nature of the adversary, the countries involved, US strategy, and the politico-military dynamics of the respective conflicts.

**Syria:** Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, the US has refused to intervene openly in the conflict. Apparently, President Obama sees no way of using US troop deployments to exert decisive influence on the course of what is both a civil war and a proxy war, and is wary of a “mission creep” into the conflict. Thus, Washington has so far limited itself to providing training and equipment, both limited in scope, to a small number of “moderate” rebels, as well as supporting the diplomatic process, which can be considered a failure for the time being in the aftermath of the conference at Montreux in 2014. Though the US has nevertheless stated its goal of seeing Bashar al-Assad deposed, that goal seems to have receded into the far distance. Overall, Obama’s decision in the summer

of 2013 not to defend his “red line” and carry out a decisive strike following the chemical weapons use near Damascus appears in retrospect to have been a mistake with grave consequences for this conflict. While the decommissioning of al-Assad’s chemical weapons was certainly a success for disarmament policy, it has had no discernible effect on the military capabilities of the Syrian armed forces while strengthening Bashar al-Assad politically. Moreover, the credibility of the US, an already weakened pillar of its foreign policy, has been further undermined.

Compared to the Iraqi campaign, under international law, the Syrian part of *Operation Inherent Resolve* rests on less than solid foundations. Plus, the only countries that regard their own interests as being under threat and are willing to participate in the fighting are Sunni-dominated states of the region – Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates. Most of these countries are longstanding US allies, and at the same time most of them have an equally long history of opposition to a regional preponderance of Iran, which is a party to the conflict in Syria via the Assad regime, the Lebanese Hizbollah, and likely also with its own forces.

Western media focused largely on the US air strikes against IS forces arrayed around Kobane and the targeted strikes against the so-called “Khorasan Group”. The case of Kobane, a Syrian-Kurdish town on the Turkish border, exemplifies the logic of the US operations in Syria – in Iraq, the US aims to shape the course of the war; in Syria, it does not. In and of itself, Kobane had little strategic value, which explains the initial reluctance of the US to intervene. Just as Washington had previously refused to get involved when Syrian cities fell to one of the parties to the conflict and massacres loomed, it also refused in the case of Kobane to let the IS dictate when US forces should intervene. Only after it had transpired that the IS had declared the capture of Kobane a priority did the US decide to intervene decisively and apparently inflict heavy losses on the IS; or in other words: Only because the IS regarded its capture as a strategic goal did Kobane become strategically important for the US as well. Had Kobane been a Kurdish city in the north of Iraq, on the other hand, it is certain that the US would have intervened earlier and in coordination with the Kurdish forces.

According to US sources, the air strikes against the Khorasan Group are directed

against a network consisting of operatives of al-Qaida and the Syrian al-Nusra Front, which allegedly is preparing attacks in the West. The US does not wish to be drawn into the war in Syria any further beyond this air campaign. Moreover, any active measures against the Syrian armed forces of al-Assad, as demanded vehemently by Turkey and others, would be regarded by Iran as a hostile US act.

The US mission in Syria is not aimed at bringing about a realistic political end-state – not least because most parties would find it difficult to define one. Thus, the military attacks have no political purpose beyond a strategic weakening of the IS as well as the

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elimination of the Khorasan Group. Thus, the air strikes in Syria are of secondary importance to the US compared to Iraq.

**Iraq:** Essentially, the struggle against IS in Iraq is a continuation of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which continued after the US retreat in December 2011. The parties involved and – apart from a few exceptions – their motivations remain largely the same as in 2006 and 2007, the most intense period of the US occupation. There is no doubt that the US carries a special responsibility for the country; moreover, in terms of international law, this operation is based on an explicit request by the Iraqi government in Baghdad. This solid political and legal basis has cleared the way for an international coalition that also includes several Western partners – including Canada, the UK, France, Denmark, and Germany – with varying degrees of involvement. However, no Arab states are participating. In view of the Shi’ite-led government in Baghdad and the presence of Iranian military advisors, the involvement of the “Syrian coalition” would in any way be quite improbable.

Unlike in Syria, there is a political objective to the mission in Iraq that could potentially be shared by all parties and factions opposed to the IS: A reformed and functioning, federal Iraqi state within its international borders and free from an existential threat from the IS – essentially, an improved *status quo ante* compared to 2011. And, unlike in Syria, the IS in Iraq is not a purely military threat: The advance of the

IS in the summer of 2014 and its deeply entrenched support in Sunni strongholds such as Fallujah can largely be attributed to the Sunni-backed revolt against the Shi’ite-led central government in Iraq. Thus, the key to success for the US is a sound compromise and power sharing agreement involving the various population groups in Iraq.

Against this background, the US has made its military assistance contingent on the formation of an inclusive government in Baghdad and the replacement of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Washington is pushing for a difficult, but achievable equitable resolution between Baghdad and the region of Kurdistan in a conflict revolving mostly around the sharing of oil revenues and the future of the city of Kirkuk, historically claimed by the Kurds and now also controlled by them. Furthermore, they hope

that political reforms and the creation of the national guards will win them the support of the Sunnis and help to convince them to oppose the radicalism of the IS, as they did in 2006 and 2007. However, considerable Sunni forces feel that the government in Baghdad has cheated them out of the rewards for their cooperation back then; it remains to be seen whether the Sunni constituency can be persuaded to cooperate once more, given the memory of that disappointment. The IS, on the other hand, is aware of that danger and thus retaliates with brutal violence and waves of executions against Iraqi tribal members that threaten to oppose it.

If the US should manage to compel Baghdad and the regions to make meaningful political concessions and to explain to Iran that an inclusive government in Baghdad, naturally under Shi’ite leadership, would be in Tehran’s interest as well, a rapid military collapse of the IS in large swathes of the country would be possible. If the political measures should fail, however, the military campaign would essentially be a futile exercise.

### Limited Room for Maneuver

Barack Obama’s approach to countering IS, often criticized, makes sense if the underlying parameters are taken into consideration. Washington’s behavior is bounded by significant constraints that naturally lead to inherent contradictions. Thus far, the US has only limited leeway in this crisis. The following three parameters are among the most important.

First of all, the US does not want to change existing borders. The IS, for its part, has explicitly challenged the current borders in the region and is pushing for a restructuring of the Middle East. The current borderlines, largely drawn by European colonial powers, have certainly not prevented conflicts and wars in the past, but have contained them and mostly channeled them into state-controlled limitations. Fixed borders are a necessary condition for existing (Lebanon, Egypt/Jordan with Israel) peace agreements in the region and will have to be the cornerstones of those for which there is yet some hope (Israel-Palestine). If this order should be fundamentally challenged, a bloody redrawing of boundaries and, in the worst case, an “Arab Thirty Years’ War” may be in the offing: A conflict characterized by a self-sustaining cycle of violence, proxy wars, and religious wars in which the original political goals are successively lost from view. Therefore, Washington remains staunchly opposed to a division of Syria or Iraq, for instance by encouraging the Kurds to secede.

Secondly, the US wishes to contain a resurgent Iran. Tehran is overall among the big geopolitical winners of the US invasion of 2003, and Shi’ite-Iranian dominance in large parts of the region is no longer a distant vision. The US cannot and does no longer want to prevent that from happening, but does aim to contain Tehran and, possibly, to counter-balance it with the help of Sunni powers. This also involves a refusal to cooperate with Bashar al-Assad – even though the fight against the IS obviously plays into the hands of the Syrian strongman. One complicating factor is the circumstance that Iran, which is active militarily in both countries, is in principle fighting on the side of the US-led coalition (for Baghdad) in Iraq, but against it in the Syrian theater (for Damascus). Military cooperation between the US and Iran, which is certainly already taking place informally and at least indirectly, is thus necessarily limited to Iraq for the time being. However, the main priority for the US overall remains the nuclear negotiation

process just extended until June 2015. As long as those negotiations are ongoing, the US does not seem prepared to more openly act against Iranian interests in Syria.

Third, Obama has so far ruled out the involvement of US combat forces as the mainstay of operations, for reasons of domestic, foreign, and military policy. While it is certainly possible that US Special Operations Forces are already active in Syria now, a war-weary US electorate on the domestic front would probably not be willing to entertain significant casualties in a region where around 4,500 US soldiers have al-

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ready died between 2003 and 2011. In the pursuit of its foreign policy, the US is neither interested in fighting the wars of allies nor in becoming the “free air force” of various parties to the conflict. And finally, in operational military terms, the war in Iraq taught the US a lesson about the long-term value of maintaining its own troops in a culturally and politically delicate environment.

Thus, the US military advisors with the Iraqi army are not so much engaged in actual training and instruction – after all, proficiency in handling most current types of small arms and portable anti-tank weapons is not exactly in short supply in Iraq – but rather in coordinating its air power and controlling the Iraqi army as well as the Shi’ite militias that are frequently allied with it. A similar divergence between the communicated intention of a training mission, and the more important core purpose of the mission, is to be seen in European attempts to bolster the Iraqi Kurds: While powerful guided anti-tank missiles like the German–French MILAN system are an important complement to the Kurdish arsenal that requires instruction for proper use, the Kurds do have an interest in ensur-

ing the actual presence of foreign soldiers and thus the political commitment to support them. A training mission on the ground, which may today seem an attractive option, may thus have significant long-term consequences.

Barack Obama has repeatedly stated that the IS constitutes a threat to partners in the region and to US interests, but that it may only develop into a direct threat to the US in the long run. In doing so, he is signaling that there are deliberate limits to US action and that he is not willing to fight other countries’ wars. In the conflict with the IS,

Obama remains a foreign-policy pragmatist who came into office on a promise to end wars, but not to start new ones. Apart from a few exceptions, there are few critics in the US Congress who would be willing to change the abovementioned parameters and to hazard incalculable consequences – for instance, by pushing for Kurdish independence or a deployment of military advisors to Syria.

Taken together, a success of the Iraqi part of *Operation Inherent Resolve*, considering potentially achievable political aims, seems possible. For Syria, neither is such a political aim in sight, nor is therefore, necessarily, a success of the Syrian part beyond a strategic degradation of IS likely. For the time being, the US does not appear to be willing to question the underlying parameters of its campaign. Only then would a markedly different US strategy be possible; a strategy that would inadvertently have serious consequences for the Middle East.

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