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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

## CASE ANALYSIS

# Confronting ISIL: Causes and Consequences of America's Strategic Failure

Policy Analysis Unit | July 2015

Confronting ISIL: Causes and Consequences of America's Strategic Failure\*

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## Introduction

The Obama administration's strategy to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) has come under the spotlight once again with the fall of Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's al-Anbar province, to ISIL control on May 17, 2015. Hugely outnumbered and outgunned, a mere several hundred ISIL fighters forced the flight of Iraqi army regulars from Ramadi, who abandoned their American weaponry behind them – a scene recalling all too clearly the fall of Mosul just one year earlier. Washington's difficulties were compounded by the fall, only a few days later, of the Syrian town of Palmyra, as ISIL expelled the Syrian regime's forces. These two successes of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria were achieved despite nearly nine months of air strikes launched against it by the United States and a number of its allies, giving rise to further doubts concerning the extent to which Obama's strategy of "degrading" and then "destroying" ISIL can be said to be actually working.

Ironically, ISIL's achievements followed optimistic American and Iraqi assessments that the group had been sent reeling, and was in retreat as a result of coordinated air strikes, at least in Iraq. In the words of Obama last February, ISIL was "on the defensive, and would be defeated," noting that there were "reports of the collapse of morale in the ranks of ISIL fighters, who seem to be aware of the futility of their cause".<sup>2</sup> Iraq's allied government leader Haidar al-Abadi also spoke optimistically when he announced that the March liberation of the city of Tikrit by Iraqi forces (supported by the "popular mobilization militia" (*al-Hashd al-Sha'bi*) affiliated with Iran) was "most encouraging."<sup>3</sup> This excessive optimism remained unchecked even days prior to the fall of Ramadi. It is what led US General Thomas Widely, chief of staff of the US Army's Joint Task force in the war against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, to tell reporters: "We firmly believe that ISIL is on the defensive in all areas of Iraq and Syria; it is trying to

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<sup>2</sup> "Remarks by the President on Request to Congress for Authorization of Force Against ISIL," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, November 2, 2015, <https://goo.gl/DIOasc>.

<sup>3</sup> Susanne Koelbl, "Interview with Iraqi Prime Minister Al-Abadi: 'The Liberation of Tikrit Is Very Encouraging'," *Spiegel*, April 3, 2015, <http://goo.gl/jWNRzv>

preserve its previous gains by carrying out small-scale attacks at local levels and occasionally launching complex larger-scale attacks to feed their propaganda.”<sup>4</sup>

In Washington, debate on the fight against ISIL was limited to three tracks: questioning the effectiveness of air strikes without a substantial US troop presence on the ground, the feasibility of arming Sunni tribes directly and circumventing a central government proven to be unreliable in Baghdad, and finally, the role of the popular *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* militia and their Iranian sponsors. The failure of US policy to make headway met, even in the early days, a storm of criticism from Democrats and Republicans alike, all demanding the administration overhaul its ISIL strategy. Officials have refused to change course.

## Change in Strategy

The Obama administration’s response to the criticisms leveled against it has been decisive. Officials simply state that there is no intention to review its strategy,<sup>5</sup> which will remain centered on the use of air strikes, combined with the provision of training, arms and advice to Iraqi forces on the ground. This strategy has been maintained even with the news of the fall of Mosul and Ramadi, which Obama described as a “tactical setback,” all the while continuing to assert that America would not lose the war against ISIL.<sup>6</sup>

Members of the Democratic and Republican parties have taken issue with this assessment, as have a number of political and military analysts, who call instead for a strategy that will put US troops, or at least more military advisers on the ground in Iraq,<sup>7</sup> and developing a clearer strategy in the Syrian portion.<sup>8</sup> The administration

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<sup>4</sup> “Department of Defense Press Briefing with General Weidley via Teleconference from Southwest Asia,” *U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Press Office*, May 15, 2015, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5629>

<sup>5</sup> Roberta Rampton, “Obama Meets with Advisers on Iraq, Reaffirms Support for Abadi: White House,” *Reuters*, May 19, 2015, <http://goo.gl/2SgPkY>.

<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “‘Look... It’s My Name on This’: Obama Defends the Iran Nuclear Deal,” *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2015, <http://goo.gl/gL5SDp>.

<sup>7</sup> Jethro Mullen, “After Ramadi, What Options Does U.S. Have for ISIL Fight in Iraq?” *CNN*, May 25, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/25/politics/iraq-ISIL-us-options/>; Carol E. Lee, “Obama’s Strategy Against

responded by shifting blame for failure. According to Obama, "if the Iraqis themselves are not willing or capable to arrive at the political accommodations necessary to govern, if they are not willing to fight for the security of their country, we cannot do that for them."<sup>9</sup> The same strategy was used by US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, who said that "Iraqi forces just showed no will to fight [...] They vastly outnumbered the opposing forces [...] yet they withdrew from the site."<sup>10</sup>

In light of recent events, the Obama administration has proposed a reinforcement of the same strategy that until now has failed to achieve real and effective results on the ground. This position reaffirms Washington's confidence in Prime Minister Abadi, on the grounds that he is sincere in his efforts to heal the sectarian Sunni-Shiite, and ethnic Arab-Kurdish divisions in Iraq.<sup>11</sup> It also insists that airstrikes will support Iraqi troops on the ground, which are the force that is solely responsible for direct engagement.<sup>12</sup> The administration also announced it would speed up the shipment of weaponry and ammunition to Baghdad so as to better support these troops. Among the weapons to be delivered are 2000 T-4 anti-tank rockets –100 more rockets than had previously been agreed upon. These are meant specifically to help Iraqi forces respond to the cars and trucks used by ISIL in their suicide attacks.<sup>13</sup> Finally, the Ministry of Defense announced it would intensify the training of Iraqi forces.<sup>14</sup>

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Islamic State Under Scrutiny After Setbacks," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 22, 2015, at: <http://goo.gl/JNeMcx>.

<sup>8</sup> Editorial Board, "The Fall of Ramadi Exposes Obama's Weak Islamic State Strategy," *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2015, <http://goo.gl/XbKqhN>.

<sup>9</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Starr, "Carter: Iraqis Showed 'No Will to Fight' in Ramadi," *CNN*, May 24, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/24/politics/ashton-carter-ISIL-ramadi/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>12</sup> "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, May 22m 2015, <https://goo.gl/qjvTSy>.

<sup>13</sup> Phil Stewart & Arshad Mohammed, "U.S. to Deliver 2,000 Anti-Tank Weapons to Iraq, Pentagon Says," *Reuters*, May 21, /2015, <http://goo.gl/iTbNN1>.

<sup>14</sup> Aaron Mehta, "US Looks at Train, Equip Options in Iraq," *Defense News*, May 28, 2015, <http://goo.gl/p2te4F>.

## Requirements Beyond Review

Given the entrenchment of the Obama administration and insistence on maintaining current policy, in the short term, three things are clear:

1. There will be no US ground combat forces in Iraq: about 3,000 US military personnel are deployed in Iraq today, with a mission limited to the provision of training and advice to the Iraqi regular troops. However, since the ISIL occupation of Mosul in June 2014, the scope of the task they are charged with prohibits them from engaging in direct combat operations against ISIL and bans them from forward positions in combat fronts. The administration has categorically rejected calls today to place American fighting forces on the ground, or at least to increase the number of those originally deployed so as to take on a broader training and advisory role.<sup>15</sup> Obama is clearly very reluctant to become once again embroiled militarily in Iraq, given that his election to the presidency was in part due to his opposition to America's plunge into the Iraqi quagmire during the years of his predecessor George W. Bush, and his vow to withdraw from Iraq, as actually took place at the end of 2011.
2. The presence of US military personnel on the front lines directing air strikes will be rejected: to date, the administration has insisted that it will not place US military personnel on front lines of combat, even to guide the air strikes of coalition aircraft. Moreover, the Obama administration has refused to entrust the guiding of air strikes by coalition aircraft to US-trained Iraqi personnel, as Spokesman Colonel Steve Warren declared "That is not something we are going to delegate to anyone other than Americans. Period."<sup>16</sup>
3. The sluggish development of a strategy specific to Syria will continue. With a continued absence of any clear or effective strategy, whether in terms of dealing with the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, whom they consider to have

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<sup>15</sup> Goldberg.

<sup>16</sup> Stewart & Mohammed.

lost legitimacy, or in terms of ISIL, US action in Syria remains limited to conducting air strikes against ISIL positions. Critics of the Obama administration argue that it is not possible to eliminate ISIL without developing a strategy to deal with the situation in Syria,<sup>17</sup> and this includes ISIL in Iraq, since the group seized control of the borders between the two countries, effectively abolishing them and moving freely between the two territories. The administration has countered this by saying that unlike the situation in Iraq, there are no allies that can be relied upon in Syria. Unlike the Iraqi government, the administration does not consider the Syrian regime as an ally, and the "moderate" opposition factions that it is working to train in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey will not be ready in the near future to take on the responsibilities of combatting either ISIL or the Syrian regime.<sup>18</sup>

## Dilemma of Dealing with the Iraqi Sunni Tribes

One of the most important planks of Obama's strategy in confronting ISIL in Iraq has been gaining the support of Sunni tribes, and arming them so that they can take on ISIL in limited theatres on their own. The hope is that action would be along the lines of the 2006-2007 "awakenings", as they were known at the time. After the fall of Ramadi, Obama reaffirmed this by saying "there is no doubt that in the Sunni areas we must strengthen the training and commitment as well, and make the Sunni tribes more effective than they are now."<sup>19</sup> The problem is that Obama's remarks do not really address the reality of the situation on the ground.

The basic idea behind Abadi succeeding Nouri al-Maliki as Iraq's prime minister was the creation of a national unity government incorporating all the constituent elements of Iraqi society, and especially the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds. This was a reaction to accusations that Maliki was sectarian and authoritarian. A united Iraq, it was hoped, would help confront ISIL more effectively. However, Abadi's efforts have come to

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<sup>17</sup> Editorial Board.

<sup>18</sup> Jim Garamone, "Anti-ISIL Campaign Will Take Time, Dempsey Says," *U.S. Department of Defense*, September 26, 2014, <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=123274>; Phil Stewart & Missy Ryan, "Up to 15,000 Syrian Rebels Needed to Retake Eastern Syria -U.S. Military," *Reuters*, September 26, 2014, <http://goo.gl/x3GWvN>.

<sup>19</sup> Goldberg.

naught. For example, though Abadi government's has submitted a proposal to parliament for a law that would form a "national guard" in Sunni areas, with provisions for arming Sunni tribes, Maliki's parliamentary bloc has impeded the passage of the law under the pretext that these weapons could fall into the hands of ISIL and subsequently be used against Iraqi forces.<sup>20</sup> This deliberate obstruction on the part of Shi'ite parties brought about widespread complaints among Sunni tribes, who for over a year were left to fight ISIL without sufficient arms or ammunition.<sup>21</sup> This resulted not only in the fall of Ramadi, but also led to massacres committed by ISIL against its own Sunni constituents whom they considered to be allied with the Iraqi government and the Americans. Other Sunni tribes have maintained neutrality through the battles, while still others have joined forces with ISIL.

According to Ed Royce, Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee in the US House of Representatives, the Abadi government "did not provide the support and equipment the tribesmen required." He added that the National Defense Act that the US House of Representatives had recently passed stipulates that "a portion of the aid delivered via the government in Baghdad was to go directly to the Peshmerga Kurdish forces and to Sunni tribesmen."<sup>22</sup> However, observers doubt that the Obama administration will arm the Sunni tribes directly and bypass Baghdad, since this would further weaken Abadi against Iran, the Shi'ite popular *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* militia and other Shi'ite political parties confronting him in the parliament.<sup>23</sup> According to American officials, Washington has drawn up a budget to train and equip 8,000 Sunni fighters from Anbar province, and has approved all weaponry; all that remains to be done is "to deliver it to the designated areas."<sup>24</sup> However, nothing of this has taken place.

Iraqi Sunnis thus find themselves in a difficult situation today: they are unable to combat ISIL without support, and they cannot trust the central government in Baghdad or rely upon American promises. The Iraqi Sunnis fear sectarian depredations by the

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<sup>20</sup> Doyle McManus, "Obama Has a Strategy for Fighting ISIL -- One That Isn't Working," *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 2015, <http://goo.gl/2aEE3t>; Mullen.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> McManus.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Shi'ite popular *al-Hashd al-Sha'bi* militia should these militias enter into their areas, as occurred last March in Tikrit. This raises some concern in Washington that Iraqi Sunnis may find themselves forced to accept ISIL rule in order to protect themselves.<sup>25</sup>

## Alliance of Necessity with Iran and the Shi'ite Militias

Faced with this complex situation rooted in a lack of flexibility with regard to its strategic choices, and its inability to pressure the Abadi government into arming the Anbar tribes, the Obama administration has found itself obliged to enter into an implicit alliance with Iran and the Iraqi Shi'ite militias. Reliance on these militias, however, gives rise to larger problems for Washington, since these militias operate with an acute sectarian zeal that provokes the sensitivities and fears of the Sunnis, propelling them into the ISIL embrace. The original moniker adopted by the Shi'ite militias for the campaign to recover Ramadi – “Here I am, Oh Hussein!” – only served to confirm the fears of Iraqi Sunnis and Washington, alike. Although the militias were forced, as a result of American and Sunni criticisms, to change the name to “Here I am, Oh Iraq!” the fears of both parties were not assuaged. The success of these militias, supported by Iran, in regaining control of Ramadi, after the Iraqi forces had failed to do so, may weaken the Abadi government, which may be seen to be powerless without the support of Iran and its proxies in Iraq. These militias have demonstrated a far higher degree of combat effectiveness than have the Iraqi Army regulars, as seen previously, in Tikrit and the Tigris valley.

Given the inflexibility of American strategy, American stipulations (regarding the role of Iran and these militias that it has been forced to accommodate) have been limited to stating that these militias should be controlled by the government, even if only formally, and requesting that they refrain from perpetrating any sectarian atrocities.<sup>26</sup> Based on previous experience, these are stipulations that stand little chance of being enforced.

In practice, the Obama administration abandonment of Iraq has left it as ready prey for Iran. Perhaps this is what led General Qassem Suleimani, Commander of the al-Quds

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<sup>25</sup> Isabel Coles, Sylvia Westall, John Irish, & Phillip Stewart, “Iraq Shi'ite Militia Take Lead in Campaign to Reverse Islamic State Gains,” *Reuters*, May 26, 2015, <http://goo.gl/yIGCZj>.

<sup>26</sup> Loveday Morris, “Iraq Opens Operation to Choke off Islamic State Lifelines in Ramadi,” *The Washington Post*, May 26, 2015, <http://goo.gl/wUJ4J7>.

Brigade of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard who is charged with the Iraqi dossier, to accuse the United States of failing to stand up to ISIL, and state that Iran alone has taken this task upon itself: "America has no will to confront ISIL, and no one is on the scene save Iran."<sup>27</sup>

## Conclusion

The continued on-the-ground achievements of ISIL testify to the failure of what is known as "the Obama Principle" in foreign policy, in part signifying that the United States will only use military force if necessary, and if "core interests" of United States are at risk.<sup>28</sup> If American "core interests" are not threatened in an imminent and impending way, the administration will resort to undertaking special and limited operations, including the launch of drone attacks and providing advice and training to armies and security forces of countries of concern.<sup>29</sup>

This principle is disintegrating today in Iraq. Not only has it failed for Baghdad, but it has also proven incapable of accommodating the complex elements of the Syrian conflict. The Obama administration understands this perfectly well, yet it appears captive to the calculations of its president, who came on the scene promising an end to a decade of wars, rather than starting a new decade of them. Given this state of affairs, even the White House has admitted that the next president will inherit the problems of Iraq and Syria. As White House spokesman Josh Earnest put it, "Two years from now the situation on the ground may have changed and that may require a change in the strategy we follow...but we will leave the matter to the next president."<sup>30</sup> In the even shorter term, goals are being reduced: the Obama administration has scaled down its ambition to regain the city of Mosul by the upcoming fall or winter.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Sameer N. Yacoub & Nasser Karimi, "Iraq, Iran Push Back on U.S. Defense Chief Over Ramadi Loss," *U.S.A Today*, May 25, 2015, <http://goo.gl/jpyKHC>.

<sup>28</sup> "Remarks by the President at the United States Military Academy Commencement Ceremony," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, May 28, 2014, <http://goo.gl/aE8zWP>.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest."

<sup>31</sup> Carol E. Lee.

The Obama administration seems prepared for a long battle. In February 2015, when it submitted its request for authorization from Congress to use military force against ISIL, Washington specified in the request that the authorization would "give our armed forces and our coalition the continuity we need for the next three years,"<sup>32</sup>

No review of Middle East strategy is going to take place in the remaining 18 months of the Obama administration mandate. The Middle East looks set to burn in conflagrations that would never have erupted were it not for decades of wrong-headed US policies in the region. Extinguishing the flames will not be within the power of the next president nor anyone else, as long as the countries of the region do not shoulder their responsibilities and establish a new national and regional approach that sharply defines the true sources of threat to their region's stability. What is needed is an approach that integrates everyone –regimes and citizens– within a new project of renaissance, one built upon the pillars of popular legitimacy, respect for human rights, and democracy.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.