

President Obama's strategy against Islamic State is highly flawed

✘ President Obama's plan to destroy the Islamic State (IS, former ISIS) is ineffective at best. Rather, NATO allies should aim toward forcing the terrorist organization that is destabilizing the territories of Iraq and Syria to implode from within. Beyond the White House's valid intentions, there is little solidarity within the coalition that has been assembled to take action. With the exception of the United Kingdom, the United States had not secured any solid assurances from the 'allies' forming the 'Atlantic Alliance' to back up its overly military focused strategy; it may even have obtained some rejection. Most of all, the Atlantic Alliance cannot work because it has excluded Syria's Bashar al-Assad, which is as much an omission as it is a contradiction in terms.

The inception of IS was largely favored by the fact that some of the West's allies – namely Saudi Arabia and Qatar – have promoted the armed opposition against the regime of President Bashar al-Asad, which, as dictatorial it may be, has yet to find any credible – or reasonable – alternative. Obama's strategy was conceived and delivered far more to respond to internal pressures from Republicans and 'hawks' rather than to actually resolve the IS problem. Perhaps, that is the weakness of his foreign policy. Obama wants to disengage from many international crisis situations but he has been forced to succumb to internal pressure rather than seeking alternative solutions. Meanwhile, the West wants American leadership and it is just getting the same old tired solutions to problems in the Middle East, Ukraine and China with which relations have deteriorated.

The fact that President Obama has remained reluctant to intervene militarily in Syria to influence the outcome of the civil war over the past three years suggests that he has realized that working with the Syrian regime offers the only real chance of eradicating IS the terrorist group. Moreover, the Atlantic Alliance is fully aware that the Syrian army, the Kurdish Peshmerga and units of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard are the ones performing the actual "dirty work" (i.e. combat) on the ground; and this very important latter part is exactly what the allies will not be doing. Meanwhile, inasmuch as Obama has framed the strategy as a war against ISIS rather than against Islam, it will be a difficult sell for some of the Arab governments called to participate. In fact, some of the West's most reliable regional allies, Jordan and Turkey, will offer only minor logistical support. This is because, IS's goal of creating a large Islamic state and converting the West are concepts well rooted in the Qur'an and constitutes an attraction for some of the 'allied' states. While, none of these would ever engage in messianic wars, their military participation in the anti-ISIS alliance, would only serve to exacerbate the conflict within the Islamic world between Sunnis and Shiites. From a strictly military point of view, Obama's offensive against IS will be largely based on air raids. Air raids are not sufficient.

The problem is not whether to send drones or fighter jets; surely, they will be all be used. Rather, such a conflict as one targeting a well rooted, armed and financed militant group as Islamic State, which controls an area the size of the United Kingdom (including Scotland) requires the kind of massive commitment that nobody can assure, neither the Americans and especially not the Arab allies. Obama is promoting a war by half measures and this cannot work. IS has appropriated many armored vehicles, tanks, guns, ammunition during their numerous raids against the Iraqi and Syrian armies. Yes, the allies can bomb them successfully out in the open using aircraft but the terrorists would then seek refuge

in the cities, starting a guerrilla war that can only be addressed with troops on the ground. This is exactly what the rebels have done in Syria, increasing civilian casualties and destruction to property. The West – especially the United States – has little appetite to get involved in such a war again. No, IS cannot be defeated by air strikes, bombs and bullets aimed at hitting the infrastructure and the strategic objectives of the organization.

IS has enjoyed operational and tactical successes on the ground while it is clear that it has an important nerve center in the West, especially the USA and the UK. No war against IS can be won without stopping its rise and its propaganda to recruit members in the West – members who come from Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds alike. In addition, Western governments should borrow from the anti-Mafia and anti-drug cartel struggles playbook to tackle IS: target its funding and wealth. The military strategy should focus on driving IS away from the oil fields they are controlling. IS also has an actual public administration, provinces, a judicial system, tax collection and, of course, an army, which the CIA has estimated at being over 30,000 troops strong (but according to other estimates it might be as high as 50,000). The air strikes must be part of an offensive conducted simultaneously from multiple directions with Syrian and Iraqi ground forces backed by the air forces of the United States or any other Western countries.

IS should be treated in the same way as a rogue State; it should be made bankrupt and force to self implode. Without funds, IS will not be able to provide the kinds of benefits it has promised its backers. It will prove incapable of governing a well-defined territory for quite a long time such that its leadership would emerge discredited beyond repair. The actions proposed by the West, in contrast, may only increase the global popularity of IS.