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The ISIS Threat in Iraq and Beyond >

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Robert N. Hein | November 7, 2014 12:00am

The Big Questions on ISIS

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Sometimes just knowing what questions to ask is as important as the answers. In that light, as the U.S.-led coalition continues its efforts against ISIS, it is worth taking a step back and asking a few questions about the conflict.

Is ISIS Really a Threat to the United States?

A real threat must have three attributes: intent, capability, and opportunity. Clearly, ISIS has the intent, declaring that the black flag of ISIS will fly over the White House. It also has the capability. Suicide bombers are not the most tactically advanced weapons, but their utility has been demonstrated for decades in the Middle East. That leaves opportunity, and the coalition of nations committed to defeating ISIS is in place to harden the Western target and diminish the chances of attack. Consequently, ISIS is only a threat if America stands by and lets it be a threat. When we stop fighting, however, we allow their fighters a chance to plan overseas operations and focus on a conceptual threat (the West) instead of daily threats at home.

How Will ISIS Know It Has Lost?

The enemy decides when a war is over. ISIS will have lost when they no longer have safe haven, can't sustain funding, their recruitment dries up, and disillusioned young Islamic extremists go home. But even then the fight will certainly not be over. Cottage industry terrorist organizations will still take advantage of young, disillusioned extremists much like Al Qaeda offshoots have done across the Middle East and Africa, to include Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Islamic Magreg, Al Shabab, Al Nusra, the Khorasan Group, and even the newest franchise in India, thus continuing a cycle of Jihadist Whack-A-Mole. Destroying ISIS is not enough; America is conducting a war on terrorism, and ISIS is only the latest manifestation of the threat.

Should We Defeat ISIS?

Rather than defeat, containing their activities within failed or near-failing states is the best option for the foreseeable future. The United States has no desire to build nations, and without a stable Middle East, terror groups will continue to find safe haven; if not in western Iraq or Afghanistan, then in Yemen or Somalia. The Middle East and Africa have no shortage of ungoverned or poorly governed territories. The current strategy of prolonged engagement, development and training of local militias, logistic support and air strikes against real targets may be the best solution after all. This strategy keeps ISIS tied up overseas and draws radical extremists away from Western borders. While this doesn't mean they can't attempt to expand operations overseas in the future, keeping extremists focused overseas is the best policy.

Many influential voices have called for the United States to put boots on the ground, but a larger American ground presence could serve as a greater recruiting tool for ISIS leadership and cost American lives in an unending battle.

How Long Will This Take?

Americans like their conflicts to have clear obtainable objectives and end-states. That will not be the case with the ISIS conflict. The administration is correctly informing the public that the war on ISIS will be a long, slow process, and it will be. While the goal of containment is not necessarily an end-state, it is a process that is executable. There is a parallel here between the war on Islamic extremists and the war on drugs: the absolute end-states for both may be unachievable, but that in no way diminishes the need to execute counter operations. Some wars cannot be won but still must be fought.

There are other hard questions for even bigger threats in the Middle East, such as how to ensure a nuclear free Iran and how to deal with the Assad regime in Syria. For ISIS, though, we may have it right.

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