

## **The Big Questions on ISIS, 7 November 2014**

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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 does it mean they can attempt to expand operations overseas in the future, keeping extremists focused overseas is the best policy.