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Coping With Success Against ISIS

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Although Washington should have no illusions about resolving the region's wider problems, it can build on early successes against ISIS by making the commitments needed to fully defeat the group in Iraq and Syria, including a modest, enduring U.S. military presence.

The battle against the "Islamic State"/ISIS has just begun, and officials in Washington are reiterating that it will be a long-term fight even in the Obama administration's priority front, Iraq. Nevertheless, recent successes by Kurdish peshmerga and federal forces controlled by Baghdad point to a reversal of the jihadist group's offensive in Iraq, likely leading to its containment and eventual eviction from Mosul, Falluja, and Tikrit. As in any military campaign, once the United States and its allies gain the upper hand, their momentum will fuel even more success, as ISIS itself experienced in June when it overran most of Sunni Arab-majority Iraq. Within a year, coalition successes could destroy the group as a major conventional force in Iraq, assuming the administration can answer the "who provides the ground component?" question for offensive action. (One answer to that question could be a mix of twelve Iraqi army and peshmerga brigades reequipped and retrained as planned by the United States, along with Sunni Arab national guard elements and a more aggressive U.S. forward ground presence involving Joint Terminal Attack Controllers and unit advisors; limited American ground troops might be needed to augment such a local force, however.)

Thus it is already appropriate to begin considering what will happen if the fight in Iraq goes well. In that case, the United States would need to lock in its success there if it hopes to make any headway against ISIS forces intact in Syria, against potential Iranian efforts to profit from the group's setbacks, and against the ethnic and religious demons that have long haunted the Iraqi state. Following are general political and military pointers for cementing such success.

1. Do not let the perfect be the enemy of the feasible.

The U.S. military has correctly focused attention on the iconic question asked in 2003 by then-Maj. Gen. David Petraeus: "Tell me how this ends." Yet while this is a vital consideration for any military operation, it can inhibit action when taken too far in an uncertain situation. Furthermore, the battle

against ISIS is a low-cost "economy of force" campaign that includes the explicit goal of "no casualties." In such campaigns, firmly answering the general's question before going all-in is less necessary than when contemplating the commitment of hundreds of thousands of troops with heavy casualties and applying the Powell Doctrine.

2. Military action is sometimes not just a means, but an end.

Although Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz's precepts about the primacy of policy should be heeded in any conflict, they should not deter leaders from effective military action to change a military situation in an emergency, even before "crossing all the T's" of a political end state. And the conflict with ISIS still constitutes an emergency. Stopping the jihadist advances in Iraq and Syria and pushing ISIS back would be an effective response, in part because it would shape the eventual political options. President Obama was right to warn in his May 28 West Point speech that not all problems are "nails" requiring a military "hammer." But the corollary is that some problems are in fact nails, and bringing down the military hammer is the right choice.

3. Any political outcome centered on fundamentally transforming the region and ending ISIS-like outbreaks is doomed.

The Middle East is a cauldron of complexity, dysfunction, and conflict. The United States must remain engaged there given the critical interests reiterated by President Obama -- combating terrorism, stopping proliferation, supporting allies and partners, and facilitating the flow of hydrocarbons -- but it cannot "fix" the region. This was tried repeatedly in places such as Beirut and Mogadishu, and on a larger scale in Afghanistan and Iraq, with results best characterized as unsatisfactory.

As Henry Kissinger emphasizes in his new book *World Order*, the fundamental building block of all American and international engagement over the past hundred years -- namely, the nation state and the Westphalian system in which states are embedded -- is particularly weak in the Middle East due to fragile national roots and competing local and universalist identities, including pan-Arabic movements and messianic religious calls from the likes of Iran's ayatollahs and ISIS. Many in the United States and Europe are skeptical about transporting Western values to the Middle East, and ambivalent about the region joining the West. Furthermore, major elements within Middle Eastern societies, including most religious movements, oppose such an embrace of secular Western identity to one degree or another, and only a small part of the population would commit to it.

4. Peoples of the region, not outsiders, must solve their problems.

Although this principle applies worldwide, it is nowhere more relevant than in the Middle East, given the depth and breadth of the problems that threaten its internal order. Societal modernization is unfolding in the region amid the weak national structures and reluctance to adopt Western models described above, creating tremendous tension. The outside world can help with some of these issues, but until a true internal "awakening" occurs among the region's populations -- away from messianic political movements and toward political norms prevailing in most of the rest of the world -- no fundamental change is possible.

5. Significant stability operations by U.S. ground forces must be avoided.

This admonition flows not only from the regional situation described above, but also from America's

extensive experiences with regime change, stability operations, and nation building under fire, from Vietnam to the past decade. Any such attempt would have at best questionable success -- even if local populations did not see U.S. troops as occupiers, even if nervous neighboring states did not undercut the U.S. effort, and even if the American people showed remarkable patience. But none of these happy eventualities is likely, making success even more improbable. In addition, such campaigns tend to sour the American people on any military engagement, even if necessary and low cost.

6. Continued American engagement, including some military presence, is essential for long-term success.

In Iraq, and eventually in Syria, political accommodation of diverse ethnic and religious groups -- however difficult -- will be essential to fully defeating ISIS and preventing it or the next millennial Islamist movement from gaining a new foothold. As seen repeatedly, constitutional, democratic institutions in the Middle East are vulnerable to sectarian and authoritarian pressures, especially if championed from outside. Therefore, any political accommodation must also be anchored in decentralization and effective power sharing, including with regard to security forces, natural resources, and revenues.

Iraq has had the most success here by creating and maintaining structures enabling the Kurdistan Regional Government to exist in the north. But extending such power-sharing solutions to the Sunni Arab areas of Iraq, and eventually to ethnic and religious groups in Syria, will require internal cultural change, international guarantees, and an outside monitoring force. While the political legitimacy for such moves should come from the UN or other international bodies, the military power to enforce them must come from the United States. And the credibility behind that power will need to be demonstrated by limited American forces remaining in Iraq and potentially in or around Syria, all of them authorized to defend the international guarantees and decentralized order.

Such guarantees would give all parties incentive to adhere to agreements, and to respond to challenges not with social engineering, but with trade and financial sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and, if necessary, selective military force. The West has succeeded repeatedly with sanctions and isolation, most recently with Russia and Iran. And the U.S. military in Iraq successfully encouraged all sides to adhere to power sharing along the Kurdish-Arab fault line and between Baghdad and the Sunni Arab "Awakening" forces. To this end, it is imperative that the United States maintain the integrity and credibility of its military commitments throughout the region -- with Israel, against Iran, and in Afghanistan.

7. Buying time in a long-term struggle.

The question of "how this ends" cannot be answered with an explicit scenario and timeline, and it does not need to be answered to justify the use of emergency military "hammers." Yet political reality and alliance diplomacy require some answer. For now, the best response is that a program such as the above -- applied when necessary beyond Iraq, Syria, and ISIS to other challenges against the international order -- would buy the Middle East time for the modernization and internal transformation needed to anchor the nation-state principle and provide homegrown disincentives to violence and upheaval. This is not a battle cry to glory, but it has the merit of being, perhaps, attainable.

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