Proposal on US Policy toward Daesh

Daniel Holland

Abstract

The rise of Daesh took the world by surprise, as the group took advantage of discontented Sunni populations and political turmoil to rapidly expand in Iraq and Syria. The group, designated as a terror organization by the United States and the international community, grew out of a fusion between al Qaeda in Iraq and remnants of the deposed Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Although a coalition of domestic and international actors primarily led by the United States has recaptured much of the territory held by Daesh at its peak, the increasingly globalized nature of the group has ensured that its eradication remains a top priority of the international community. Efforts at eradication are complicated by the ongoing Syrian Civil War and the myriad interests at play, which have contributed to the group's enduring presence in the region. Nevertheless, there are still several policy options available to the international coalition supporting local groups like the Iraqi military, Kurdish fighters, and certain Syrian militants in the fight against Daesh. Air strikes, drone surveillance, and stricter border controls can be used to disrupt the group's revenue streams and supply chains. Closing national borders and collaborating with social media corporations to impede online recruitment can help slow the steady stream of foreign fighters flocking to the group in Iraq and Syria. Targeting Daesh leadership also degrades the ability of the group to maintain the infrastructural services it offers the populations under its control, as well as inhibiting the strategic capabilities of the group. Finally, arming, training, and providing logistical and intelligence support to local actors fighting against the group offers the hope of preventing a power vacuum and aiding the development of a consolidated government once Daesh territory is completely reclaimed. These policy proposals, many of which are already being implemented by elements of the international coalition against Daesh, will provide for the degradation and eventual eradication of the regime, while also enabling the local actors in the region to have an important stake in the outcome, which is critical for the prospects of a feasible government taking power once the dust from Daesh has settled.

Overview: Rise of Daesh

Daesh, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or simply the Islamic State (IS), is a self-declared caliphate currently occupying a swath of territory roughly the size of Belgium. Located primarily in northern Iraq and eastern Syria, the Syrian city of Raqqa serves as an unofficial capital.[1] Daesh is considered to be a terrorist

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[1] Kathy Gilsinan, "The Many Ways to Map the Islamic State," *The Atlantic*, August 27, 2014, http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/the-many-ways-to-map-the-islamic-state/379196/.

organization by the international community and is comprised of Sunni Islamic extremists, many of whom have ties to either al-Qaeda or the Ba'athist party of Saddam Hussein.[2] It was officially declared a caliphate on June 29, 2014, by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was elected caliph by the organization's majlis al-shura, an Islamic advisory council with the power to select the political and religious leader of the entire Islamic community.[3] The goal of Daesh is to establish a permanent Islamic caliphate over dar al-Islam (the land of Islam, territory governed by Islamic law), and expand to encompass the entirety of dar al-harb (the land of war, territory that is not governed by Islamic law).[4]

Currently, Daesh is constrained to Iraq and Syria, although its area of operation in the Muslim world extends as far as Afghanistan to the west and Algeria to the east. The organization also boasts the ability to coordinate attacks as far away as Paris and Brussels, and it has been incredibly successful at recruiting from countries around the globe thanks to its impressive social media presence.[5] To explain why Daesh has been able to expand, it is important to note the tremendous social and political upheaval in Iraq and Syria over the past decade and a half. This upheaval has led to a power vacuum in the heart of the Middle East that has been filled to some extent by Daesh.

In Iraq, this power vacuum was caused in part by the Iraq War, instigated in March 2003 to overthrow Saddam Hussein and his Sunni Ba'athist party and continuing until December 2011 with nation-building efforts that aimed to protect a fledgling democratic government from a variety of insurgents, primarily Sunni jihadists.[6] After the Ba'athist strongman was overthrown, the new government was founded on democratic ideals in an attempt to ensure that the majority Shiite country (the Iraqi population is roughly 60 percent Arab Shia, 20 percent Arab Sunni, and 20 percent Kurdish Sunni) would have a power sharing government that respected Iraqi demographics.[7] Unfortunately, Iraqi society lacked the political institutions necessary to enable true democracy, and the US-backed Shia government engaged in discriminatory practices against Iraqi Sunnis.[8] This made marginalized Sunnis in northern Iraq fertile ground for Sunni terrorist recruitment and operation (this is part of the reason Daesh has been able to hold parts of northern Iraq but has struggled to expand into the heavily Shia territories to the south). Compounding this, the US withdrawal from Iraq was not a strategic decision based on rational military and political calculus but the effect of an American public that had received its fill of war. This withdrawal meant that Iraq would have to stand on its

[2] Isabel Coles and Ned Parker, "How Saddam's Men Help IS Rule," *Reuters*, December 11, 2015, http://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/mideast-crisis-iraq-islamicstate/.

[3] "Sunni Rebels Declare New Islamic Caliphate," *Al Jazeera,* last modified June 30, 2014, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/isil-declares-new-islamic-caliphate-201462917326669749.html.

[4] Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/isil-declares-new-islamic-caliphate-201462917326669749.html.

[5] "Brussels Attacks: Zaventem and Maelbeek Bombs Kill Many," last modified March 22, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35869254.

[6] "Timeline: The Iraq War," Council on Foreign Relations, last modified May 2013. https://www.cfr.org/timeline/iraq-war.

[7] "The World Factbook, Middle East: Iraq," Central Intelligence Agency, last modified March 16, 2016, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html.

[8] Priyanka Boghani, "In Their Own Words: Sunnis on Their Treatment in Maliki's Iraq," *PBS*, October 28, 2014, http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/in-their-own-words-sunnis-on-their-treatment-in-malikis-iraq/.

own as a sovereign nation before it was truly capable of maintaining a democratic peace. The rise of Daesh in Iraq is a direct result of this decision.[9] Similarly, the rise of Daesh in Syria is a direct result of the Syrian Civil War, which will be explored in depth next.

Overview: Syrian Civil War

The ongoing civil war in Syria can be traced back to the actions of one man, Mohamed Bouazizi, who used self-immolation to protest the confiscation of his vegetable cart by Tunisian officials.[10] This sparked what is known as the Arab Spring, a wave of pan-Arab uprisings against corrupt and brutal dictators in the spring of 2011. By the time these protests spread to Syria in March of that year, three presidents had already been deposed. Fearing that this expression of the popular will could result in more insidious calls for revolution, President Bashar al-Assad of Syria made the unsurprising decision to squelch any and all dissent in an effort to preserve the minority Alawite regime that had ruled Syria since 1971.[11] Assad's vicious tactics only served to further escalate the conflict, which developed into a civil war that continues to rage on today.

Although this was initially a dispute between Syrian protesters and the Assad regime, the Syrian Civil War has expanded to include four main groups: the Assad Regime, the Syrian Arab Rebels, the Kurdish Rebels, and Daesh itself, with international partners involved as well. The Assad regime holds Damascus and much of western Syria.[12] The regime is Alawite, a Shia minority in a country that is predominantly Sunni, and it continues to be the only internationally recognized government in Syria. The regime targets the rebels and their jihadist allies, and largely avoids conflict with Daesh. Next, there are the rebels, an ambiguous lot that are located primarily in northwestern Syria, and are fighting against the Assad regime and Daesh. It is hard to say exactly who the rebels are or how many there are. Although there is considerable confusion over the exact composition of the myriad Syrian Arab rebel groups, the two largest rebel groups are believed to be the Free Syrian Army, composed of defected officers and soldiers of the Syrian Armed Forces, and Ahrar ash-Sham, a coalition of Islamist and Salafist militias.[13] Working alongside the rebels are jihadist organizations like Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda located in northwestern Syria. These organizations are not to be confused with Daesh, as they are actually fighting against Daesh in Syria as well as against the Assad regime. The third group is the Kurds, located in northeastern Syria along the Turkish border. The Kurds are also fighting against Daesh in both Iraq and Syria, and have plans to use the conflict to carve out an independent Kurdish state.[14] Daesh is the last of the four main groups fighting in Syria, and it holds significant territory in the east.

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[9] James Franklin Jeffrey, "Behind the US Withdrawal from Iraq," *Wall Street Journal,* November 2, 2014, http://www.wsj.com/articles/james-franklin-jeffrey-behind-the-u-s-withdrawal-from-iraq-1414972705.

[10] Thessa Lageman, "Was the Arab Spring Worth Dying for?" *Al Jazeera,* January 3, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/mohamed-bouazizi-arab-spring-worth-dying-151228093743375.html.

[11] Marc Lynch, "How Syria ruined the Arab Spring," *Foreign Policy*, May 3, 2013, http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/05/03/how-syria-ruined-the-arab-spring/.

[12] "Islamic State and the Crisis in Iraq and Syria in Maps," *BBC News*, last modified April 28, 2017, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-27838034..

[13] "Guide to the Syrian Rebels," *BBC News,* last modified December 13, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003.

[14] "Syrian Civil War: Kurds Declare Federal Region in North," *Al Jazeera*, last modified March 17, 2016, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/syria-civil-war-kurds-declare-federal-system-north-160317111902534.html.

Additionally, there are two international coalitions, a US-led coalition and a Russian-Iranian coalition. The US-led coalition includes Western countries, some Gulf States like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and Turkey. This coalition is not on the ground in Syria, although there is talk that Turkey and Saudi Arabia may be willing to send soldiers to Syria in the near future.[15] Instead, the coalition provides arms, intelligence, air cover, training, and financing to the rebels while conducting airstrikes against Daesh. In addition, they oppose the government of Bashar al-Assad.[16] On the other side, Russia and Iran are working to preserve the Assad regime, although it is perhaps misleading to label them a coalition, as they are not working in concert. Russia joined the war after the Assad regime officially requested military help against both rebel and terrorist groups, and Russian military involvement has been limited to air strikes, ostensibly against terrorists but in large part directed at the rebels and their allies.[17] Recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the withdrawal of the main part of Russian forces in Syria after successfully protecting Russian interests in the country, reaffirming Russia's status as a shaper of world events. Iran has been actively financing the Shia Alawite regime in Syria, and has influenced the conflict by having Hezbollah, its Lebanese proxy, engage with the enemies of the regime on the ground.[18] Shiite militias loyal to Iran have also been combating Daesh in Iraq and in Shia to a lesser extent.

The Syrian Civil War is over six years old, and the situation continues to deteriorate. The Assad regime once looked to be in danger of falling, but Russian intervention has allowed the regime to regroup and retake territory previously in rebel hands. Now it is the rebels who are in disarray, with shrinking territory and revitalized enemies. There is still no end in sight, although an internationally brokered ceasefire between the Assad regime and the rebels (but not their jihadist allies) has been generally upheld.[19] The Kurds continue to protect their lands capably, and recently even declared a federal region in Syria, a step towards Kurdish independence.[20] The international community continues to dither about the appropriate course of action to take, and in the midst of it all, Daesh is slowly approaching its two-year anniversary. This shows remarkable staying power for an organization universally condemned. Daesh's success in Syria is attributable in large part to the fragmentation of the country, and the road to peace from here is far from clear. The Assad regime is what made Syria ripe for jihadist extremism, but it is possible that the problem would only be exacerbated should Assad be overthrown. It may not be possible to defeat Daesh without first unifying Syria, but it may not be possible to unify Syria before defeating Daesh. This confusion has made an impact on US policy by creating a battlefield in constant flux. Combined with hard-learned lessons of the past, the former Obama administration was prevented from taking an overly aggressive stance in Syria. Yet, the serious nature of the Daesh threat coupled with an undemocratic Assad regime silencing, torturing, and killing civilians at will,

[15] Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Anti-ISIS Coalition to Intensify Efforts," *New York Times,* February 2, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/03/world/europe/john-kerry-isis-threat.html?_r=0.
[16] "Islamic State: Where Key Countries Stand," *BBC News*, last modified December 3, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29074514.
[17] "Islamic State Crisis in Seven Charts" last modified March 15, 2016.
[18] Hossein Bastani, "Iran Deepens Involvement in Syria," *BBC News,* October 20, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34572756.
[19] "US Russia Brokered Truce to Start at Weekend," last modified February 22, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35634695.
[20] Matt Bradley, Ayla Albayrak, and Dana Ballout, "Kurds Declare 'Federal Region' in Syria," *Wall Street Journal*, March 17, 2016, http://www.wsj.com/articles/kurds-declare-federal-region-in-syria-says-official-1458216404.

makes it impossible for a country with a foreign policy predicated on democracy promotion and human rights protection to turn a blind eye.[21]

US Policy toward Syria and Daesh post-Syrian Revolution of 2011

The United States has long been wary of the Assad regime given its authoritarian tendencies and strong ties to Iran, but before the Syrian Revolution of 2011 it was US policy to not intervene in the country. This changed to a certain extent after the Arab Spring, although not in any significant ways. Early on, the former Obama administration eschewed air strikes, no fly zones, and lethal assistance to the Syrian rebels in favor of humanitarian assistance, non-lethal aid, and diplomatic efforts to consolidate the rebels.[22] This is because there were plenty of drawbacks to an aggressive approach; lethal aid could have easily fallen into jihadist hands, and overt military action could have encouraged other countries to get involved in the fighting as well. In addition to this, the no-fly zones which have been proposed frequently would be a significant commitment for any country, requiring resources that would mandate another large US military presence in the Middle East—something that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan left little taste for. The United States has decided to refrain from direct military intervention against the Assad regime, which has now been made all the more risky due to the Russian presence in Syria. The former Obama administration rightly acknowledged that fighting on behalf of the rebels against a Russian-backed Assad regime would have been a recipe for disaster. The time to take military action against the Assad regime was when evidence of chemical weapons use by the regime were found, violating the Obama administration's red line that threatened severe repercussions in retaliation against the use of chemical weapons.[23] The lack of a military response in 2013 when sarin gas was used by the Assad regime hurt the reputation of the United States, but the Obama administration decided intervention as too risky. This was because overthrowing a regime with chemical weapons in an unstable country could have potentially allowed the wrong groups to gain access to chemical weapons. Nothing about the situation has changed to make a military intervention in response to chemical weapons use a viable option now. US policy towards Syria has remained largely the same: the United States will aid and abet the rebels as much as possible, including training and arming them, but it will not fight their war for them.

US policy against Daesh has been more aggressive, with an estimated 26,000 Daesh fighters killed through US-led coalition airstrikes since they began in 2014.[24] These air strikes have been the staple of US policy towards Daesh, and have been used to target the Daesh leadership and inhibit degrade lines of communication and supply within Daesh territory.[25] The US has also formed a coalition of Western and Arab nations to oppose the organization and provide intelligence, training, and arms to groups fighting against Daesh. Those groups include the Kurds in northern Iraq and eastern Syria and the

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[21] "Syria," *Human Rights Watch*, last modified October 2015, https://www.hrw.org/middle-east/n-africa/syria.

[22] Aaron David Miller, "Don't Blame Obama for Syria," *Foreign Policy,* December 14, 2012, http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/14/dont-blame-obama-for-syria/.

[23] Glenn Kessler, "President Obama and the 'Red Line' on Syria's Chemical Weapons," *Washington Post,* September 6, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2013/09/06/president-obama-and-the-red-line-on-syrias-chemical-weapons/.

[24] Barbara Starr, "Estimate: More than 26,000 ISIS Fighters Killed by Coalition," *CNN,* February 17, 2016, http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/17/politics/isis-fighters-killed-iraq-syria/.

[25] Christopher Blanchard and Carla Humud, "The Islamic State and US Policy," *Congressional Research Service,* February 2, 2017, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43612.pdf.

Iraqi army itself. In addition to this, the US has sought to disrupt Daesh finances and restrict the flow of foreign fighters to the organization by securing the border between Turkey and Syria. It also remains a priority of the US to weaken the hold of Daesh on its territory in Iraq and Syria by enabling the Iraqi government to retake cities like Baiji and Mosul, and helping local forces in Syria reclaim Raqqa. Finally, preventing the organization from carrying out terrorist attacks overseas remains a high priority, especially in light of the recent attacks in Brussels. This is essentially the extent of current US policy towards Daesh; a campaign to degrade and destroy the organization without committing American troops to fighting on the ground, instead preferring to empower local actors to combat the organization themselves.[26]

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Policy Options for Combatting Daesh

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In order to specify the policy options available to the US in the fight against Daesh, it is important to differentiate between the two potential goals and the variants of each. It is the current position of the United States that Daesh must and will be destroyed. This eradication can occur over a multitude of different timelines, but for the sake of simplicity there will be a consideration of short-term and long-term policy options to destroy the group. A short-term goal is to contain Daesh to its current territory, limiting its spread in countries like Libya and Afghanistan, as well as ensuring that it cannot expand beyond its current borders in Iraq and Syria. This short-term focus is not inherently incompatible with a longer-term goal of destroying Daesh, and policy options for containment will share many characteristics with policy options aimed at destroying the organization over a longer period of time.

To destroy Daesh in the short term, it is likely that US involvement will be required at the ground level. Daesh is estimated to have roughly 19,000–25,000 fighters available in Iraq and Syria, and while it is unclear precisely how many US troops would be required to effectively destroy the organization, the consensus is that it would require closer to 30,000 than 10,000.[27] This is an unpalatable option to many, but if the goal is to eradicate Daesh quickly, it must be considered. Two years of air strikes have killed thousands of Daesh fighters, but the organization still holds substantial territory, showing that air power will not be enough to win this war. The Syrian rebels are too preoccupied with the Assad regime, the Kurds are not likely to fight too far beyond their borders, and the Iraqi army has demonstrated it is incapable of defeating Daesh, so if the objective is to defeat Daesh quickly without using US troops, the only alternative is to bring in troops from surrounding countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, all of which may produce more problems than they solve.

It may be impossible to destroy Daesh quickly without putting American lives at risk, but with a longer time frame more options become available. Daesh has been losing territory recently, indicating that the air strikes have had a deleterious effect. This trend could be accelerated by investing in substantive training programs for local actors, along with taking steps to further eliminate Daesh revenue sources. It is also imperative to continue targeting Daesh leadership and disrupting chains of transportation, command, and communication. It may also be necessary to target the social media activities of Daesh to slow the flow of foreign fighters, and push back against the organization's propaganda. Doing so could inhibit the supply of fighters available to Daesh, shrinking its military capabilities and enabling local actors to reclaim territory, eventually resulting in the recapture of major cities like Raqqa and Mosul. Over time, this combination of policy options could degrade Daesh to the point that it is no longer able to hold territory, effectively destroying its self-styled caliphate.

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[26] Ibid.
[27] Brian McManus, "How Many 'Boots on the Ground' Would It Take to Defeat ISIS?" *Vice,* December 8, 2015, http://www.vice.com/read/syria-boots-on-the-ground-isis-390.

        The best course of action for US policy to take with regards to Daesh is to degrade it over time. This can be done by eliminating its revenue streams, military capabilities, and supply chains; targeting its leadership and preventing the flow of foreign fighters by closing national borders and impeding online recruitment; and empowering local actors to retake territory with the help of US air support, intelligence, financing, and arms.[28] The cost to defeat Daesh quickly is simply too high—politically, diplomatically, and in terms of human life. There is no guarantee that a substantial US military presence in the Middle East would even achieve its objective. De facto US occupation of Iraq and Syria could easily spur local resentment, enabling Daesh fighters to abandon territorial borders in favor of the more adaptable cell system used by al-Qaeda and others. Eliminating Daesh through direct US involvement would also fail to empower Arab states to play a role in resolving the issue, setting the stage for future conflict. US policy should be to defeat Daesh over time through five key initiatives. First, the United States should continue air strikes to take out Daesh leadership, disrupt supply chains, and provide air support for local ground troops. Second, the United States should inhibit the ability of Daesh to replenish its ranks by helping neighboring countries to close their borders to the flow of foreign fighters, and targeting Daesh capabilities on social media through joint action with companies like Twitter and Facebook, among others. Third, the United States should deny Daesh its revenue streams by allocating more resources to the prevention of illicit trafficking and denying the organization the ability to export its oil. Fourth, the United States should continue to arm, finance, and provide intelligence to local actors, including the Kurds, the Iraqi army, and the Syrian rebels. Fifth, the United States should engage in more goodwill projects throughout the Middle East, but especially in Iraq and Syria to combat the anti-Western sentiments that enable Daesh to not only recruit fighters, but to occupy territory without consequence. Rebuilding the US image in the Middle East would also entail implementing a much stricter policy on drone strikes, and carefully managing the Arab Muslim perception of America by ensuring that calls for Islamophobic attitudes and policies are not heeded. Through these five points, it is possible to weaken Daesh to the point that local actors, with US support, are able to reclaim lost territory and ultimately destroy the organization.

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[28] Blanchard and Humud, "The Islamic State and US Policy."

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