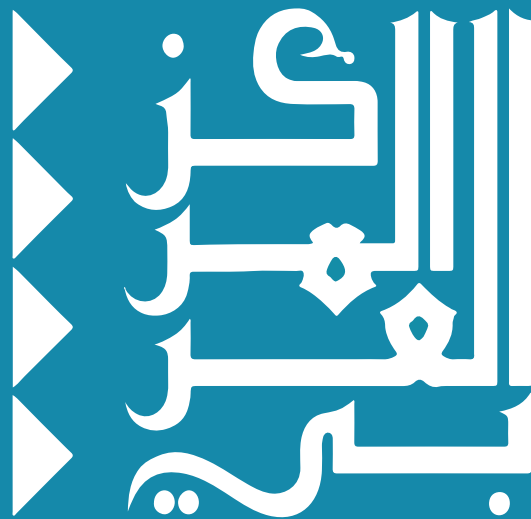


Why is the Battle against ISIL not Going Well?

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On March 22nd, the foreign ministers of the Global Coalition to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) concluded their meeting in Washington, DC with the participation of more than 68 states, among them Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq, whose prime minister, Haider Al-Abadi, was also present.

The final statement issued by this coalition focused on four countries related to the battle against ISIL. The primary concern of the declaration was Iraq and Syria, but it also mentioned the liberation of the Libyan city of Sirte from ISIL and the strategy against the organization in Afghanistan. In addition, the statement dealt with three issues related to the fight against ISIL: networks around the world which supply it with human resources and money; the need to disrupt these networks through sharing information and enhancing screening; and increased law enforcement cooperation.

Another issue of concern related to radicalization and ISIL recruitment from around the world. Despite the low recruitment rate in the last year, ISIL operatives continue to be very active in trying to recruit new and young individuals to travel into its territories or behave like "lone wolves," like the attack in London on March 22, 2017.

The final issue the ministers discussed was confronting ISIL in the "digital battlespace," since the organization has been successful in poisoning the minds of many youth through its

social media. Therefore, there is a need to develop an alternative and authentic worldview within the Muslim world, one that can confront the brand of Islam that ISIL is trying to spread through its platforms and propaganda.

Setbacks in the Fight against ISIL in Syria and Iraq

During the American presidential campaign, candidate Donald Trump announced many times that he had a "secret plan" to combat ISIL in Syria and Iraq. He used very strong terms like "eradication" and insisted that the United States was at war with "radical Islamic terrorists." This is a term that former President Barack Obama refused to use. Many leaders in the Muslim world prefer not to use it because they do not want to create an imaginary link between the religion of Islam and terrorism.

When President Trump took office in January 2017, he signed an executive order to direct the Department of Defense and the State Department to "submit a strategy within 30 days to defeat the Islamic State." The elements of the new strategy, however, resemble closely the features of the policy under Obama, which was to rely on local partners to carry out the fight while minimizing the US role to supporting, financing, and advising these groups on the ground. This is why the United States depends on the Iraqi Army and the Kurdish Peshmerga in Kurdistan in the fight against ISIL in Iraq. It is also the reason Washington relies on the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria, which are basically a

Kurdish militia associated with the PKK in Turkey.

President Trump increased the number of troops in northern Syria in preparation for the battle against ISIL in Raqqa. Perhaps the only change from the Obama Administration is the blanket permission Trump gives the Pentagon to conduct airstrikes. The results have been disastrous; in less than one week's time, the United States has been accused of killing hundreds of civilians in Syria and Iraq.

On March 21st, the US military conducted an air strike that hit a school in the village of Mansoura, in Raqqa governorate, which killed at least 30 Syrian civilians. Again, on March 24th, the Syrian Network for Human Rights accused the International Coalition of killing at least three civilians in al-Sabkha, a town also in Raqqa governorate. To be sure, the largest tragedy regarding the number of civilian casualties due to US airstrikes was in Mosul, where more than 200 reportedly lost their lives on March 24th, after a raid west of the city.

These incidents have created a huge setback in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and helped ISIL fighters to play the role of victims rather than what they truly are—murderers and perpetrators. Directly after these events, Arabic language news from the region depicted outrage and anger against the United States, and this was exactly what ISIL wanted. ISIL fighters sometimes use civilians as human shields to achieve such results. This is why US military strategists have to carefully review all

plans for such airstrikes, including the targets collected by the intelligence of local partners, so as not to allow a repetition of these tragic events.

The Grand Strategy against ISIL in Syria

The final statement of the international coalition talked about the need for "an integrated, multidimensional, and comprehensive approach to defeat ISIS [sic] and its global networks."

But the fight against ISIL in Syria is far from such a "comprehensive approach"; as everyone knows, the Islamic State was born as a branch of Al-Qaeda, which first declared itself in Iraq then gained a significant foothold in early 2013 in Syria. After taking control of Raqqa, its declared capital in Syria, ISIL focused on controlling territory rather than participating in the fight against the Asad government. This is why the Syrian armed opposition fighters lost thousands in their fight against ISIL. Eliminating the organization in a battle that focuses only on the Kurdish forces would cause the overall strategy to break down, and, more importantly, alienate the Syrian Elite Forces (SEF). The SEF are groups recruited from Syrian tribes brutally massacred by ISIL in 2014; they now contribute to the fight against it in many areas of Syria including Shaddadi, a town near Deir al-Zor, and Al-Karama, a town near Raqqa. It would be a mistake to develop a strategy for Raqqa that does not involve the tribes from the governorate.

Now the question is, who will lead the efforts to liberate Raqqa? And who will govern it after liberation? The final statement of the international coalition was silent about these issues. Indeed, the answers to these questions reflect the complicated map of alliances and partners in Syria. At the same time, they disclose the lack of coherence of such a strategy.

If the United States refuses any Turkish role in the battle against ISIS in Raqqa and relies only on the SDF, which Turkey considers a terrorist organization due to its connection to the PKK, the process of liberating Raqqa will take longer, perhaps months, because there is a high chance that Turkey would not allow—or perhaps would block—the line of supplies to the groups fighting ISIL in northern Syria. Turkey has refused to allow humanitarian and military aid to pass through its territory, even to the humanitarian organizations working in areas under the control of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) or SDF. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, on a visit to Turkey on March 30 to discuss the Turkish role in the battle of Raqqa, tried to build trust between the two NATO partners. If the two parties have disagreements regarding the part of the PYD in Manbij and other areas, then the fight against ISIL in Raqqa will be delayed even further.

The final statement of the international coalition meeting commended Operation Euphrates Shield, led by the Turkish Army with groups of the Free Syrian Army, which successfully cleared ISIL from al-Bab, Dabiq, Jarabulus, and other areas. This opens the door for a Turkish

role in the future and especially in Raqqa. But Turkey insists that it cannot work with the SDF as a partner in liberating Raqqa. At the same time, Turkey just announced the conclusion of its Euphrates Shield operation which may have an impact on the battle against ISIL.

The United States has to formulate a "deal," in President Trump's words, or a comprehensive strategy that reconciles the role of Turkey, the SDF, and the Syrian Elite Forces (SEF) of Syrian tribes; otherwise, the battle in Raqqa would take longer and require more resources. Trump's strategy has to ensure the existence of passable roads to evacuate civilians from Raqqa and to rebuild the city after its liberation from ISIL. This is clearly a missing piece in all the negotiations regarding the post-ISIL period.

The Turkish-American dispute can escalate or de-escalate depending on the US strategy regarding Raqqa. If Washington decides to rely on the SDF instead of its NATO ally, as the Turkish media has reported, this will have very serious repercussions and significant regional consequences, especially in the alliance between Turkey and Russia over Syria. Such an alliance only exists because of the mistrust that emerged between the Turkish leadership and the Obama Administration, and it led to conflicting agendas over each party's interests and the resolution of the crisis in Syria.

The Linkages between the Fight against ISIL and the Transition in Syria

The final statement by ministers of the global coalition to defeat ISIS dealt positively with the connection between the Syrian transition and the elimination of ISIL in the country. This was almost absent in all the interviews of Trump Administration officials since Trump took office in January 2017. The statement assured that “the Coalition stands with the Syrian people in support of a genuine political transition based on the 2012 Geneva Communiqué and UNSCR 2254.” It also supported the UN-sponsored talks in Geneva. This is the same logic, however, that was repeated numerous times under the Obama Administration. The United States has never used its resources to push for such a transition to the degree that it did in the fight to eliminate ISIS in Syria. The idea of a workable political transition was more rhetoric than policy. This is why the coalition’s final statement avoided any mention of the safe zones in Syria that President Trump talked about on two occasions.

Finally, it is clear that the United States has no policy toward Syria or Iraq yet; rather, the policy is developing as events on the ground change and alliances shift. There is a need to know how the United States will deal with Russia in Syria, Iraq, and recently, Libya. To be sure, the withdrawal of the United States from

the region under the Obama Administration allowed regional powers to behave, at times, against US interests in the region. It is true that defining such "interests" is an evolving policy; nevertheless, some analysts hold US declared principles should not be compromised despite such political changes.

It is important for Washington to place a high priority on the protection of civilians and to review all the targets suggested by local partners carefully. At the same time, the United States should develop a strategy to evacuate the civilians from Mosul and Raqqa and not leave them stuck between the killing machines of ISIL and the Asad government.

As the Asad government continues to drop barrel bombs on Syrian civilians every day, more and more young people will be motivated to join an extremist organization like Al-Qaeda and ISIL in Syria. Therefore, the United States would do well to invest more resources and to redouble its efforts to make the political transition in Syria possible. What is paramount at this time is to implement the recommendations of the Global Coalition and to develop them into policies and real actions in Syria and Iraq. Otherwise, the two countries will be made to wait for another meeting and one more photo opportunity, without any tangible hope for their future.

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