The War with ISIS

In 2016 the United States finds itself in the unenviable position of being engaged in five simultaneous wars in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan. In each of these conflicts, to one degree or another, ISIS is now involved (ISIS is the primary opponent in Iraq, Libya, and Syria and is contributing significant numbers of fighters in Yemen and Afghanistan). In none of these cases has the Obama administration publicly stated its strategy, nor has there been a demand for the articulation of its strategy from the media or the American public. In each of these five conflicts the United States has deployed diverse forces that are being used in very different ways to achieve what seems to be a single goal: the defeat of ISIS by denying it the ability to establish a territorial sanctuary and local government. The primary U.S. tools in each of these conflicts involves a mix of U.S. airpower, training assistance efforts for local groups opposed to ISIS, arms and equipment transfers to these local groups, and some direct action by U.S. Special Forces. Collectively these efforts may ultimately lead to a kind of narrow victory against ISIS in one or all of these five conflicts—though in none of these cases is that victory assured, and the long-running conflict in Afghanistan demonstrates that even such a narrow victory will not come easily—but what comes after victory remains unclear.

As Anthony Cordesman of CSIS has pointed out, in each of these military conflicts “the United States does not seem to be learning from its past.”1 The world wars, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War all provide examples of twentieth-century U.S. military conflicts that failed to produce favorable outcomes—endstates—sometimes in spite of military victory. The danger of repeating those mistakes again in the new wars in the greater Middle East in the twenty-first century is very real. What has become clear in this now-global battle against ISIS, is that it cannot be defeated quickly and that even battlefield victories against the group can never “defeat” the threat of terrorism. The threat posed by ISIS fighters themselves as well as the extremists around the world who they may inspire will, unfortunately, continue to pose an indefinite threat to the United States and Western interests. While I have written about the lack of U.S. strategy in Afghanistan elsewhere, it is worth examining the other four conflicts in greater detail here.

Libya

Even assuming that the United States can ultimately defeat ISIS in Libya—and that would be no mean feat, given the current limited U.S. resources being expended there—Libya is likely to remain a source of regional instability for some time to come. Ending the ISIS threat there will not change the fact that there are two de facto governments, each controlling half of Libya, neither of which is interested in ceding power to the other. While they have cooperated in fighting ISIS to a certain degree, ultimately tribal and regional infighting, along with the social chaos and economic disruptions that years of warfare have created there, will produce an

intractable problem in attempting to establish good governance in a future Libya. Libya needs an end to violence altogether and a long-term national program of reconstruction and political and economic reform to reduce the social, political, and economic instability brought about by years of war. This will entail the creation of a stable internal Libyan government along with significant aid from the United States and Europe. The Libyan economy is almost entirely dependent on oil and natural gas exports, which have been harmed tremendously by the country’s current civil war and the global drop in oil prices. Since the overthrow of Qaddafi, Libyan crude oil production has not managed to reach more than one-third of Qaddafi-era production.\(^2\) That must change if Libya is to recover and prosper, but production can likely only increase to pre-war levels once fighting has stopped altogether: energy production infrastructure is simply too vulnerable to disruption to operate at significant levels in the midst of an ongoing civil war.

While the United States need not provide significantly more aid to Libya than it already does, it must understand that unless there is significant assistance from the international community even after ISIS is defeated in Libya, the country will remain a source of political and economic turmoil in North Africa for a long time to come unless it can develop a clear strategy that looks beyond the defeat of ISIS to true national reconciliation.

**Syria**

The ongoing conflict in Syria shows no sign of abatement. The problems there may even be growing, with the introduction of the new U.S.-backed Kurdish enclave inside Syria on the Turkish border that is creating additional tensions with Turkey and the other Arab states in the region. There is no clear faction in Syria capable of governing what is left of the country; instead, there are at least 40 rival factions of Syrian rebels present, many of whom fight each other and/or have powerful Islamic extremist elements that make them little better, if at all, than ISIS. Even if the fighting in Syria were to end in the near future—an unlikely prospect at best—economic recovery from the war would take the better part of a decade at least. Prospects for nation-building in creating a stable civil society in Syria seem remote.

**Iraq**

Iraq is torn by religious, ethnic, and trouble factionalism. The various Iraqi factions each seek either a form of federalism that would give them near complete control over those regions of the country that they dominate, or independence. Tensions between Kurds and Arabs and between the Sunni and Shiites in Iraq remain high and may even be growing.

As of September 2016, the Kurds occupy territory in Iraq and in Syria that was never traditionally Kurdish but was instead historically Arab territory containing major oil and gas reserves. This means that the Kurds have expanded their territorial control significantly, due in no small part to U.S. aid in both Iraq and Syria. This is not to say that the Kurds should be treated as a unitary actor; there are complicated intra-Kurdish conflicts present, as well as tensions between Kurds and the Turks because of Kurdish support for the PKK in Turkey. The United States has in some ways been using both Syrian and Iraqi Kurds as its local agents on the ground in the fight against ISIS. Undoubtedly the Kurds expect some degree of U.S. support for Kurdish independence or self-governance in both Iraq and Syria once the fight against ISIS has been won. U.S. policy on the future of the Kurds is unclear; there are few good options here that could provide the Kurds with security in both Iraq and Syria while reassuring the Arab factions and Turkey, as well as reducing the potential for future conflicts.

\(^2\) Ibid., 5.
The fight against ISIS in Iraq is inextricably linked with the fight against ISIS in Syria. The fact that the ISIS caliphate crosses the Iraqi-Syrian border complicates the situation immeasurably, making it extraordinarily difficult to provide local security for Iraqi civilians without increasing the risk of heightened sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq and between the Sunnis and the Alawites in Syria. Inevitably, resolving these conflicts will have to bring in other nations in the region, including Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf states. In Iraq, the defeat of ISIS raises the question of how a mostly Sunni rebel force in eastern Syria can hope to interact peacefully and constructively with a Shiite-dominated Iraq in which Sunnis are a distinct minority who lost their dominance over Iraq with the fall of Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athists. Once ISIS is defeated, Iraqi Sunnis will undoubtedly demand greater security and political participation in Iraq, complicating Iraq’s federalist system.

It is important to note that even if ISIS can be defeated, sectarian violence and terrorism will not automatically end. There was already considerable violence between Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites in Iraq prior to the establishment of ISIS, which is only worsened by outside support for these groups. Any efforts to truly engage in a kind of nation-building in Iraq, even post-defeat of ISIS, will have to cope with a transformed set of circumstances: the United States has helped the Kurds construct a kind of de facto Kurdish state inside Iraq and now Syria; defeating Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athists meant that the Sunnis fell from power and will never likely regain it in Iraq; and the Iraqi Shiite majority is now the recipient of significant Iranian aid and influence. Once ISIS is defeated, the Shiites will no longer need the United States nor will Iran have to remain circumspect and show restraint. Iraq is, like all of the other places in the greater Middle East in which the United States finds itself involved in a military conflict, a failed state as well as a society torn by war. Rebuilding a stable Iraq will be a truly long-term project that may never succeed. A U.S. military “victory” over ISIS runs the risk of becoming the major U.S. strategic defeat, with the best and likeliest outcome remaining a hopelessly unstable Iraq for the indefinite future.

**Yemen**

Currently the situation in Yemen is perhaps the worst of the five conflicts in which the U.S. currently finds itself. U.S. involvement in the conflict is extremely limited at the present. The United States’ efforts in Yemen seem restricted to supporting the Saudi Arabia and UAE-led coalition through some air support and intelligence and targeting data sharing. Fighting there shows no sign of letting up, nor do any of the current factions seem to have much of an incentive to cease. Yemen’s economy is extraordinarily weak, lacking in fundamental resources like water and basic infrastructure. With the extreme overpopulation given the country’s resources, there seems no way to create a stable government, society, or functioning economy that all or even a significant fraction of the current factions there can agree upon.

At least given current interests, resources, and other circumstances, it seems that the best one could hope for in Yemen is to contain the fighting and the spread of international terrorism emanating from Yemen, as well as to dampen tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. There do not seem to be many good strategic options for the United States in Yemen.