

# Fighting the “Islamic State” The Case for US Ground Forces

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**ABSTRACT:** This article argues counterinsurgency wars are not analogous to the challenges presented by the Islamic State. The United States needs to accept the nature of the war it is in, and undertake a clear and comprehensive assessment of the means necessary for strategic success. Such an assessment will make apparent the need to commit US ground combat forces.<sup>1</sup>

The rise of the Islamic State has forced policy makers to confront uncomfortable questions: What will it take to defeat the Islamic State? What is the nature of the current conflict against the Islamic State? Can the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), bolstered by US and allied air power, advisers, special forces – almost everything short of ground combat forces – defeat the Islamic State? The difficulty the Iraqis experienced in taking Tikrit and the recent abandonment of Ramadi should be instructive, as was the premature announcement by US Central Command of a coming ISF spring 2015 offensive to retake Mosul, which was followed by an admission that the ISF is not yet ready for the kind of fight Mosul would entail.<sup>2</sup>

Many have already commented on the need to have all US options on the table to defeat the Islamic State. Retired Marine Corps General James Mattis recently wrote US strategy should include ground combat forces “to achieve our war aims.”<sup>3</sup> This article explains why US ground forces are not just a better option than the ISF, but absolutely necessary for achieving US policy objectives against the Islamic State.

## Does Our Strategy Fit the War We Are In?

All students of strategy have had the ends-ways-means catechism drummed into them at some point in their education. Assessing the US strategy for the war with the Islamic State from this perspective is useful in reaching an understanding of what needs to be done to defeat the Islamic State. Additionally, it will illustrate the continuing challenges

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1 This article is derived from my commentary in *War on the Rocks* which argues US ground forces are necessary to defeat the Islamic State, and that a crucial test would come with the battle to retake Mosul. This essay expands on that premise, even though it is being written as events unfold on the ground in Iraq. See David Johnson, “Means Matter: Competent Ground Forces and the Fight Against ISIL,” *War on the Rocks*, March 19, 2015. This essay incorporates much of this earlier commentary.

2 Loveday Morris, “Iraqi Offensive for Tikrit Stalls as Casualties Mount,” *Washington Post*, March 16, 2015; and Robert Burns, “Pentagon Calls Mosul Briefing a Mistake by CentCom,” *Associated Press*, March 3, 2015; and Nancy A. Youssef, “Exclusive: Pentagon Doubts Its Own ISIS War Plan,” *Daily Beast*, February 20, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/02/20/pentagon-doubts-its-own-isis-war-plan.html>.

3 James Mattis, “Using Military Force Against ISIS,” *Defining Ideas*, March 4, 2015, <http://www.hoover.org/research/using-military-force-against-isis>.

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in post-9/11 strategy formulation and, in particular, the chasm between desired ends and deployed means.

President Obama, in his February 11, 2015 letter to the Congress requesting an Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF) to fight the Islamic State, set forth clear “ends” for his strategy: “to degrade and defeat ISIL.”<sup>4</sup> To this point in the fight against the Islamic State, the US “way” has been limited to “a systematic campaign of airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria” and supporting various anti-Islamic State security forces.<sup>5</sup> American “means” are limited to air power, advisers, and US support to the Iraqis. The other means beyond US supporting forces—the “boots on the ground”—include the ISF, Kurdish Peshmerga and Sunni and Shi’a militias, the latter backed by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. Indeed, Major General Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Quds Force, was at one point directing the offensive to retake Tikrit.<sup>6</sup> This is problematic in terms of US strategy in the region, but also creates sectarian tensions with Iranians deeply involved in taking Sunni areas.

The AUMF explicitly states it “would not authorize long-term, large-scale ground combat operations like those our Nation conducted in Iraq and Afghanistan.” This is the fundamental flaw in conceptualizing a strategy for defeating the Islamic State in Iraq—seeing this new fight as similar in character to the past 14 years of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. Clausewitz is instructive when he stresses that war is “an *instrument of policy*. . . . This way of looking at it will show us how wars must vary with the nature of their motives and of the situations which give rise to them.”<sup>7</sup> Quite simply, the United States needs to understand the war it is in and the adversary it faces in the Islamic State.

The Islamic State is not an insurgency like the United States fought from 2003 until its departure from Iraq. Rather, it is an aspiring proto-state bent on taking and holding territory. Thus, the centrality of “protecting the people” from the insurgents that is the cornerstone of US counterinsurgency doctrine—the “way” the United States eventually approached the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—is irrelevant to the Islamic State itself. Protecting the Iraqi population from the Islamic State is important, but that will be accomplished through conventional operations that destroy the Islamic State and seize the territory it currently occupies in Iraq.

To date, air power and limited Iraqi ground operations have degraded the Islamic State and put it at risk when it moves in the open. In response, the Islamic State has gone to ground in urban areas. This creates a new reality on the ground and a problem that cannot be solved through airstrikes alone, though retired US Air Force Lieutenant General David Deptula has argued that a stepped-up air campaign could defeat the

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4 Barack Obama, “Letter from the President—Authorization for the Use of United States Armed Forces in Connection with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,” *The White House*, February 11, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/02/11/letter-president-authorization-use-united-states-armed-forces-connection>.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Paul McCleary, “Iranian General again in Iraq for Tikrit Offensive,” *Defense News*, March 2, 2015, <http://www.defensenews.com/story/defense-news/blog/intercepts/2015/03/02/iraq-iran-is-war-terrorism/24270363/>.

7 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88.

Islamic State.<sup>8</sup> Islamic State fighters are now able to conceal themselves in the terrain and amongst the people of the cities they occupy. They are more akin to Hamas in Gaza or the North Vietnamese Army in Hue than they are to an insurgency of the type we fought in Iraq and are fighting in Afghanistan. These urban areas are where the Islamic State will have to be defeated if the United States is to realize President Obama's stated policy objective. US success is, therefore, inextricably linked to the success of ISF ground combat operations against the Islamic State in the difficult tactical environment of a densely populated urban battlefield. As currently structured, if the ISF fails, so does the US strategy.

### ISF Is Not the Army We Need

If one accepts the fight against the Islamic State requires ground combat to defeat a conventional force that is holding territory, the crucial next step is deciding the appropriate "means" to execute that "way." Although the administration continues to emphasize all options are on the table, the letter from the President to Congress requesting an AUMF specifically states "Local forces, rather than US military forces, should be deployed to conduct such operations."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the role of US ground forces is extremely limited in the AUMF:

The authorization I propose would provide the flexibility to conduct ground combat operations in other, more limited circumstances, such as rescue operations involving US or coalition personnel or the use of special operations forces to take military action against ISIL leadership. It would also authorize the use of US forces in situations where ground combat operations are not expected or intended, such as intelligence collection and sharing, missions to enable kinetic strikes, or the provision of operational planning and other forms of advice and assistance to partner forces.<sup>10</sup>

Although some like General Mattis have argued for the need to include US ground forces in the fight, most have limited this discussion to providing advisors and tactical air controllers at lower levels to the ISF.<sup>11</sup> John Nagl has been a consistent voice in this debate arguing:

We are going to have to put those American troops embedded inside Iraqi units, in close support of those Iraqi units, in order to enable and empower them to expel the Islamic State from that country in a reasonable period of time. That's not an occupation, it will be Iraqi troops doing the fighting, it will be American troops in close support, calling in airstrikes, providing intelligence, providing a number of the enablers and the logistical support

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8 See Sydney J. Freedburg, Jr., "Trench Warfare With Wings: Can ISIL Airstrikes Go Beyond Attrition?" *Breaking Defense*, April 9, 2015. In this article Deptula, a noted airpower theorist and practitioner, argues for a return to first principles: Why is the road between Raqqa [the ISIL 'capital,' in Syria] and Mosul, for example, still open? Why is electricity not terminated in either city? Wouldn't shutting down the electrical grid harm the local civilian population? Yes, Deptula said, but not to an extent that would violate the laws of war. "This is one of the problems, there's been more attention to the avoidance of collateral damage and civilian casualties than there has been to the accomplishment of eliminating ISIL," he said. In fact, he argued, "in an echo of long-ago airpower theorist Giulio Douhet — that bringing the war home to ISIL-controlled populations might turn them against their occupiers."

9 Obama, "Letter from the President—Authorization for the Use of United States Armed Forces in Connection with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant."

10 Ibid.

11 Mattis, "Using Military Force Against ISIS." General Mattis chafed at restricting the means in the fight against the Islamic State, writing "When fighting a barbaric enemy who strikes fear into the hearts of many, especially those living in close proximity to this foe, we must not reassure that enemy in advance that it will not face the fiercest, most skillful and ethical combat force in the world."

that America is so good at, and it will enable the Iraqis to do the fighting and the dying. So I am talking about the total force of some 10-20 thousand American advisors—clearly, an insufficient number to occupy the country the size of Iraq, but sufficient to provide a steel spine that will provide support to an Iraqi military that collapsed under pressure last year and that has not been completely rebuilt, that cannot conduct this fight on its own.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the central assumption—and the Achilles' heel—in the current US strategy is this: with foreign training and assistance, the ISF will eventually be able to provide sufficient on-the-ground military means to achieve US strategic ends. The question yet to be asked and answered (without spin) is: What if the ISF *cannot* be trained and advised to achieve the level of competency necessary to roll back the Islamic State?

Ironically, the way the United States defeated Saddam Hussein in 2003—destroying the enemy through joint combined arms maneuver—is what is needed now. The flaw in the 2003 strategy was failing to plan for what would replace the Hussein regime and letting Iraq descend into chaos; but that is not the central issue now. There is an Iraqi government in place that the United States intends to sustain. Yet, debates about the way to defeat the Islamic State are frequently, and incorrectly, trapped in the counterinsurgency model of the past decade, as can be seen in this statement by Janine Davidson at a recent Council on Foreign Relations event: “the people in Iraq feel like this civil war has insurgency-like elements, meaning people are embedded among the people, [if] the fighters are embedded, then there are counterinsurgency-like approaches.” Max Boot, Davidson’s fellow panelist at the event, agreed: “I think a COIN [counterinsurgency] strategy is basically the only strategy that has any track record of success. And it’s not an easy strategy, but it’s the only strategy that has any track record of success in dealing with an enemy that is entrenched among the people.”<sup>13</sup>

Will the ISF be able to drive the Islamic State out of Iraq? Operations in Tikrit, which had to be stopped because of lack of progress and high casualties and could only resume once US airpower was employed, provide some indication of the lack of competence of the ISF for the task of defeating the Islamic State.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the brunt of the fighting was reportedly done by Shi’a militias as the ISF was not up to the task. Nevertheless, the key test will be the retaking of Mosul, a much larger Sunni city of some 1.5 million residents. As already noted, doubts about the readiness of the ISF for this fight ostensibly pushed back plans for an offensive to take Mosul from this spring to an undetermined date in the future. There is likely to be a long wait: reports from US trainers indicate ISF is in bad shape. Lieutenant Colonel John Schwemmer, a US Army officer training Iraqis at Camp Taji in Iraq, was recently taken aback at the poor state of the ISF, observing: “It’s pretty incredible . . . I was kind of surprised. What training did they have after we left?”<sup>15</sup> Finally, there appears to be doubt among at least some senior

12 John Nagl, interview, “Americans Have to Die On Battlefield to Destroy ISIS—US Military Strategist,” *RT*, February 16, 2015, <http://rt.com/shows/sophieco/232635-us-isis-middle-east>.

13 Council on Foreign Relations, “What to Do About ISIS,” transcript, March 31, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/do-isis/p36333>, accessed April 15, 2015).

14 Morris, “Iraqi Offensive for Tikrit Stalls as Casualties Mount.”

15 Rod Nordland, “US Soldiers, Back in Iraq, Find Security Forces in Disrepair,” *New York Times*, April 14, 2015..

Iraqi officers whether ISF can take Mosul without US ground forces. Major General Najim Abdullah al-Jubouri, the individual selected by Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to command operations to liberate Nineveh, said: “I think it would be very difficult to defeat ISIS in Nineweh without American forces.”<sup>16</sup>

There is reason for concern. The ISF that fled in the face of the Islamic State’s offensive in 2014 bolted because it was designed largely as an internal security force that “did little more than staff checkpoints.”<sup>17</sup> The ISF could only operate effectively with significant US assistance when facing anything other than moderate-scale internal threats. It is incapable of the combined arms maneuver required to defeat the Islamic State. The tough urban fights in Iraq—Fallujah (2004) and Sadr City (2008)—were dominated by US forces with modest ISF participation. The battle for Basra (2008), while Iraqi conceived and led, required massive US assistance to succeed. The US ground formations in these key battles were not just “boots on the ground.” They were skilled, professional forces capable of something the ISF is not: the expert execution of highly synchronized joint combined arms operations. This competence is paramount in defeating determined adversaries and avoiding friendly and unwarranted noncombatant casualties and collateral damage. This is the ground force needed to defeat the Islamic State. US advisers cannot transplant these competencies into the ISF in a relatively short time, if ever, even if the ISF did not have all of its other challenges to overcome. Indeed, eight years of large-scale efforts from 2003 to 2011 failed to do so. Nor can it do the heavy lifting in intelligence, fires, and planning for the ISF; it is not capable of this level of sophisticated synchronization of joint combined arms.

### The Singular Importance of US Ground Forces

The 2008 Battle of Sadr City is perhaps the most illustrative example of the capability chasm between US ground forces and the ISF—or almost any other military in the world, for that matter. In that battle the US Army’s 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, destroyed the Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM) militia in an intense ground fight. Sadr City contained over 2 million Iraqi noncombatants, with an estimated 6,000 to 8,000 JAM fighters operating in their midst. The problem was similar to that which forces trying to retake Mosul will face: How to defeat a relatively small number of fighters without wantonly killing the civilians amongst whom they are hiding and destroying the city.<sup>18</sup> To reverse a famous quote reported by Peter Arnett during the Vietnam War, “How do you save the city without destroying it?”<sup>19</sup>

In the Battle of Sadr City, the US Army created a condition intolerable to JAM by sealing off the city with a concrete wall and using the protected mobility and firepower of M1 Abrams tanks and Bradley infantry fighting vehicles to maneuver against JAM. This threatened

16 Thomas E. Ricks, “Former FP [Foreign Policy] Roundtable Participant Tapped to Lead Iraqi Offensive to Re-take Mosul— But Will He Ask for US Ground Forces?” *Foreign Policy*, April 22, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/22/former-fp-roundtable-participant-tapped-to-lead-iraqi-offensive-to-re-take-mosul-but-will-he-ask-for-u-s-ground-forces>.

17 *Ibid.*; and Nordland, “US Soldiers, Back in Iraq, Find Security Forces in Disrepair.”

18 David E. Johnson, M. Wade Markel, and Brian Shannon, *The 2008 Battle of Sadr City: Reimagining Urban Combat* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2013).

19 “Major Describe Moves,” *New York Times*, February 8, 1968, 14.

JAM's source of sustenance and it came out to fight US forces to stop the progress of the wall. When JAM fighters became visible they were destroyed with discriminate firepower. This is not unlike Israeli ground operations in Gaza during Operations Cast Lead and Protective Edge—competent ground forces, enabled by a joint system, can create conditions that force an adversary to fight at great disadvantage.

Simultaneous with the ground fight against the JAM militia, the 3rd Brigade executed a high-technology, complex hunt for JAM rocket launcher crews who were firing from Sadr City into the Baghdad Green Zone, where the US Embassy was located. The brigade staff, augmented by Air Force officers, integrated multiple intelligence means, unmanned aerial surveillance and attack systems (Predator and Shadow), Apache helicopters, Air Force fighters, and artillery to hunt and destroy JAM rocket launchers.

The ISF was also in the Sadr City fight, but it played a secondary infantry role, assisted by US advisers, focused on consolidating gains and occupying Sadr City once the fighting ended. That was all that could be expected of the ISF, because it could not execute synchronized joint operations, nor did it have the capabilities—the US military provided all the joint fires, technical intelligence, and overhead surveillance. While isolating Mosul might not be the best strategy, the fight for Sadr City illustrates the unique effectiveness US ground forces in orchestrating and executing a joint fight could have in the fight against the Islamic State.

Competent ground forces are fundamental to the joint force equation for finding and defeating adversaries. Attempting to impart this competence to another ground force is folly. The ISF of 2008, before then-Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki riddled it with crony appointments and corruption, was more competent than the ISF that fled from the Islamic State last year.

Still, it is unimaginable that the ISF of 2008 could have done what US forces did in Sadr City or Fallujah, for that matter. It took years of effort to create the ISF of 2008 and the adversaries they joined us in fighting were less formidable than the Islamic State. Why would we imagine the ISF ground forces will be able to take Mosul this year?

### **The Fallacy of the Advisor Option**

This is a central fallacy in US advisory efforts in areas with ongoing conflicts. Our advisory efforts may create infantry formations that can operate within the context of a supporting US joint system that provides air, artillery, intelligence, logistical support—and ground combat forces. Advisors are essentially a link for the local security forces into that system, which also has US ground forces in the event of the need for reinforcement. This is essentially the system we had in Iraq during the surge. It is not dissimilar to the program of Vietnamization during the Vietnam War. So long as the South Vietnamese had access to US enablers, particularly airpower, they could endure as they did during the North Vietnamese failed Easter Offensive in 1972. Three years later, absent this US system and sustained security assistance support, the South Vietnamese military deteriorated and collapsed under a conventional attack by North Vietnam. In the case of the ISF, the Islamic State

(a much less significant foe than the North Vietnamese Army) was able to overrun much of Iraq. Finally, in the past when the United States built militaries that gradually became truly joint, combined arms-capable, the US army provided military assistance and forces in largely benign security environments for decades (e.g., South Korea). It strains credulity to believe we can create an ISF capable of effective operations in an urban area like Mosul in short order, even if we provide intelligence, planning, and fires.

### The Perils of Sectarianism

Trying to take Sunni cities with combinations of Shi'a militias, Peshmerga, and ISF forces would also present another challenge. None of these forces would be trusted by the Sunni populations, which might therefore continue to support the Islamic State. Nor would they trust each other. In the eyes of the locals, US ground forces are least likely to have sectarian agendas and, thus, are potentially trustworthy—or at least honest brokers. The aftermath of the ISF victory in Tikrit reinforces this view. As Reuters reported, “the looting and violence in Tikrit threaten to tarnish [Iraqi Prime Minister] Abadi’s victory. It risks signaling to Sunni Iraqis that the central government is weak and not trustworthy enough to recapture other territory held by Islamic State, including the much larger city of Mosul.”<sup>20</sup> Future depredations against the Sunnis also risk exacerbating the already deep sectarian divides that would undermine a central pillar of our strategy in Iraq of creating an inclusive Iraqi government.

This brings us back to the importance of having the means to achieve our ends. If the ISF is incapable of defeating the Islamic State in the cities where ISIL fighters have gone to ground, then the only reliable means available are US ground combat forces. They have all the skills in joint combined arms warfare the ISF lacks. US Army armor and mechanized infantry formations should be at the heart of this joint task force, just as they were in Sadr City, to provide US forces with the mobile, protected, and discriminate firepower that will overmatch and quickly defeat the Islamic State. If the United States is unwilling to deploy ground combat forces, the end state of a “degraded and destroyed” Islamic State is at risk.

### Capacity Matters—Two Recent Examples

Two recent cases when the United States chose to embark on a new strategy in the midst of failing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provide lessons about the criticality of providing sufficient means. The first instance was when President George W. Bush announced on January 10, 2007 that he was sending 30,000 additional troops, including five more US Army brigades, to Iraq. Quite simply, the strategy of turning the war over to the Iraqis—“standing down as they stand up”—was not working.<sup>21</sup> These surge forces were the critical to a new strategy for Iraq that made possible the establishment of a level of internal security that

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20 “After Iraqi Forces Take Tikrit, a Wave of Looting and Lynching,” *Reuters*, April 3, 2015.

21 Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009), 74-128.

the Iraqis could maintain independently and allowed the United States to withdraw in 2011.<sup>22</sup>

The second case is the increased commitment in Afghanistan that General Stanley McChrystal designed for the Obama administration in 2009. The ends for the campaign were clear: denying al Qaeda a safe haven, reversing the Taliban's momentum, and strengthening the capacity of Afghanistan's security forces and government for the long haul. The ways were also understood—population-centric COIN. What was inadequate were the means allocated to achieve the strategy. According to US COIN doctrine, the number of security forces available to execute the strategy was insufficient and the ends of the strategy were not attained.<sup>23</sup> Today, over four years after the surge in Afghanistan, the United States has had to revisit its plans to withdraw US forces from Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup>

### Moving Forward

There is understandable reluctance to deploy US ground forces to fight the Islamic State, given US experiences since 2003. However, the military objective against the Islamic State would not be nation-building or counterinsurgency, but rather removing the Islamic State from Iraq. The surest means of attaining this strategic objective is with the introduction of US ground combat forces and the necessary sustainment packages to support them. Politically, this will be extremely difficult both domestically and internationally, given likely Iraqi objections and the substantial Iranian presence in Iraq.

The most difficult political issue, however, is mustering American political will for a US ground commitment against the Islamic State. The President will have to make the American people understand why US ground forces are the only sure means available to achieve our national objectives. President Bush did this in 2007 for Iraq; President Obama did it 2009 for Afghanistan. It is, however, clear the American people understand the threat posed by the Islamic State. A recent CNN/ORC Poll found:

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22 Peter Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven: Yale University Press). It was not just the five US brigades that changed the situation in Iraq during the surge. What mattered was the show of US resolve, which enabled the Sunni to stand up to Al Qaeda in Iraq, along with JAM leaving the field for its own, separate reasons.

23 David E. Johnson, "What Are You Prepared to Do? NATO and the Strategic Mismatch Between Ends, Ways, and Means in Afghanistan—and in the Future," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 34, no. 5 (May 2011): 383-401. See US Department of the Army and US Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army and Headquarters, US Marine Corps, 2006), 1-13, which notes: "Twenty counterinsurgents per 1000 residents is often considered the minimum troop density required for effective COIN operations; however as with any fixed ratio, such calculations remain very dependent upon the situation. . . . As in any conflict, the size of the force needed to defeat an insurgency depends on the situation." There is an ongoing debate about the relevance of these ratios. See, for example, Jeffrey A. Friedman, "Manpower and Counterinsurgency: Empirical Foundations for Theory and Doctrine," *Security Studies* 20, no. 4 (2011): 556-591. One could argue that they were not met across Iraq during the surge, but within Baghdad, considered by many to be the center of gravity of the war, there were approximately 131,000 US-Iraqi security forces in a city with a population of some 7,000,000, which came close to the doctrinal ratio. Interestingly, these ratios do not appear in the 2014 version of the US Army-Marine Corps FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5: *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies*.

24 Greg Jaffe and David Nakamura, "Obama Agrees to Slow US Troop Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, March 24, 2015.

Americans see ISIS as a bigger threat to the United States than Iran, Russia, North Korea or China. . . . Overall, 68% say ISIS is a very serious threat, compared with just 39% who say so about Iran, 32% about North Korea, 25% on Russia and 18% on China. Nearly 9 in 10 see ISIS as at least a moderately serious threat.”<sup>25</sup>

The argument to the American people for greater US involvement in the fight to defeat the Islamic State is straight forward: Absent the introduction of US ground forces, the success of the US strategy is inextricably tied to means—the ISF, Shi’a militias backed by Iran, and the Peshmerga— whose capabilities and competence for the task is questionable, as are for some of them their increasingly retaliatory methods against Sunnis. If the ISF fails, the Islamic State will receive a boost in prestige and recruiting appeal, thus increasing its threat to the region, US friends and allies, and possibly even the homeland. If we recognize the inability of the ISF to defeat the Islamic State, the alternative approach to employing US ground combat forces would be continued strategic patience and kicking the can down the road. This course is also problematic, given that it will surely increase an already sizable Iranian influence and presence in Iraq and create even more concern in the region about US commitment and credibility.

In the words of retired Lieutenant General Daniel Bolger, “a broad chasm gapes between what the United States accomplished and what it aspired to do in the wake of the 9/11 attack.”<sup>26</sup> Why is that? My sense is that is the responsibility of the military to provide expert advice to civilians on the necessary means to attain policy ends is either not being fully expressed, being shaped in ways to make it palatable to the recipient, or being ignored because it conflicts with a broader policy agenda. Nevertheless, whatever the reason, it boggles the mind that a commander could offer a plan to the president for Afghanistan that failed to address the three critical mandates of our own doctrine: adequate security force to population ratios, denial of sanctuary for the adversary, and a legitimate host nation government. A “we will do the best we can with what means we get,” is something other than expert military advice and a formula for disaster.

But this caution was not put forward on Afghanistan. Indeed, the opposite happened. President Obama specifically wanted an answer to the fundamental question about the strategy: could it succeed with the forces the president was willing to commit and in the timeframe specified. Jonathan Alter, in his book *The Promise: President Obama, Year One*, writes that President Obama specifically addressed these issues with General David A. Petraeus, Commander, US Central Command and General McChrystal’s commander:

[President Obama]: I want you to be honest with me. You can do this in 18 months?

[General Petraeus]: Sir, I’m confident we can train and hand over to the ANA (Afghan National Army) in that time frame.

25 Jennifer Agiesta, “CNN/ORC Poll: ISIS a Bigger Threat Than Iran, Russia,” *CNN*, April 22, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/22/politics/cnn-orc-poll-isis-iran-russia/index.html>.

26 Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost: A General’s Inside Account of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2014), 420.

Alter also writes that Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael G. Mullen agreed with General Petraeus's assessment.<sup>27</sup>

Every war college student learns about the tools available to policy makers to meet strategic ends—Diplomatic, Information, Military, Economic, Financial, Intelligence and Law Enforcement (DIMEFIL).” When the critical moment in a policy occurs that the other than military elements are not achieving the policy ends, policy continues, as Clausewitz reminds us, “with the addition of other means.”<sup>28</sup> These means are military capability and capacity. Absent a rigorous and forthright assessment—and commitment—of the means required to accomplish the strategic ends policy will be placed at risk. This is the critical juncture we are rapidly approaching in Iraq and the broader Middle East.

It is time for strategic clarity. An ISF military failure against the Islamic State or a protracted delay in defeating the Islamic State could unhinge US policy in the region and provide the Islamic State with a significant boost in credibility. One option is to revise our policy goal to accord with the means we have devoted to the strategy: degrade and *contain* the Islamic State. Indeed, there are reasonable arguments regarding cultural, political, and military considerations for doing just that. If, however, our policy actually requires the defeat of the Islamic State, which I believe it does, then we need to provide the necessary means—competent US ground forces at the core of a joint, combined arms team—to realize our policy objectives.

The advance of the Islamic State into Iraq should also force a rethinking of our broader national security strategy and force posture. The central issue is this: desired policy outcomes in the fight against the Islamic State—and in the Middle East and elsewhere—are being compromised by the continued reluctance to put US “boots on the ground” in a direct combat role. In part, this is because of the current strategy of rebalancing to the Pacific to contend with a rising China. This is important, but it should not divert our attention from the rest of the world. The collapse of the Yemeni government, the chaos in Syria and Libya, an ever present threat in North Korea, and Russian adventurism in the Ukraine require a broader discussion about the military means necessary to attain US policy objectives worldwide. Air strikes, counterterrorism with drones, and special operations raids against high value targets create immediate, but transitory effects—what has been termed by Israelis “mowing the grass.” They are also clearly less risky than committing ground combat forces. Nevertheless, while these stand-off and small-scale operations might attain short term political objectives, they most often do not achieve or support the longer term policy ends of creating enduring conditions of stability and security we seek in the world. Nor do they deter aggression and assure partners and allies. This is the role of US ground forces.

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27 Jonathan Alter, *The Promise: President Obama, Year One* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 390. See also Peter Baker, “How Obama Came to Plan for ‘Surge’ in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, December 5, 2009.

28 Clausewitz, *On War*, 605.

The decision to commit US ground forces to the war against the Islamic State will be extremely difficult for US policymakers, given the burden of our recent history in Afghanistan and Iraq. These counterinsurgency wars are not analogous to the challenges posed by the Islamic State. It is the job of military professionals to explain why the current ways and means in the war against the Islamic State will likely lead to policy failure. They must also tell those they advise that strategic success demands the commitment of US ground forces. These forces are not merely “boots on the ground,” but the competent professionals required to defeat the Islamic State. Accepting the nature the war we are in, understanding the way in which it must be prosecuted, and undertaking a clear and comprehensive assessment of the means necessary for strategic success will make apparent the need to commit US ground combat forces. The clock is ticking and the stakes are high in Iraq—and elsewhere.



The threat of the Islamic State (also called ISIS) is only one of those currents, but it is certainly the most immediately threatening, a pseudo-state with an army, access to funding, an appealing religion-based ideology, and the capability to launch, or inspire, mass terrorist attacks anywhere. It is bankrupting those regional states that are trying to cope with it and providing the excuse for a destabilizing Russian regional intervention and a budding axis with Damascus and Tehran.Â First, most suggestions about U.S. ground troops do not advocate large numbers, but rather an elite force to deal with the particular military situation the United States faces with ISIS.