

ALTERNATIVES TO WAR: EIGHT THINGS THE US SHOULD DO REGARDING ISIS

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President Obama was right when he said there is no military solution to the ISIS crisis. His decision to bomb Syria, and to return US troops to fight in Iraq, contradicts that recognition. It also violates Obama's own commitment, stated in his State of the Union address of 2014, to reverse Washington's "perpetual war footing." Instead, his renewal of a direct US military role in the region in the context of the rise of ISIS only makes that crisis worse. It gives ISIS and its allies a new basis for recruitment, it encourages extremists in other countries to link to and emulate ISIS, it strengthens the repressive Syrian government, it undermines Syria's struggling non-violent opposition movement, and it further consolidates the links between ISIS supporters in Syria and in Iraq.

There are limits to what any government – including the United States, the most powerful country in the world – is actually capable of doing. When the actions taken are in fact doing more harm than good, the response to those actions must be based on reclaiming the Hippocratic Oath: first, do no harm. That means rejecting actions – bombing, drone strikes, arming opposition forces, renewed US troop deployments – that are making the crisis worse.

And around the world, including in the US, Britain, France, and elsewhere, there is the need to create responses to ISIS (and other terrorist) recruiting that does not make that situation worse as well. President Obama himself acknowledged that "engagement with communities can't be a cover for surveillance. It can't securitize our relationship with Muslim Americans, dealing with them solely through the prism of law enforcement." But he didn't do or even propose anything to actually change the US and local state and municipal policies that do just that. And he made the statement at a White House conference designed to figure out how to counter recruiting by ISIS and similar organizations – but it wasn't held until mid-February 2015, a full seven months after he ordered the bombing to begin. In the meantime, a policy that depended precisely on using "engagement with communities" as a "cover for surveillance" and a law enforcement-based "securitized relationship with Muslim Americans" remained in effect. Prioritizing the law enforcement response at home remained the parallel to prioritizing the military response in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond.

A month earlier, meeting with British Prime Minister David Cameron at the White House, President Obama described the "phenomenon of violent extremism," saying "I do not

consider it an existential threat.” Unlike the British leader, Obama did not use the term “Islamic extremism.” He noted it was “important for Europe not to simply respond with a hammer and law enforcement and military approaches to these problems,” but he did not indicate then or at the conference later, anything he would actually do to stop the reliance on precisely those approaches in his own country.

At the end of January 2015 the *New York Times* editorial board wrote that “American officials see an emerging international consensus on the need for a long-term diplomatic solution between Mr. Assad and diverse rebel groups. There is also interest in United Nations-led ceasefires in local communities like Aleppo that might serve as a basis for a broader peace....But it’s unclear how plausible any of the ideas are, and no one seems to have figured out how to tie these disparate pieces into a coherent game plan.” In fact it remained unclear just who in Washington, let alone in the rest of the world, actually believed there was an emerging consensus on anything regarding Syria diplomacy – and as long as that was the case, US reliance on military instead of diplomatic solutions would continue to carry the day.

When it comes to dealing with US policy towards ISIS, there are two critical understandings. One requires rejecting George W. Bush’s post-9/11 claim that the only choice was “we either go to war, or we let ‘em get away with it.” That was not the only choice for dealing with al Qaeda then, it is not the only choice for dealing with ISIS now. War or nothing is never the only choice.

The other understanding means recognizing that there is often no strategy, no tactic that will successfully end an immediate attack, or resolve another kind of crisis, without causing much greater harm in the medium and long term. Whether or not military action is appropriate or legitimate is not dependent solely on how violent the potential target is. There are critical questions of law – international as well as domestic. There are questions of efficacy – will it work, will it make the threat go away or actually enable the threat to grow? There are challenging questions of consequence – what will happen, and who will come to power the day after? And there are the crucial questions of morality – when we know so many more people will die as a result of anticipated actions, how can we justify carrying them out? And of hypocrisy – when one country’s actions have already been so culpable in creating a crisis, how dare that same government claim legitimacy in choosing to kill again, to destroy again, in the name of solving the crisis?

No US military action will result in ISIS immediately disappearing. And even if US or allied airstrikes manage to get the right target sometimes, and take out a rocket-launcher or kill a truckload of ISIS fighters or destroy a house where an ISIS commander lives, the inevitability of family members being killed, of local anger being stoked, of homes and villages and whole cities being wiped out, of more people beginning to sympathize with violent extremists... all undermine any potential immediate military value.

Arming the so-called “moderate” opposition in Syria doesn’t mean supporting the good guys, it means sending arms to the Free Syrian Army – and thus risking the almost inevitable result that the weapons will be expropriated by far more powerful violent extremists. It also means supporting FSA fighters who themselves, according to the *New York Times*, “went on to

behead six ISIS fighters ... and then posted the photographs on Facebook” shortly after ISIS beheaded the US journalist James Foley.

The CIA and Pentagon-run program to vet and train thousands of new anti-ISIS fighters (the same ones who were going to be trained to fight against Assad) means creating an entirely new US proxy army, almost certainly with little or no indigenous legitimacy. Arming the Iraqi government and its allied militias doesn't solve the problem there. It means supporting a sectarian, Shi'a-dominated government in Baghdad, backed by even more sectarian militias, both responsible for terrible violence against Sunni communities.

The US went to war in Afghanistan seeking revenge for the September 11 attacks. Jordan sent waves of airstrikes over Syria in revenge for ISIS's horrific killing of its bomber pilot. Japan's premiere vowed revenge for ISIS killing two Japanese citizens in Syria. But while a military strike might bring some immediate public satisfaction, revenge is a dangerous basis for foreign policy.

Military attacks are not only wrong in a host of ways (mostly illegal under international law, immoral because of civilian casualties, a distraction from vitally needed diplomacy), but they also make real solutions impossible.

So what do serious alternatives to military solutions look like? They have to start by recalling why ISIS is so powerful in the first place.

First, ISIS has good weapons, mostly US weapons that have flooded the region directly and through Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States for more than 15 years. Since 2011 the post-Qaddafi chaos in Libya has unleashed a new flood of weapons throughout the region. So there needs to be a strategy of how to achieve a real arms embargo on all sides.

Second, ISIS has good military leadership. In Iraq some of it is provided by Sunni generals who were kicked out of their positions in the military when the US invaded and who are now providing training, strategy and military leadership to ISIS-allied militias and ISIS itself. Many of them are very secular, and would be unlikely to continue support for ISIS if they believed a new, truly inclusive government in Iraq would give them some chance of recovering their lost jobs, prestige, and dignity. It has not been enough to elect a new prime minister who speaks in more inclusive language, but announces a new government made up of too many of the same old sectarian faces. There needs to be a real strategy to convince those military leaders that there is a place for them in a new and different Iraq.

Third, also in Iraq, ISIS has support from Sunni tribal leaders – the very people President Obama says he wants to “persuade” to break with ISIS. But these are people who have suffered grievously – first during the US invasion, and especially in the years of the US-backed Shi'a-controlled sectarian government of Nuri al-Maliki. They were demonized, attacked, and dispossessed by the government in Baghdad, and many of them thus see ISIS as the only force they could ally with to find protection from and perhaps even challenge that government. And many of them control large and powerful militias willing to fight alongside ISIS against the government in Baghdad. So there needs to be a strategy to win the Sunni

community away from ISIS by building an entirely new, inclusive political culture to replace Iraq's toxic sectarian divides.

Fourth, ISIS has support from ordinary Iraqi Sunnis, who (also largely secular) may hate what ISIS stands for, its extremism and violence, but who have suffered terribly under successive sectarian Shi'a-controlled governments in Baghdad. They have faced arrests, torture, extra-judicial executions, and more. As a result, some also are willing to ally at least temporarily with ISIS against Baghdad. They must be convinced that the new government in Iraq really represents a break with the anti-Sunni sectarianism of the past.

So, weakening ISIS requires ending the support it relies on from tribal leaders, military figures, and ordinary Sunnis. Much of that requires local mobilization, not US intervention, and Washington needs to be pressed to acknowledge the limitations imposed by its damaged legitimacy and credibility. There are, however, many things that the US – some of them *only* the US – can and must do to help end this brutal violence spreading across the Middle East.

SO WHAT TO DO?

Step One: Remembering that doing no harm must be the top priority, the first step is to stop the airstrikes. Because while people in the US may respond to them with “hooray, we got the bad guys,” the bombings and drone strikes are seen by many in Iraq (especially the very Sunni President Obama wants to persuade to break with ISIS) as the US acting as the air force for the Kurds and the Shi'a against the Sunnis. Thus the airstrikes defeat the important goal of undermining popular support for ISIS, and instead actually serve to strengthen the extremist organization.

Step Two: Make real the commitment for “No boots on the ground” and withdraw the troops. The White House has authorized sending more than 3,100 troops back to Iraq, officially for training and counter-terrorism. No one knows how many unacknowledged pairs of CIA and JSOC (special operations forces) sneakers may already be on the ground in Iraq or indeed in Syria. The presence of US troops provides exactly what ISIS and other extremist organizations want – US troops on their territory, providing renewed evidence of US meddling in Muslim countries, as well as providing thousands of new targets. This is identical to the al Qaeda goal of 15 years ago, which was to provoke US troops back to their territory to fight them there.

Step Three: The US must also stop flooding the region with arms. Whether they are sent to Syrian “moderates” who far too often are over-run by (or whose fighters defect to) ISIS or other not-so-moderate militias, or to the Iraqi army whose generals abandoned their troops resulting in the soldiers leaving their weapons behind and running away when attacked by small numbers of ISIS fighters, the weapons all seem to wind up in extremists' hands. And both in the hands of extremists and in the hands of US-backed supposedly “moderate” governments or militias, the result is more and more violence against civilians. Washington must end its policy of ignoring the violations of human rights and international law committed by its allies. Consistent enforcement of the Leahy Law prohibiting assistance to any foreign military units known to violate human rights must be an urgent demand. Only

when the US stops providing weapons to its regional allies who are arming the whole range of opposition forces from the Free Syrian Army to the most extreme Islamists, will Washington have any credibility to urge Iran and Russia to end their arming of the Syrian regime.

Step Four: The US should change its laws to reverse the Supreme Court decision (*Holder vs Humanitarian Law Project*) that criminalizes as “material support for terrorism” the teaching of non-violence training, conflict resolution or how to access the United Nations human rights system to any organization on Washington’s list of “foreign terrorist organizations.” That prohibition undermines any effort to win people in those organizations away from violence by providing information about non-violent alternatives. The US should end its prohibitions on virtually any kind of contact with those listed “foreign terrorist organizations,” including many in Syria and elsewhere in the region. The politicization of the list is a huge problem. This was evident in 2014 when the US resisted talking with or even acknowledging that the central players in saving the Yezidis besieged on Mt Sinjar were from a Kurdish militia in Syria allied with the PKK (Turkish Workers Party). The PKK had remained on the US anti-terrorism list so no contact was allowed, even while the Turkish government was negotiating directly with them.

Step Five: There must be a real diplomatic partnership to respond to the ISIS crisis. The US is carrying out airstrikes and deploying new troops in Iraq even while top US officials and much of the rest of the world agree there is no military solution. Diplomacy must be returned to center stage. That means serious engagement with Iran, among other players. Tehran has more influence in Baghdad than Washington does. Any serious effort to encourage Iraqi government acceptance of a truly inclusive approach to power will require joint pressure from the US and Iran. Even though Iran is predominantly Shi’a itself and its government claims global leadership of Shi’a Islam, the country’s leaders are very worried about the instability in their next-door neighbor resulting from the years of Shi’a sectarianism in Baghdad. So there is every reason to anticipate Iranian support for tamping down the sectarian-based violence in Iraq. The US-Iran nuclear talks should be broadened to include a real “grand bargain” between the US and Iran to include all the related crises, including normalization of Iran’s role in the region. The US should open direct talks with Iran and Russia, based initially on shared opposition to ISIS – talks with Iran to jointly push for ending anti-Sunni sectarianism in the Iraqi government, and with Russia to jointly work towards ending the multi-party civil war in Syria.

Step Six: The US should support a new search for broader diplomatic solutions in the United Nations involving both ISIS and the civil war in Syria. One aspect should be greater support for the UN efforts to negotiate local ceasefires in Syria. Those efforts, renewed in Aleppo in early March 2015, have led to important examples of encouraging short-term truces to create humanitarian corridors and allow humanitarian aid into and evacuation of civilians from besieged areas. That doesn’t necessarily mean calling for the opening of direct talks with ISIS – that is neither practically nor politically viable in the short-term. It does mean working to build a real coalition aimed at changing the desperate conditions that lead ordinary people, people with power and people without power, to consider supporting ISIS.

Even talks with ISIS should not be permanently ruled out. Jonathan Powell, former chief of staff for then-prime minister and Iraq war supporter Tony Blair, reminded CNN in October 2014 that

people forget how long the process leading up to a successful negotiation can take. The British government opened up a secret channel to the IRA in 1972 and yet the real negotiations only happened in 1991-93 when Major opened his correspondence with Irish republican politician Martin McGuinness. It takes a long time for armed groups to realize that their demands are unachievable and to start to consider what else they would settle for.

The same is true of ISIS. No one is going to agree to a universal caliphate. But once ISIS realizes they can't win then they may be prepared to talk and we need to open a secret channel now to give time to establish enough trust to move to negotiations when the moment comes. There are practical things we can talk to them about. The ex-Baathists and ex-Iraqi army officers that make up a major part of the ISIS force have genuine grievances about the way they were treated by the sectarian Maliki government. We can discuss with them ways of ensuring Sunnis have a powerful voice in a Shia majority Iraq.

A viable international coalition will require replacing military strikes with powerful diplomacy. That US will have to pressure its ally Saudi Arabia to stop arming and financing ISIS and other extremist fighters; pressure its ally Turkey to stop allowing ISIS and other fighters to cross into Syria over the Turkish border; pressure its allies Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan and others to stop financing and arming everyone and anyone in Syria who says they're against Assad. What is *not* needed is another Coalition of the Killing (see Step One for why); what is needed instead is a newly-created Coalition of the Rebuilding. Shared opposition to ISIS can provide a new beginning for cooperation between the US and its long-time competitors such as Russia and Iran.

Step Seven: Push the United Nations, despite the resignation of two sequential special envoys, to restart real negotiations on ending the civil war in Syria. That means everyone involved needs to be at the table: the Syrian regime; civil society inside Syria including non-violent activists, women, young people, internally displaced and refugees (Syrian, Iraqi and Palestinian); the Syrian Kurds, Christians, Druze and other minorities as well as Sunnis, Shi'a and Alawites; the armed rebels; the external opposition; and the regional and global players supporting all sides – the US, Russia, Iran, Saudi, the UAE, Qatar, Turkey, Jordan, and beyond.

This could provide a moment for the US to collaborate with Russia on Syria policy, building on the successful joint effort to destroy Syria's chemical weapons and perhaps lessening tensions over Ukraine. A ceasefire and arms embargo on all side should be the medium-term goal – which will only be possible if the US is prepared to exert serious pressure on its allies to stop arming all their favorite factions, even as pressure is brought to bear on Iran and Russia to stop the flow of arms to the Syrian government.

It should not be forgotten that, at least until mid-2013, despite US reluctance to send arms directly to the rebels, their weapons are mostly US-produced, and were sold to Washington's Gulf monarchies over the years in multi-billion-dollar arms deals. (France has sold some weapons to Gulf states as well.) All US weapons sold internationally, including to close allies, include end-use restrictions limiting how they can be used, and whether and to whom they can be resold. There is little doubt that the US could, if it chose, bring an immediate halt to the Saudi,

Qatari and other arms shipments heading to the Syrian opposition forces, by enforcing those end-use restrictions on pain of losing all future access to US arms.

Step Eight: The US must be pushed to massively increase its humanitarian contributions to United Nations agencies for the millions of refugees and IDPs in and from both Syria and Iraq. Money is desperately needed both inside Syria and in the surrounding countries where millions of Syrians have now fled seeking refuge. The US has pledged significant funds, but much of it has not actually been made available to the agencies, and more must be pledged and given.

SYRIAN WOMEN KNOW HOW TO DEFEAT ISIS

A group of Syrian women came together in 2013 and 2014 to discuss how to respond to the crisis facing women and indeed facing their entire country. As reported in the October 2014 Time magazine article by Kristin Williams and Michelle Barsa of the Institute for Inclusive Security, the Syrian women's proposals are below.

More arms and more bombs, they said, are not the answer. They insisted that the only way to fight this extremist threat is to return to the negotiating table and hash out a peaceful political transition to heal the divisions ripping Syria apart.

“Oppression is the incubator of terrorism,” one woman told us as the group prepped for meetings with high-level officials in D.C. and New York. Her participation in peaceful protests during the early days of the revolution led to her two-month imprisonment in a four square meter room shared with 30 other women—yet she was adamant: “We cannot fight ISIS except through a political approach.”

So what do they recommend? To create stability (which is kryptonite to extremists), Syrian women say three things must happen.

First, humanitarian aid must get to the millions in grave need. Almost three million people are registered as refugees in neighboring countries and over six million are displaced inside Syria. That's in a country with a pre-war population of just under 18 million. Approximately half of the remaining inhabitants live in extreme poverty. In response to this disaster, the UN made an urgent appeal for \$2.28 billion just to meet the critical requirements of the internally displaced. So far, Member States have committed only \$864 million—a little over one-third of the total. Last month, the UN was forced to cut the delivery of food aid by 40 percent.

Violent extremism thrives in areas where social services have all but disappeared. A woman who serves on the local council of an opposition-held town told us that she fears more of her neighbors may become radicalized because there's no work, no education, and no other opportunities. Women ...[have] first-hand witness of the different needs of zones under government, opposition, Islamic State, or other control. They've seen, for instance, that food baskets can't get into areas blockaded by the regime; in these circumstances, cash transfers are more effective. To reach the greatest number of people, relief agencies should coordinate with civil society and devise humanitarian strategies that reflect these differences.

Second, international actors must encourage local pockets of stability. Beyond funding, a key barrier to humanitarian access is the ongoing violence. Besieged areas are the hardest to reach and most in need. Here too, women have a solution. Though missing from most news reports, a number of local ceasefire arrangements have proliferated throughout the country, often negotiated by civil society actors. In the Damascus suburbs, a women's group brokered a ceasefire between regime and opposition forces. For 40 days before fighting resumed, they were able to get essential supplies into the city. Syrian women are now calling on the UN to not only track these local arrangements, but assign international monitors to ensure parties stick to them. Beyond opening channels for the passage of humanitarian aid, this may also help the parties come closer to an agreement to cease hostilities on the national level. This will require accountability, as these negotiations are all too often used as a tool of political manipulation.

Which brings us to the third, and potentially most important, step: The parties must return to internationally-mediated negotiations and agree on a political solution to the conflict. The last round of talks in Geneva failed, it's true. But this is still the best solution to the burgeoning civil war and the opportunistic extremism that has followed it. Only a unified Syria can beat back the ISIS threat.

Convincing both parties to come back to the table won't be easy. But Syrian women have identified concrete ideas that could help unite disparate factions by encouraging them to cooperate on mutually beneficial activities. For instance, the regime and opposition could coordinate the safe passage of university students between government- and nongovernment-controlled areas to allow them to resume their studies. The women also call on parties to prioritize construction of temporary housing for those displaced by the conflict on both sides. These actions could help cultivate trust between the regime and opposition and encourage popular support on all sides for renewed negotiations.

As important is the construction of an inclusive peace process. One that engages women, but also others who have thus far been missing from the conversation: the Kurds, Druze, youth, independent civil society networks, tribal leaders, and, yes, more radical elements like Jabhat al-Nusra, who can otherwise spoil the talks from the outside. Without this, no agreement stands a chance.

These three priorities—humanitarian relief, support for local ceasefires, and resumption of negotiations—are not the result of idealistic or wishful thinking. This is not an abstract call by Syrian women to “give peace a chance.” It's a plea for policy approaches that are grounded in the lived experiences and long-term goals of the vast majority of the Syrian people.

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