The Problem With Vows to 'Defeat' the Islamic State

What happens after Raqqa falls?
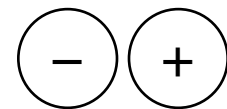

Smoke rises after an U.S.-led air strike in Kobani, Syria

Murad Sezer / Reuters

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In recent weeks, ISIS has suffered territorial losses on multiple fronts, including in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. The organization may look nearer to defeat than at any

time in the past two years, but there is still a great deal of fighting to be done before the group is destroyed, or more likely beaten back to an underground terrorist organization as it was in 2009. In a previous post, we argued that truly defeating the ISIS threat would be more expensive than most now recognize, and beyond what most Americans would be willing to pay, leaving containment as the only viable option. Ambassador James Jeffrey disagrees.

In particular, he argues that the United States and its allies should reinforce today's U.S. force of roughly 5,000 soldiers with another 10,000 troops, order them to lead a conventional ground offensive against ISIS, and loosen the rules of engagement for ground fighting and air strikes to tolerate more civilian casualties. With these policies, Jeffrey argues, ISIS can be defeated promptly. Once Raqqa falls, the real U.S. mission is complete in his view. He doesn't say what those 15,000 soldiers should do then, but he's opposed to a costly stabilization mission and implies that U.S. troops should instead go home and avoid further commitment.

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We agree that stabilization is too expensive. But we disagree with Jeffrey on the merits of a smash-and-leave conventional offensive. In our view, such a policy actually secures none of the interests that nominally motivate it.

Jeffrey's argument is a variation on a theme that is increasingly prominent among analysts frustrated with the long U.S. counterinsurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq: The United States should adopt a policy of waging decisive conventional warfare against states without worrying overmuch about what happens afterwards when the target regime is toppled. But this position isn't actually new—it represents a return to the de facto policy the United States adopted in Iraq in 2003 and Afghanistan in 2001. A decade later we know quite

a bit about the likely consequences, and they aren't pretty.

If all we're going to get is the kind of chaos that typically follows regime change without stabilization, such as the kind of warlord governance that we now see in Libya, for example, then the real payoff to smash-and-leave conventional warfare of this type is very limited. Reasonable people can differ on whether the limited payoff and ugly aftermath of U.S. conventional warfare against ISIS is worse than the limited payoff and ugly interim of containment—this is ultimately a value judgment on balancing current against future costs, and different people will have different time preferences on costs. But this is not a simple choice between decisive victory against ISIS as opposed to chronic terrorism with containment. The real difference is much narrower, and we're going to be living with some version of containment against most of the threat for a long time either way. The greater cost of proposals such as Jeffrey's thus needs to be weighed against a properly modest understanding of their real benefits.

Jeffrey's proposal raises at least two important, related, issues for public debate: Is it really wise to topple regimes then leave, and how do we draw the line between threats we must actually defeat and those we will instead contain?

What's Left Behind by "Smash and Leave"?

As for the first, the smash-and-leave approach fell into disfavor after 2003, when post-Saddam Iraq fell into chaos after the United States failed to stabilize the leaderless country. As early as 2004, Rumsfeldian willingness to dismiss the messiness of freedom in the aftermath of U.S.-imposed regime change was widely criticized as short-sighted. This critique became something like conventional wisdom after the growing Iraqi insurgency drove Rumsfeld from office and led to the surge of some 30,000 additional troops into Iraq in 2007-2008.

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Yet the smash-and-leave thesis is now making a comeback. Recent books by retired General Daniel Bolger, retired Colonel Gian Gentile, and by the Reagan administration official Bing West critique nation-building as a military mission and advocate conventional warfighting to destroy hostile armies instead. Israeli analysts bemoan the indecisiveness of occupation and stabilization, and seek a return to the "battlefield decision" of the conventional wars Israel fought in 1956, 1967, or 1973. Many would like some alternative to the Hobson's choice between mere containment and the long, grinding commitment of stabilization. Conventional invasion followed by quick departure looks to some like an answer.

There is now plenty of evidence on such policies' outcomes, however. If Iraq weren't enough, there are Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Somalia, among other examples, to show that the chaos following regime change often creates exactly the kind of terrorist havens, humanitarian crises, and refugee threats that motivate today's U.S. concern with ISIS. Indeed it was precisely the U.S. policy of regime change without real stabilization in Iraq that created ISIS itself, a lineal descendant of the Iraqi al-Qaeda affiliate that arose in the turmoil of post-Saddam Iraq.

Conventional conquest is often faster and cheaper than stabilization and counterinsurgency, but warfare is a means to political ends—if the military means don't actually secure any of the political ends, then the fighting is just a waste of lives and dollars, whether the United States declares victory after an early advance or not. The U.S. interests at stake in Syria and Iraq are a combination of homeland security against terrorism, humanitarian concerns for civilian suffering and refugee outflows, and the stability of a region with unusual importance for global energy markets. Defeat of ISIS per se is just a means to these ends—it is not an end in itself. If a U.S.-led offensive pulls down the ISIS

black flag over Raqqa, but ISIS is then replaced by al-Qaeda's former affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, or another militant group, which then claims vanguard status in global jihad against the West, and if that group then uses this to consolidate control over its current Syrian territory and to destabilize weak U.S. clients in Raqqa or Mosul, then how much real progress will have been made toward the actual interests that motivate the campaign in the first place? In fact there is evidence that Jabhat al-Nusra's new incarnation, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, is already planning just such a transition in anticipation of ISIS's decline. To replace ISIS with another al-Qaeda offshoot may be an improvement even so, but a modest one at best.

Chaos without ISIS is better at the margin than ISIS—but by how much?

Nor is the alternative to smash-and-leave an acceptance of a future ISIS caliphate. The point of containment is that a contained ISIS will eventually collapse from its own internal contradictions. ISIS's governing model is not viable, and eventually its inability to produce economic growth, deliver services, or tolerate political participation will reach the breaking point under even gradual military pressure, and the ISIS regime will fall. We can already see the early indications of this in ISIS's recent cuts in fighter salaries, attempts by civilians under ISIS control to flee, harsh repression by ISIS to prevent this, internal disciplinary challenges, and the willingness of some ISIS foreign fighter recruits to return home even at the cost of imprisonment in their countries of origin. With or without a smash-and-leave offensive, there will not be an ISIS caliphate stretching across the Mideast in 2030.

Given this, what a smash-and-leave offensive actually accomplishes is to hasten an ISIS collapse that will eventually happen anyway even without such an offensive (and to accept some degree of perceived U.S. political responsibility for

the aftermath). And the outcome being accelerated here is not the replacement of a terrorist proto-state with stability in Syria—it is the replacement of ISIS with chaos, continued humanitarian crisis, continued risks of the war spilling over to other parts of the Persian Gulf, and continued use of Syrian territory as havens for Islamist terrorism by other Islamist militant groups. Yes, chaos without ISIS is better at the margin than ISIS—but by how much? A real end to these underlying threats will require exhaustion by the Sunni and Shiite international coalitions that are now waging the war, and/or the emergence of a new governing model to resolve the region's post-Arab-Spring crisis of the state. Neither of these developments are likely any time soon, with or without a U.S. ground offensive, and with or without ISIS.

To achieve such limited gains will increase U.S. costs. Some of these costs are financial: Tripling the troop count would probably add something like $10 billion a year to the bill for Operation Inherent Resolve, which has to date burned over $8 billion since August 2014. The more important cost is in casualties. The current "non-combat" mission has produced three U.S. combat fatalities to date; an explicit shift to a primary ground combat role on the leading edge of an offensive that must conquer multiple large, heavily populated, fortified urban areas would be higher. Then there are the costs of hunting down ISIS units that go to ground and continue to wage a terrorist campaign, as many of the group's current leaders successfully did in Iraq from 2009-2013. That said, ISIS is not the Wehrmacht, and a multi-brigade U.S. ground assault with modern air support could well eject them at a toll not radically higher than that of, say, Fallujah in 2004, when 71 U.S. soldiers were killed in urban warfare against Sunni insurgents. If ISIS morale breaks under the pressure, then the toll could be lower; if it doesn't, then the equivalent of multiple Fallujahs could cost more. But none of these costs are trivial, and none address the fact that this organization has proven its ability to survive massive losses. And they must be weighed against the limited return to real U.S. interests they would produce.

Where to Draw the Line on Containment?

This raises the second important question embodied in Jeffrey's proposal: How should decision makers draw the line on threats they must destroy as opposed to those they will merely contain? Almost no one now favors a true global U.S. war to destroy all terrorists everywhere; some will surely be contained. In fact Jeffrey himself is not actually opposed to containment per se—his proposal implies that he would contain all other Islamist militants in Syria while defeating only ISIS. Why draw the line there?

Jeffrey argues that ISIS's "state" status makes it a unique threat whose severity warrants American destruction even without stabilization. Certainly terrorists benefit from control of contiguous territory that can be used to plan attacks, train recruits, and tax locals. But many terror groups enjoy de facto territorial control even without ISIS's nominal state status, and they use that territory to support terrorism: Al-Qaeda and its allies do this in parts of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas; al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates have exercised such control in parts of Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Nigeria, and elsewhere. None have yet declared themselves a state in these territories, but the declaration is less important than the underlying real capability that territorial control conveys, and this is hardly unique to ISIS. In fact many analysts now see a major terror threat emanating from ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates without statehood in chaotic Libya or Yemen that rivals or even exceeds that from ISIS's nominal state territory in Syria and Iraq. In his Worldwide Threat Assessment in February, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper argued that homegrown extremists in the United States operating without direct planning guidance from ISIS in Raqqa actually pose a greater threat than ISIS can produce from its own territory. (And of course the United States has long lived with the terrorist threats sponsored by true states of much larger territory or population than ISIS, in the form of Iran and North Korea.)

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What about the branding, inspirational, and recruiting advantages ISIS is said to enjoy from its declared state status? The homegrown extremist threat in the U.S. is often said to be inspired by ISIS and its vanguard status, which is reinforced by the group's claim to statehood. But essentially the same arguments were made about al-Qaeda long before ISIS or its claiming of statehood: When al-Qaeda was the apparent vanguard of anti-Western militancy this leadership status was widely held to be a major recruitment advantage. Now that ISIS enjoys vanguard status this advantage belongs to them. With ISIS's expansion halted and, increasingly, reversed in the face of containment (even without the reinforcements Jeffrey and others favor), many now believe their recruiting advantage is waning. But this effect attaches largely to leadership status rather than ostensible statehood per se. If ISIS is destroyed as a state this will hardly destroy Islamist militancy—either in the Levant or elsewhere—and the next group in the queue to claim vanguard status will then inherit the associated recruiting benefits. Perhaps ISIS's self-proclaimed statehood is superior to this, but is the difference enough to warrant waging war against one but containing the other?

That said, ISIS is still a bigger threat than Syria's other Islamist militants, at least for now. It makes sense at the moment to rank them higher in the priority list than, say, Jabhat Fatah al-Sham.

But it's far from clear that there's a bright line dividing ISIS and other militants—this is a difference of degree, not kind. And it's very likely that if the U.S. does topple ISIS, then today's debate will simply repeat itself shortly thereafter, when the next militant group with an abhorrent ideology and an intent to target Americans steps up and threatens the ground won from ISIS. And when that

happens, as it probably would if the U.S. removes ISIS and then disengages, then the debate we are having now will begin once again.

In our view, U.S. politics overreacts to terrorism—an important problem but not an existential threat to the American way of life unless Americans' own reactions make it so. But whatever one's view on the terrorism threat, the world presents a host of terrorist groups with varying prospective lethality. It's always going to be possible to escalate American efforts and weaken the next-biggest threat in the queue, but the same can always be said for the next one after that. This is especially problematic if American responses are smash-and-leave missions that leave chaos in their wake—how much does net U.S. security improve when decision makers move on to the next threat in line? After all, each escalation increases costs in exchange for modest improvements in net security. Like the proverbial frog in a pot of slowly heating water, who could jump out but never does because the temperature only seemed to go up a little in each succeeding time step, Americans can wind up boiled to death in the end: Each step of escalation seems small and therefore tolerable, but they add up. The process needs to be seen in a larger, end-game context lest America finds itself overcommitted without having solved the problem. In that larger context, it's a mistake to view ISIS as some kind of unique peril whose destruction would somehow secure the real interests at stake. The reality is a continuum of threats with only marginal benefits to the marginal increase in cost that comes from waging war against the next one in line.

A line has to be drawn somewhere, somehow, but facing a continuum of relative distinctions rather than an easy bright line makes this a value judgment at least as much as it is an analytical exercise. For us, the judgment call on where to draw it comes down differently than Jeffrey's preference: We would contain all the current Syrian/Iraqi militant groups, whereas Jeffrey would contain all but ISIS. Reasonable people with complete information on costs and benefits can make different value judgments on where to draw a line along this continuum of

threats. (In fact, one of us drew this line to advocate defeat rather than containment for the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2009.)

But no one can draw this line rationally without a clear picture of both the costs and the benefits. And we believe that the benefits of destroying ISIS are smaller than Jeffrey implies, and the costs higher. Smash-and-leave only looks like an escape from the Hobson's choices of the post-9/11 world if we ignore the famous Petraeus question of 2003 in Iraq and do not ask how this ends. Regime change in situations like Syria and Iraq leaves chaos in its wake absent large, sustained investments in stabilization that few Americans are now willing to incur. If Americans are not willing to incur those costs, then the real benefits of a conventional offensive to conquer Raqqa are a lot smaller than they might look. Containment of some kind, ugly as it is, is an inherent feature of any line anyone will draw in the conflict against terrorism—and in a complete accounting, drawing that line to contain ISIS, rather than smashing it and leaving, has more going for it than many suppose.

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