

Iraq, Syria, and the Islamic State: The “Boots on the Ground” Fallacy

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There are times the US does not need an enemy in going to war. It poses enough of a threat to itself without any foreign help. The current debate over ground troops in Iraq and Syria threatens to be yet another case in point, compounding the American threats to America that have done so much damage in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and the earlier fighting in Iraq.

The Islamic State is Not the Center of Gravity, and the Politics of Iraqi Unity are More Critical Than the Fighting

To begin with, this is not simply a fight against the Islamic State. In fact, the key center of gravity in this campaign is to create something approaching a unified Iraq that is not dependent on Iran, or divided into Arab Shi'ite, Arab Sunni, and Kurd. There can be no meaningful military victory in Iraq without Iraqi political stability, and changes in the quality and equity of governance that offer every major faction hope and an incentive to cooperate. Moreover, there can be no meaningful military victory unless these changes create a structure of Iraqi security forces that can win back and then secure all of the country.

It is not a fight directed at the Islamic State alone in Syria. Even the best outcome in degrading and destroying the Islamic State will not produce a broad political victory against violent Islamic extremism. It will not defeat such extremism in Iraq or Syria, only suppress it to the extent to which key ethnic and sectarian factions find a better alternative, and the broader threat of violent religious extremism will almost certainly continued to grow in the rest of the Islamic world.

More seriously, it will leave Syria divided between an Assad regime that has managed to create even more casualties, human suffering, and repression than the Islamic State, and retake control of something like 65-70% of Syria's population while leaving divided and sometime warring rebel factions in the east. The refugee and IDP crisis that the UN now estimates puts some nine million Syrians at risk will remain, and even the best run US and allied Arab effort to create an effective political and military alternative will take years to build and win.

These are the key goals and realities that will shape the fight against the Islamic State, and the much broader strategic objectives the US has in Iraq and Syria. They also, however, place some key limits on the kind of US ground presence that will help achieve them. This is not 2003-2011. The US is not a conquering or occupying state, and it must now intervene in a state that Maliki divided, undermined, and drove into civil war.

History will have to judge whether Maliki was worse than Saddam Hussein, but any use of US ground troops must take account of the reality that any major US combat units sent into today's Iraq would inevitably become caught up in the civil war Maliki triggered after 2011, and find it impossible not to become caught up in the struggles between Arab Sunni and Arab Shi'ite, and Arab forces and the Pesh Merga. He politicized and helped corrupt the Iraqi forces, alienated the Sons of Iraq, sentenced key Sunni political leaders to death, crippled the Kurdish economy and Pesh Merga, used his army and police to suppress and alienate the Sunnis in the West and North, and create the power vacuum that allowed the Islamic State to win so much territory.

There is a Strong Case Against Deploying US Major Combat Units

A new, better, more honest, and inclusive Iraqi government may be able to overcome this legacy, but it will be a close run thing at best. It will also have to deal with Shi'ite and Sunni factions that see the US as an enemy, and a population that may see the need for US help, but that Iraqi public opinion polls show sees the US occupation as a key factor in much of their current insecurity and misery. Moreover, far too many elements in Iraqi politics still want to use the US against their rivals, but fear their rivals will use the US against them.

Deploying major US combat units under these conditions would not simply be a problem in terms of US domestic politics and their cost in dollars and blood, they would be an unpopular, non-Islamic force that would inevitably be perceived as taking sides in Iraq's civil conflict, create a whole new set of problems for Iraqi political unity, and reduce the incentive for all sides to create the effective Iraq security arrangements and security forces that are the only last way to contain and defeat the Islamic State and the forces that fuel violent extremist political movements.

It is possible this situation could change with time. If Iraq does move towards political unity and if Iraq can create a unified set of security forces, the time might come when limited US combat unit deployments could make a difference. It seems far more likely, however, that if Iraq can make this progress, it will never need such US units, and that if it does not make such progress, they should not be deployed.

Sending In the Necessary US Advisors and Enablers: Doing it Their Way – with Help!

The situation is radically different when it comes to another kind of US ground presence. Iraqis have already shown that they can fight. They have done all too good a job of fighting each other since the rounds of Arab-Kurdish fighting that began in the early 1970s, and the low-level Arab Sunni vs. Arab Shiite fighting that began during the Iran-Iraq War and went on through the start of the US-led invasion in 2003. They fought the Middle East’s bloodiest modern war against Iran from 1980-1988, and decisively defeated Iran in 1988.

If Iraq can move towards sufficient unit, improvements in governance, and more effective sharing of its oil wealth, however, Iraq forces will need as much advisory help as they can get. They will need trainers in the rear, and help in intelligence and managing air support. They will need help in arms and equipment imports, training, and support. They will need a third party that all sides can see is not tied to an opposing faction, and caught up in Iraq’s endemic level of corruption.

What General Dempsey, General Odierno, and General Mattis have all made clear, however, is that they will almost certainly need something more than the 1,400-odd US troops now assigned to these missions. It is not enough to generate and sustain forces. They also have to have help in becoming effective in combat, and here the issue is to build on their past fighting skills by helping them with forward-deployed advisors, coordinators, air controllers, and intelligence experts.

Iraq still has effective combat units in spite of Maliki, but it is going to need forward Special Forces, ranger-type troops, and other teams of experts to help coordinate, train, and link ground and air power. These need to be embedded at the combat unit level, they need to be armed, they need to be capable of self-defense, and they need to be prepared to take casualties and have medical aid.

All of our experience in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and the earlier fighting in Iraq, efforts to create effective rebels in Syria, and the low-level fighting in Yemen reinforce a critical lesson of military history. Weak and divided host country forces need aid at the combat level to develop cohesion and effective leadership and war fighting skills.

Doing it their way -- rather than trying to make them do it our way in spite of cost and major cultural differences -- is critical. However, helping them change “doing it their way” to deal with maneuver, combined operations, land-air warfare, and develop leadership in complex operations is critical. This can only be done forward and in combat. “Force generation” in the rear is equally necessary, but is never enough. It does take a limited number of US “boots of the ground” that will effectively be in combat to make the difference.

This is the plan and the risk the administration should have presented to Congress from the start. This is the level of US involvement in Iraq the President should have had the courage to explain and defend. This is the level of US “boots on the ground” the Congress needs to understand, debate, support, and properly resource. The political risks already are high enough. Trying to make the Iraqi side of the campaign work on the basis of air strikes and force generators and enablers on the ground that can’t go forward and can’t be where it will count most is a recipe for failure.

The level, timing, and intensity of the air campaign is also critical. So is how the proposed effort to strengthen the Syrian rebels is intended to work out over time. But, this is debate over ground troops that really matters and where the advice of the nation’s key current and past commanders is critical and needs to be taken as soon as possible.

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