

Report No: 191, September 2014

US STRATEGY AGAINST ISIS AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAQ & SYRIA



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مركز الشرق الأوسط للدراسات الاستراتيجية



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ORSAM Report No: 191

September 2014

ISBN: 978-605-4615-91-9

Ankara - TURKEY ORSAM © 2014

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PRESENTATION

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has established its dominance in an area extending towards the Iranian border after its capture of Mosul in Iraq. Even though the group has been active in Syria for a long time, after its gains in Iraq, it became a target for the West, especially for the United States. The turning point in the Western perspective was ISIS's advance towards the outskirts of Arbil, the administrative center of the Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). In response, the U.S. conducted an aerial bombardment of the ISIS positions. Even though the U.S. response was limited, it eliminated the ISIS threat on the Iraqi Kurds. ISIS was forced to retreat in Iraq with the aerial support of the U.S. and the advance of the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga on the ground.

The aerial strikes, as the U.S. Chief of Staff stated, will force ISIS to reevaluate its short term tactical goals, though, will not make it possible to permanently destroy the ISIS threat. On 10 September 2014, President Barack Obama declared the U.S. strategy against ISIS, which the U.S. considers the biggest threat in recent years. Obama's 4-point plan, which includes air strikes against ISIS, improving the anti-terror capability, supporting local forces on the ground and increasing humanitarian assistance, involved the creation of a coalition that included some NATO allies. This process is going to affect the future of ISIS as well as having critical impact on the security situation in Iraq and Syria, as well as the political atmosphere and humanitarian dimension.

This report prepared by ORSAM focuses mainly on two points. First, the factors that caused ISIS to emerge as well as the process of coalition formation against ISIS are analyzed. Second, the effects of the fight against ISIS in the contexts of Iraq and Syria are examined. We hereby present our report titled "US Strategy against ISIS and its Potential Implications for Iraq & Syria", hoping it will shed some light on the recent discussions about the problem of ISIS, which is a recent agenda item. Have a nice reading.

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US STRATEGY AGAINST ISIS AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR IRAQ & SYRIA

Introduction

Iraq has been dealing with the problems related to security and political instability since the invasion in 2003. The liquidation of the state mechanism after the invasion hindered efforts for bringing stability. Then, the forces that controlled the central authority pursued exclusionist and discriminative policies that strengthened pro-decentralization forces. The groups, which have given up hopes about the central authority, adopted new pursuits in their feelings of exclusion and hopelessness. As for Syria, the armed uprising of the opposition, which had arisen as a civilian movement against the central authority, has been going on since March 2011. The uprising in Syria has been transformed into a civil war, in which the ethnic and religious dimension is prominent, because of the international community's policies that involve heavy discourse but no actual practice. The Assad regime, benefiting from the room for maneuver, provided by the inactive international community, has been trying to suppress the uprising by any violent means available. As a result, approximately 250,000 people lost their lives, while almost half of the population, which was 23 million before the uprising, was forced to relocate or immigrate. The struggle between the regime and opposition is exactly a deadlock and chaos rules supreme in the country.

The instability, violence and political exclusion in Iraq and Syria have had two important effects. First, radical groups have found a new battleground. Second, the people in despair started

to join the radicals or at least feel sympathy for them. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is a direct result of this process. ISIS, whose roots go back to the Al Qaeda in Iraq after the invasion, has spread to Syria benefiting from the civil war and taken control of entire regions in the north. The group utilized its resources and weapons that it acquired in Syria for its advance in Iraq, benefited from the support of the disgruntled people and took control of a vast territory from Mosul to the Iranian border. The Western countries, which were inactive against ISIS up to then, changed their policies when ISIS moved against Arbil. The U.S. response started with air strikes and went on with President Barack Obama's 4 point plan against ISIS on 10 September 2014. The U.S. included its allies in the struggle against ISIS and started a long term fight in order to destroy it.

The conventional wisdom suggests that it is impossible to destroy ISIS without fighting in both Iraq and Syria. Therefore, the air strikes that started in Iraq have spread to Syria as well. The fight against ISIS is expected to have various effects in Iraq and Syria beyond destroying ISIS, in terms of security, political atmosphere and humanitarian situation. This report focuses mainly on this issue. The first chapter of the report handles the process that led to the forming of ISIS. The main observation of this chapter is that the most important factor that led to the rise of ISIS is the exclusionist and discriminatory policies of the central governments and in-

stability in Iraq and Syria. After the chapter that focuses on the origins and rise of ISIS, the Western, especially the U.S., response against ISIS will be reviewed. This chapter will examine the content of the U.S. plan against ISIS. The next

two chapters examine the effects of the plan in the contexts of Iraq and Syria.

1. The Complex Legacy from Bush to Obama: The Road to Iraq and ISIS

When the US President Barack Obama took the presidential office, he was facing three main problems regarding the Middle East. The first one was the instability in Iraq and 140 thousand American troops in the country; the second one was the anti-Americanism in the world and especially in the Middle East due to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, while the last one was Iran's nuclear activities.

When he started his duty, President Obama, who signaled that he would follow a different policy than George W. Bush era, began to use a moderate rhetoric to change the American image in the region and stated that his priority was withdrawing American troops from Iraq. While decreasing the level of engagement with the Middle East due to the economic crisis and factors such as the Iraq War and anti-Americanism, Obama Administration cut defense spending and announced that American troops in Iraq would completely withdraw from Iraq by December 2011. In order to prevent a potential power vacuum in the Basra Gulf and overall the Middle East, countries in the region were supported by the US with large amounts of arms supplies within the framework of bilateral alliance.

In the meantime, two realities, the transformation of Iraq's domestic politics and the Arab Spring, began to challenge the US policy towards the Middle East. Iraq was already a problem since American troops failed to leave behind a stable Iraq. Additionally, Nouri El Maliki's sectarian policies starting in 2010 began to shake the feeble political balance in the country. Maliki, while disengaging Sunni Arabs from the political landscape on the one hand, deteriorated relations with the Kurds on the other, with disagreements on oil revenues and disputed territories. An additional cost of these disputes for Maliki was his lost of support from some Shia groups, since they were not comfortable with his policies.

Iraq's security problems existed before Maliki era as well; however, Maliki's polarizing policies made these problems persistent. For instance, in 2013, before ISIS was able to control any territory, an average of 800 people was dying monthly due to IED attacks. It can be argued that the first challenge to overcome standing in front of a consensus in Iraq was Maliki administration and its practices. However, despite the deteriorated situation in the country, the US kept its low profile, did not oppose Maliki and even maintained reluctantly its support for him. This US policy played a major role in deepening the crisis in Iraq and increased country's vulnerability.

2. Arab Spring, Obama's Red Lines and Syria

In the first phases of the regional transformation that began with the Arab Spring, Obama administration was hesitant to declare a clear position. Tunisian and Egyptian governments were changed with the movements that began late 2010. Six months later, on 19 May 2011, Obama announced that the US was supporting the transformation movements in the region, and he went on to state that regime changes with military intervention were difficult and costly, referring to Iraq.¹ In this context, the administration was declaring that the US will not take part in regime changes by military intervention, keeping in mind experiences from Afghanistan and Iraq. The low profile American policy, which was similar to an undeclared Nixon doctrine after the Vietnam syndrome, was obvious during the military operation against Qaddafi's forces in Libya. Thus, Obama Administration did not play a pioneering role and just provided limited tactical assistance in the operation against Qaddafi, which came to be called 'leading from behind' strategy.²

Due to the fast pace of the transformation, Obama Administration's policy towards the Middle East was not questioned by either domestic or international public opinion during the first phases of the Arab Spring. However, the Syrian civil war that began in March 2011 caused a reaction and questioning of Obama's policies towards the region; thus Obama was pushed to take a new stance, though reluctant-

ly. In this context, when the civilian casualties were around 2000, Obama, for the first time, on August 2011, declared that Assad should leave his post; however, this declaration remained at rhetorical level. The biggest expectation of the US allies in the region and Syrian opposition forces clashing with Assad's army was a US-led coalition to stop civilian massacre by the regime forces or at least military and logistical support for the opposition forces. However, Obama administration's support remained limited to intelligence assistance and non-lethal aid to the opposition.

On 21 August 2012, when the civilian casualties were above 20.000 and international call for an 'humanitarian intervention' was increasing, Obama declared that his red line for a military intervention was the use of chemical weapons by the regime.³ In other words, Obama declared that his administration would not intervene in the civilian massacre by conventional weapons, by saying the red line would be the use of chemical weapons. Although there were allegations that the red line was crossed several times, the Guta attack that took place on 23 August 2013 was an obvious break of the red line. After this chemical attack it was thought that an American intervention against Assad regime was inevitable. While it was publicly debated whether the intervention will aim the fall of the regime or just take away the chemical attack capability, Syrian regime signed the Chemical Weapons Convention and agreed to give away its chemical weapons. This new maneuver made Obama administration change its mind. By that date, the death toll in the country had reached over 100.000, according to the UN.

3. Increasing Radicalization, ISIS and the US

Two cases in the 2000s led to the formation of radical organizations and their recruiting capabilities in the world and specifically in the Middle East. In the case of Iraq, the American invasion in 2003 and American military presence in the country until December 2011 attracted the infiltration by many foreign fighters, who used to have fighting experience from Afghanistan, Bosnia or Chechnya. The diminishing role of the Sunni Arab identity and exclusion of Sunni

Arabs from political landscape increased local participation into the radical organizations. After noticing this problem, the US tried to reintegrate Sunni groups into the political system, gained support from local tribes, and thus, effectively limited the radical movements' capabilities. However, Maliki's policies after the withdrawal of American troops excluded the Sunni groups from the political system. This situation led to Sunni tribes' participation into and support for the radical movements. Moreover, other Sunni tribes that did not participate in the radical movements chose not to combat against these groups because of Maliki's sectarian policies.

In the case of the situation in Syria, there is a positive correlation between the length of the civil war and effectiveness of the radical movements. At the onset of the war, the anticipated number of foreign fighters was in the hundreds. Among these fighters, the majority were from the countries that experienced transformation with the Arab Spring, namely Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, whereas only a limited number of foreign fighters were related to Al-Qaida or had a similar ideology. Furthermore, in the beginning, the main goal of many foreign fighters was Assad regime's collapse, since these people came to Syria to bring about the change that they experienced in their countries. Thus, during the first phases of the war, the opposition forces were fighting against the regime and cooperating with each other from time to time, rather than fighting one another.

The internal problems pertaining to the opposition groups, such as insufficient military aid from outside, the Assad regime's consistent policies, and increasing number Al-Qaida minded people in the country, turned the situation in favor of radical groups in the conflict. In this context, it should be underlined that while the moderate opposition forces could not get enough logistical support, radical organizations were being supported both financially and logistically. This situation got even more complex with the regime's deliberate policies to divide the opposition, by supporting the more radical elements. Radical movements, with their high financial means and weapons capability, did not

have difficulties in gaining control over some segments of territory, which was facilitated by the regime's inactivity as well.

Assad regime deliberately went after the Free Syrian Army instead of radical movements and ended up making it easy for the radical movements to gain territories. The moderate opposition tried to struggle with limited ammunition captured from the regime forces and international aid, fighting both the regime forces and the radical movements. Therefore, with the prolonging war, the number of foreign fighters in the country increased and due to the lack of any major gains by the moderate opposition, the local recruitment by radical organizations accelerated. Among these organizations, ISIS became prominent with its fighting capabilities.

In this context, the strengthening of radical movements was not a development that could not be predicted. Furthermore, with this prediction, even, it could have been prevented as well. If Maliki's sectarian policies pushing the Sunnis out of the system have been prevented, ISIS in Iraq could have faced a serious opposition from Sunni groups in Iraq at the first place. Furthermore, if the moderate opposition in Syria had been supported sufficiently, and sanctions against Assad had been applied in time, the recruitment by ISIS could have stayed at lower levels and it could have been extremely difficult for it to gain territorial control. However, Obama administration, during the process of increasing radicalization, did not engage with the political realities in conformity with its overall 'leading from behind' strategy in the region. This engagement does not imply a military intervention in Iraq or Syria; on the contrary, there were numerous options other than a direct military intervention. If these options had been applied, ISIS was not going to be a grave challenge today, with its immense territorial control.

4. The Background of Strategy against ISIS

Despite its origins in Iraq, ISIS made its significant gains in Syria and with its Mosul offensive in June 2014, it took charge of a greater area in Syria and Iraq. In the first phases, ISIS territorial gains in Syria, its offensives against moder-

ate forces and its massacres did not get enough attention from the international public opinion. After the ISIS offensive in Iraq, its massacres against ethnic groups, and video footages of beheadings caused a reaction from the world, and pushed Obama administration to take action. Additionally, instability in Iraq under Maliki administration brought the country to the edge of partition with ISIS offensive. In response to this crisis, the US withdrew its support for Maliki administration and supported new prime minister's election process, in order to reintegrate the Kurds and the Sunnis into the system. In this context, three months after the elections, Fouad Massoum was elected as the new president and the government was established five months after the elections following intense bargains in September 2014.

On the other hand, after ISIS threat for Iraq appeared on the horizon, the US initially sent 300 advisors to Iraq. Then, starting from 8 August 2014, American Air Forces began to strike the ISIS targets in order to stop its offensive and support groups fighting ISIS. Rather than being part of a comprehensive strategy, these air strikes were tactical moves aimed to help Kurdish and Shia groups fight ISIS on the ground, since Obama administration did not want to lead militarily the solution of the ISIS problem. The U.S. reluctance for leading the struggle, even after sending an additional 500 advisors to Iraq, was obvious with his announcement on 28 August 2014, where he stated that "We don't have a strategy yet." Obama announced his strategy against ISIS on September 10, 2014. Before announcing this strategy, Obama supported the government formation process in Iraq, established a core coalition against ISIS with 10 countries in Wales during NATO Summit, and met with Arab allies in the Middle East in order to get their support against ISIS.

At this point, three factors could be mentioned for pushing Obama to declare a strategy against ISIS. First of all, Obama's statement on not having a strategy caused a huge reaction both from domestic and international audience. Secondly, with its fragile structure, Iraq was quite far away from solving this problem on its own, and the worst case scenario of a partition was getting

more and more serious. Thirdly, the cost of 250 thousand civilian casualties in Syria was taken as an acceptable risk by the US; however, ISIS's gaining of strength and the chances of its capability to stage attacks in the West were getting more serious. Especially the latter two factors played a decisive role in Obama's decision to declare a comprehensive strategy.

5. Main Pillars of Obama's ISIS Strategy

Obama declared his strategy against ISIS through a TV speech on September 10, 2014. Before declaring the strategy, Obama referred to his fight against Al Qaida during his presidency, the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq, and the planned withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan by the end of this year. In other words, he stated that he fought against Al Qaida with a smaller budget and with less US troops on the ground. In the speech, Obama stated the objective was 'to degrade, and ultimately destroy' ISIS through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.⁴ In the statement, he laid out a four pillar strategy:

- a. Systematic campaign of airstrikes against ISIS targets.
- b. Increased support to forces fighting ISIS on the ground.
- c. Continuing to draw on substantial counterterrorism capabilities to prevent ISIS attacks.
- d. Continuing to provide humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians who have been displaced by ISIS.

Beginning with the first pillar, before declaring the strategy, the US began conducting air strikes on 8 August, and until 10 September the total number of air strikes was 154, including 77 air strikes around Mosul Dam.⁵ However, these attacks took place in Iraq, and now Obama was declaring that air strikes could take place in Syria as well.

Regarding the second pillar, Obama emphasized that US land forces would not take part in the fight, and the US would not engage in a new ter-

ritorial campaign in Iraq. Additionally, he stated that Iraqi Army and Kurdish forces would be supported in terms of training, intelligence, and logistics; and in order to organize these efforts, American advisors would be stationed in Iraq. Regarding the Syrian part of the struggle, Obama declared that the US would not rely on Syrian regime; instead he would continue the military assistance to the Syrian opposition and called on the Congress to give additional powers and resources to train and equip these fighters.

In the third pillar, Obama stated that the US would work closely with allies, redouble efforts to cut ISIS' financial support, strengthen intelligence, and counter ISIS ideology. Mentioning the issue of foreign fighters, Obama pointed out the importance of preventing the flow of foreign fighters into and out of the Middle East.

Fourthly, Obama stated that the US would continue to provide humanitarian support to the Sunni, Shia, Christian groups and other minorities. Within this framework, he went on to say that the struggle against ISIS, which he called as a cancer, would not be a short term effort and it would take time.

6. The Formation of anti-ISIS Coalition

Before declaring the strategy against ISIS, Obama initiated a core coalition in NATO with countries including the US, the UK, France, Germany, Turkey, Italy, Denmark, Poland, Canada and Australia. Secretary of State John Kerry, who was in the Middle East prior to the declaration of the strategy in order to get support from the regional countries, continued his trip after the declaration as well.

A meeting that took place in Jeddah on 12 September was one of the decisive steps in forming the coalition against ISIS. In the meeting, which the US, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE, Kuwait, and Oman participated, participants reached a consensus on the fight against ISIS. After the meeting, ten Arab countries signed a declaration on preventing the flow of foreign fighters to ISIS, and cutting its financial gains, and standing against its ideology.⁶

Another significant step of the anti-ISIS coalition was a conference called “Peace and Security in Iraq” that took place in Paris on 15 September. 26 countries attended the conference, as well as representatives from the European Union, the Arab League, and the United Nations. In the declaration after the conference, while there was not any reference to ISIS activities in Syria, the participants agreed to support Iraq politically and militarily against the ISIS threat.⁷

The United States continues to look for support against ISIS within the United Nations as well. In this context, Obama declared that he would lead a Security Council meeting to convince international public to join the fight against ISIS. Furthermore, it is expected that there would be intense negotiations in order to strengthen the coalition against ISIS at the opening of the United Nations General Assembly this year.

7. Analyzing US Strategy against ISIS in the Context of Iraq

The United States’ ISIS strategy is a turning point for Iraq and the struggle against ISIS. The ISIS offensive that started in June 2014 shattered the balance of power in Iraq, paving way for radical changes. The ISIS control in Mosul, Salahaddin, Diyala, Anbar, Baghdad and the environs of Kirkuk deepened the rift in the already unstable Iraqi politics. Ethnic and sectarian confrontations, beside political confrontations, have come to the forefront. The resurgence of the Shiite militias with the support of the government and the establishment of new groups triggered the sectarian polarization. At this stage, Iraq sought regional and international support as the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Iraqi central government and the local administrative authorities proved ineffective in the struggle against ISIS. Thus, as ISIS moved closer to Arbil, the administrative center of the KRG, and the Peshmarga retreated in failure, the United States, after Iraq’s plea for help, carried out air strikes against ISIS and severed its mobility in the country. However, the power of ISIS in Iraq has not yet been destroyed.

a. Carrying out air strikes against ISIS targets

The U.S. considers enlarging the scope of the air strikes, which forms the basis of its ISIS strategy. The countries, which will join the core coalition under the leadership of the U.S., are expected to support the air strikes. Yet immediately after the Paris conference, France started aerial reconnaissance flights in Iraq, and Norway promised to provide military aid. Even though the U.S. declared that it will not undertake a land operation and its forces will not stay in Iraq as combatant force, Barack Obama stated on September 17 that some countries were willing to support Iraq with their land forces. As of the current situation, the U.S. has carried out more than 170 air strikes against ISIS targets and received reactions that it has hit civilian areas, and Haider al Abadi, the Iraqi Prime Minister, has stated that there would be no aerial or artillery strikes against civilian areas, even if the presence of ISIS militants are confirmed in that place.

This policy is a limiting factor for air strikes. Systematic air strikes are going to hinder the mobilization of the ISIS militants. However, ISIS, beside its checkpoints, controls the living places and takes residence among the people. If the air strikes will be conducted out of the living spaces, ISIS will move towards the center of towns and villages. This is going to have two results. If ISIS is contained within the residential areas, its oppression toward the people might increase. However it will have a reduced space for maneuver since there will be a land operation against ISIS. At this point, local support for the anti-ISIS coalition in the Sunni-populated areas is particularly important. Precise information from local sources to the Iraqi security forces and the armed groups against ISIS might have a defining effect on their struggle. Therefore, the integration of the Sunnis into the political process and their share in the government would be an important variable.

b. Supporting the forces on the ground fighting against ISIS

According to the ISIS plan of the U.S., the forces, which fight against ISIS, will be provided with training, intelligence and equipment. Arms and

military equipment that are to be provided to the groups, which fight against ISIS, are particularly important. However, it brings many threats and risks with itself. As it is well known, many countries including the U.S., Britain, France and Germany, provide arms and military equipment to Iraq. Some of the aid is headed to the Iraqi central government, while some other portions are provided to the KRG, under Baghdad's scrutiny. However, Baghdad has no control and authority over the weapons sent to the KRG. According to the treaty between Arbil and Baghdad, the weapons aid to the KRG will only be declared to Baghdad, and Baghdad will have no control over these weapons. Therefore, it would not be wrong to suggest that the Peshmerga has been recognized as a separate entity from the Iraqi security forces, and acquired international legitimacy.

As of the current situation, even though the KRG and the Iraqi central government fight together against the common foe, if the ISIS threat gets weakened or abolished, the contested issues between the KRG and the Iraqi central government will once again come to the forefront. There is a risk of conflict between Baghdad and Arbil, considering the independence rhetoric of the KRG. In such a situation, the sides are going to use the weapons that they received as weapons aid. Therefore, the risk of armed conflict is being escalated through former and current weapons aid.

Another important issue in the U.S. ISIS strategy is the reorganizing of Iraq's defense forces and enabling the Sunnis to take back the control of their own areas. The reintegration of the Sunnis to the state mechanisms will hinder the support towards ISIS, while military aid to the local groups might reignite the armed conflict among the militia forces. Yet the fact that the struggle against ISIS evoked sectarian tensions creates a risk for armed conflict. The emergence and success of groups such as the Badr Brigades, Asaib Ehlül Hak, Peace Brigades, Ketaib Hizbullah and Muhtar Army, which received the government's support in the fight against ISIS, shows that Iraq once again experiences fragmentation due to militant groups.

If the Sunnis resort to militia groups as well, local conflict risks will rise and the power of the Iraqi central government will weaken. These are the marks of the U.S. strategy in Iraq between 2006 and 2010. One of the main factors for the U.S. success in dealing with Al-Qaeda in Iraq is the *Sahwa (Awakening) Councils*, which was established by the Sunni tribes and supported by the U.S. The *Sahwa* forces played a great role and supported the efforts for driving al-Qaeda out of the Sunni regions. However, between 2006 and 2010, the U.S. has increased its military presence in Iraq, hence become the main driving force behind the fight against al-Qaeda. As of the current situation, the U.S. is not a combatant side and has no control over the local militia, therefore the risk for an armed conflict is greater. Besides, another factor that needs to be well considered is the chance that the military equipment support which is sent to the local forces will end up in the hands of ISIS or other terrorist organizations, as was the case during the ISIS offensive in Mosul in June 2014. If terrorist organizations acquire the military equipment aid, the fighting will be more complicated and acts of violence will increase.

c. Utilizing the anti-terror capacity in order to prevent ISIS attacks

In the U.S. strategy against ISIS, the coordination of the coalition members' intelligence sharing and the real time intelligence are very important elements. However, the critical issue concerns strengthening the local intelligence. It is also important to detect and prevent the direct or indirect communication channels of ISIS, in order to fight against the finances of ISIS. It involves determining and restraining the tribes and groups, which are supporting ISIS. It is also important to note that the U.S. should seek the support of regional and global powers such as Russia and Iran, besides the coalition members, in the fight against ISIS. Considering its influence in Iraq, Iran may contribute a great deal to the strategy against ISIS. In other respects, Turkey, who put its reservations in the U.S. ISIS strategy, is an important country for achieving success against ISIS, so its priorities must be taken into consideration.

d. Continuing the humanitarian assistance to the persons displaced by ISIS attacks

According to the U.N. data, approximately 1.8 million people have been displaced in Iraq due to ISIS attacks since the beginning of 2014.⁸ It is uncertain as to in what condition these people will find their homes even if ISIS is destroyed. That is so because ISIS looted and destroyed homes, public buildings and government offices in the cities that it captured. If ISIS is destroyed or weakened, most of these displaced persons are highly likely to return to their homes. Therefore, it is important to prepare long term humanitarian assistance plans for the displaced persons, who suffer from ISIS's terrorist attacks, besides addressing their daily needs.

In short, although the new ISIS strategy of U.S. is outlined, it has a lot of gaps to be filled in the context of Iraq. First of all, it is very important to achieve political stability and form the government on strong basis in Iraq. Still, it is a major shortcoming in the government's fight against ISIS that there has been no appointment to the Defense and Interior Ministries. It is a serious handicap that there are no Defense and Interior Ministers in Iraq, where security is the greatest problem. Thus, the first strategic step for the fight against ISIS is the political stability and national consensus in Iraq.

8. Analyzing US Strategy against ISIS in the Context of Syria

The U.S. ISIS strategy has a lot of weak points in the context of Syria. These are the lack of concern for the fact that ISIS's organization is nested within civilian settlements, the weakness of the forces that would conduct land operation in Syria, and the difficulties about severing ISIS's finances and recruiting. However, its biggest weakness is its lack of projections for ending the chaos in Syria and integrating the masses to the system.

The Islamic State of Iraq, the al Qaeda associate, which achieved significant power in 2005 and 2006, was defeated in 2011. The Syrian civil war was the factor that enabled it to regain its

power. The group, which merged with the other factions in Syria that it supported and renamed itself ISIS, became the most powerful faction in North Syria as of the last quarter of 2013, among other opposition groups. The most important factor in the rise of ISIS is that its strategic goal was not the defeat of the Assad regime, but the establishment of a caliphate in the territories encompassing Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Jordan. Therefore, it fought not only against the regime but also against all groups that denied its authority, namely the Syrian opposition and Kurdish militia. The opposition might have lost more fighters and equipment to ISIS than the amount it lost to the regime forces. ISIS's territory in Syria consists of its conquests from the opposition forces. Therefore, the Assad regime paved the way for ISIS and pursued a non-engagement policy towards it, while occasionally providing support. The opposition controlled territories were relentlessly and indiscriminately bombarded, while Raqqa, which is controlled by ISIS, was spared a bombardment by the regime for a long time. ISIS reinforced its power base in Syria as a result of factors such as successful battle tactics, devoted warriors, organizational cohesion, strong leadership and battle experience.

ISIS is controlling the territory starting from the north of Aleppo, Raqqa, the south of Haseqe and Deir ez Zor province. It has a presence in Latakia and Idlib, though it is not active there. Its control starts in the east of Azaz in the province of Aleppo. From here, it extends towards the border with Iraq, while in some parts it is shared with various groups. The province of Raqqa, including the city center, belongs to the group. Ayn al Arab (Kobani) is under the control of YPG. In the northern axis, the ISIS control ends at Ras al Ain (Serikaniye) in the province of Haseqe. YPG controls the territory beyond this point. However in the south of Haseqe and in the most of the Deir ez Zor province, ISIS is the most powerful among the other groups. It controls the Syrian side of the border gates Akçakale and Karkamış, on the Turkey-Syria border. It also controls the border gates Yarubiye and Al Qaim on the Iraqi border. ISIS also controls the oil reserves in Raqqa and Deir ez Zor. It has the control of two hydroelectric power plants in the

Syrian portion of the Euphrates River. It seeks to expand its territory in Syria by utilizing the advantages of its Iraq offensive. It captured some territory in the province of Aleppo near the border with Turkey. The surroundings of Azaz have fallen to ISIS. If Azaz, which is on the main supply route of the Syrian opposition, falls to ISIS, the balance of power in the rural Aleppo will shift in its favor. Besides, ISIS besieged Ayn al Arab (Kobane), which is under the control of YPG and seeks to move towards its center.

This is the general setting, in which the U.S. declared its plan for struggle against ISIS. The U.S. believes that it needs to fight against the ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. Obama announced his goals for the assault targets in Syria after the air strikes towards the ISIS targets in Iraq. The evaluation of the U.S. four-stage ISIS plan in the context of Syria is as follows:

a. Conducting air strikes against ISIS targets

There are four problems about the efforts for weakening ISIS through air strikes. First, ISIS does not have clear military goals, unlike regular armies. Its battle tactics are focused on bombarding its target with long range artillery and invading it with high mobility vehicles. The most important element in this tactic is the human power and capability.

Second, the air strikes in Iraq are conducted with the authorization of the central government. This is not the case in Syria. The Syrian government announced that the air strikes need to be conducted in coordination with Syria or the unauthorized U.S. airplanes will be shot down. Obama responded by saying that "if there is an attack, it will be easier to bomb Syria than ISIS." Thus, there are two difficulties regarding the air strikes. First, there is a low possibility for Syria and the U.S. to have a confrontation. However, it is likely that Syria will avoid anything that endangers the U.S. Second, the coalition forces will be deprived from the assistance such as the airspace usage and local espionage that the central government could provide.

The third problem is that it is impossible to dominate an area without a land operation. ISIS

has mostly established dominance among the people. For example in Raqqa, the ISIS control is not limited to military dominance but includes an administrative dimension that encompasses the offices of mayor and municipality, domestic security, education and many aspects of life. Besides, ISIS forces are not confined to military barracks, but rather are organized as cells in houses. Another important point, which should not be overlooked, is that ISIS enjoys some public support. Therefore the question is how to make a distinction between the people and ISIS.

The fourth problem is the certainty of civilian casualties resulting from air strikes. As seen in Afghanistan, this situation might cause criticism and questioning of the fight against ISIS in both Syria and the international public. More importantly, this method may radicalize the Syrian civilians and move them closer to ISIS. As a result, without a land operation, the struggle against ISIS has a low chance of success. The U.S. advocates supporting the local forces as a land force against ISIS. However, this is another problematic issue, as it will be seen in the next section.

b. Supporting the forces on the ground that fight against ISIS

This issue is perhaps the weakest element in the strategy against ISIS in Syria. The coalition forces have relatively reliable associates with fighting capacities in Iraq. Even though after the capture of Mosul, the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga were defeated, these forces cannot be compared to the Syrian opposition in terms of the soldier count, organization and firepower. In Iraq, the coalition will have reliable local partners, when devoted Shiite militia, and local Sunni tribes, which were successful against the Iraqi Al-Qa-eda in the past, join forces with the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga.

In Syria, there is no force on the ground, which will carry out a sweeping operation after the air strikes. The U.S. declared that the "moderate opposition" will be its local associate. In fact, supporting "moderate opposition" against Assad and ISIS is a method that has been in consideration for a long time. The U.S. supported

the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which it regards as a moderate opposition, since the beginning of the civil war. However, as of the current situation, the FSA is the weakest link in the civil war.

Nevertheless, the new strategy has two different aspects. First, the FSA will receive heavy weapons that include anti-air defense capability, and air strikes will pave the way for the FSA's advance. In the north of Syria, there are four powers that are poised to fill the vacuum that will arise after ISIS's retreat. The first is al-Nusra front, the second is the Islamic Front, the third is the Kurdish Militia YPG and the fourth is the FSA.

A short time ago, the FSA, Islamic Front and YPG established a joint operations center. It was called "Burkan el Firat". The West regards YPG as "a secular force that fights against radical Islamists". In contrast, the U.S. does not recognize al-Nusra front, the al Qaeda associate in Syria, and Ahrar ash Sham within the Islamic Front.

Lastly, there are two problems related to a land operation. First, there is a large gap between ISIS and other groups in terms of fighter count, controlled territories, resources owned, and firepower. Second, the U.S.-promoted alliance between these groups is founded on weak grounds. They have no common ground other than being threatened by ISIS and it is difficult for them to carry on a permanent and effective cooperation.

President Obama seeks to acquire authorization from the Congress for an additional budget to support the Syrian opposition. There has been some assistance before; however, some assistance that was delivered to the FSA ended up in the hands of ISIS, which strengthened it rather than forming a balance. Therefore the reliability of this method is questioned. There are three reasons why the weapons delivered to the FSA were captured by ISIS. First, some groups within the FSA joined ISIS. Second, ISIS acquired the weapons as spoils after its military victory against the FSA. Third, as the FSA's fighting will weakened, the weapons were sold to ISIS. Therefore, if the past experiences occur

again, the assistance to the FSA might end up strengthening ISIS.

c. Utilizing the anti-terror capacity in order to prevent ISIS attacks

The financial power behind ISIS is unknown. The most popular claim on this issue is that the Gulf wealth supports ISIS. It is known that the Gulf wealth supported militant Salafist groups in the Middle East, including Afghanistan and Pakistan for a long time. It would not be a surprise that ISIS received some of the money. However, the Gulf States support Salafist groups such as Ahrar ash Sham and Islamic army, which are dependent on themselves. They even regard the latest ISIS advance as a threat. That is because some ISIS fighters hail from the Gulf countries. The Gulf States are concerned that these people return to their countries and undermine stability. That is why Saudi Arabia has included ISIS in the terrorist groups list and developed some precautions in the beginning of 2014.

Therefore, even if ISIS has received some support from the Gulf, it is misleading that these states are totally backing the group. The Gulf wealth that ISIS receives flows through foundations, clergy, and independent businessmen. Therefore, the characteristics of the relationship between the Gulf States and ISIS are unclear. However, the main problem is that ISIS has achieved resources that provide funds for carrying on its war without dependence on external financial assistance.

ISIS controls some of the border gates in Syria-Turkey, Syria-Iraq and Iraq-Jordan borders. It also has the control of the oil reserves in Raqqa and Deir ez Zor in Syria. It acquired "spoils of war" after its capture of Mosul and advance towards Baghdad. It controls water resources and some dams in Syria and Iraq. The group captured a great amount of firepower, heavy weapons and tanks after its skirmishes with the Syrian opposition and the Iraqi army. Besides, ISIS established its permanent authority in Raqqa and acts like a proper state. It collects tribute from the people, which it calls tax. It has no difficulties finding new recruits. Therefore, cutting

its foreign support may not result in weakening ISIS's economic capabilities.

The first measure that needs to be taken for the transition of foreign fighters to Syria is the prevention of them in their own countries or sharing information with neighboring states about those people, who are likely to go to Syria. The fact that ISIS has a lot of European fighters intensified security concerns of the Western countries. Threat perceptions have risen after a French national carried out the Jewish Museum attack in Brussels, after fighting for ISIS in Syria. Lately, there is intelligence cooperation with the countries of origin and Turkey. As a result of the cooperation with France and other European countries, more than 6,000 people are banned from entering Turkey and 1,000 people were captured and deported. However, it should not be forgotten that the absolute control over the flat border line of 910 kilometers is impossible. Thus, even the U.S., despite all its technological capabilities, is unable to prevent the illegal immigrants on its border with Mexico.

d. Continuing the humanitarian assistance to the persons displaced by ISIS attacks

The U.S. fight against ISIS may add up new humanitarian problems. First of all, since ISIS militants live alongside the civilians, the civilian areas may be bombed. Therefore, there will be new mass immigration waves. There are thus efforts for establishing a buffer zone in a portion of the Turkey-Syria border. The buffer zone is an imperative measure for Turkey, which houses approximately 1.5 million Syrians and deals with increasing social and economic problems. But this means that there will be a safe zone for people that flee the fighting, and Turkey will be able to address social, economic and security problems related to immigrants out of its border. Moreover, the buffer zone will enable Turkey to reach the inner zones for humanitarian assistance. The struggle against ISIS has to have social, political and economic aspects as well as military dimension. Yet, the sole reason for the

rise of ISIS is not its firepower. The oppressive and exclusionist policies by the governments of Iraq and Syria paved the way for the rise of ISIS as well. Otherwise, it is not possible to provide an explanation for ISIS's military victories against regular armies with its small fighting force. Therefore, it is imperative to destroy the social base that ISIS depends on.

What kind of a solution for ISIS in Syria?

The reality about the Syrian civil war is that neither the regime can suppress the opposition, nor the opposition is able to overthrow the regime. Therefore, the deadlock will go on as soon as there is no input to the current equation. The regime thinks that it has gained power in the latest period and will be able to defeat the opposition in military terms, if it is able to buy some more time. It shows that the regime considers the political solution as a means to buy time rather than a strategic goal. The approach for a political solution focused on putting pressure through supporting the opposition and convincing the regime for negotiations. However, this is not the case, because of the opposition's organizational problems and the unfulfilled promises of support. This is the reason why now there is no local group on the ground, which can balance the regime. Therefore, the regime needs to be convinced for political solution through relaying powerful messages or concrete military measures. Adopting non-engagement in the Syrian civil war for the reason that "Islamist shall not gain power" resulted in the rise of radicals on the ground. The fight against ISIS in Syria is possible by providing a permanent and extensive framework for peace in Syria, which prioritizes the red lines of all the sides in Syria. Unless all social groups and regional actors in Syria are satisfied, the current strategy against ISIS will result in tactical success; however, ISIS and similar groups will go on finding breeding ground for their activities since their root causes are not properly addressed.

Conclusion

The outline of Obama's ISIS strategy is clear; however there are gaps about the strategy's details. Addressing these gaps is directly related to the developments in regional and local politics. It is understood from the details of Obama's strategy that no immediate result is expected and the strategy is focused on long term results. In other words, the long term continuity of the struggle against ISIS seeks to provide flexibility and the U.S. seeks to extend the coalition against ISIS.

The U.S. wants to lessen its burden by forming an extensive coalition against ISIS and sharing responsibility with other countries. Under the influence of its negative experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. keeps in mind the risk of failure and seeks to increase the responsibility of the coalition members; hence willing to decrease the potential political, military and economic costs that may fall upon itself. Yet, Obama's ISIS strategy and international and regional meeting on the struggle against ISIS show that the U.S. does not want to commit the same mistake again.

Other than its effects on Iraq and Syria, the strategy for the fight against ISIS has two problems. First, the regional support is not fully secured. Second, the focus of the fight against ISIS is on military operations. These two problems might hinder the success of the strategy. For the first problem, the issue is Turkey's limited participation involving humanitarian assistance and intelligence support and Iran's exclusion, which will weaken the U.S. and the coalition in the regional struggle against ISIS. Similarly, the cohesion of the coalition is challenged by the different approaches that the Gulf States adopt towards the fight against ISIS.

In other respects, the focus on military operations reveals a gap in the strategy. At this point, Turkey stresses the issue that military opera-

tions will not be successful and political solution process must be maintained in both Iraq and Syria. The integration of the Sunni Arabs of Iraq to the Iraqi politics is vital for the success of the struggle against ISIS. However, the future of the political process in Syria is not mentioned. Moreover, the buffer zone that is planned for Turkey-Syria border will provide advantages for the fight against ISIS and support the humanitarian assistance efforts of the strategy.

Endnotes

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