

Obama must find strategy to crush ISIS now, not ultimately

John McCain, Lindsey Graham, The Wall Street Journal

December 9, 2015 12:00AM

In his address on national television on Monday, US President Barack Obama insisted he had a strategy to destroy Islamic State. But what Americans see instead is an incremental, reactive, indirect approach that assumes time is on our side. It is not. This danger is growing nearer: from attacks in Paris and Beirut, to the bombing of a Russian airliner, to the Islamic State-inspired shooting in San Bernardino, California. What's needed is a strategy to destroy Islamic State — not “ultimately”, as the President said last year, but as quickly as possible.

During a recent visit to Iraq, we saw the damage coalition forces are inflicting on Islamic State. Recent operations to retake Sinjar and Ramadi, together with the daily blows of counter-terrorism operations, represent tactical progress. This is a testament to the able leadership of the civil-military teams in Baghdad and Irbil, the capital of Iraq's Kurdish region.

However, significant challenges remain. The Iraqi government is weak and beholden to Tehran. Iranian controlled-militias are among the strongest forces on the ground, and Tehran is seeking to replicate the Hezbollah model in southern Iraq. The training of Iraqi security forces has been slow, and the building of support for the Sunni tribal forces even slower. At the current pace, Islamic State will still control Mosul and Raqqa, the Syrian city the militants claim as their capital. Meanwhile, Islamic State is metastasising across the region, to Libya especially.

After more than a year of an indecisive military campaign, the US still does not have the initiative. The threat is growing and evolving faster than the administration's efforts to counter it. What's needed is a comprehensive civil-military strategy to destroy Islamic State quickly, while creating conditions that can prevent it, or a threat like it, from re-emerging. In short, America must not only win the war, but also prepare to win the peace. The US has repeatedly failed to do this, and cannot afford to yet again.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has said he does not want foreign ground combat forces to be introduced on a large scale. Neither do we. What we do want is additional US troops to perform discrete tasks: improve and accelerate the training of Iraqi forces, especially Sunni tribal fighters; embed with and advise Iraqi units closer to the fight; call in airstrikes from forward positions; and conduct counter-terrorism operations. This is likely to require two to three times as many forces as the US has in Iraq now.

Ultimately, America must seek to keep these forces in Iraq. If they leave again, the threat will return, and the US will have to intervene once more. The main obstacle, once Islamic State is destroyed, is Iran, which seeks to use Iraq as a base from which to project its malign influence. Iraqis must win the peace, but Americans have a major stake in their success, and a unique role to play in helping them. The only way to do so is to be present.

In Syria, there is no coherent strategy to destroy Islamic State or negotiate an end to the civil war, which is the only way to win a lasting peace. The administration's military and political efforts are misaligned. Diplomatically, the White House is seeking a political settlement that removes President Bashar al-Assad from power. But militarily, by only addressing Islamic State and not the regime's assault on Syrian people, the US is effectively acquiescing to the Russian, Iranian and Syrian forces that are fighting to keep Assad in power. This will lengthen the conflict, strengthen Islamic State and exacerbate the refugee crisis.

After the attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, the US cannot go on like this. A coherent strategy is necessary to destroy Islamic State and end the conflict as soon as possible. America must work with its coalition partners to establish and protect zones inside Syria where refugees can be safe; to deny

the Assad regime the use of its air power, especially its horrific barrel bombs; and to impose real costs on Russia if it continues to target moderate opposition groups.

Unlike in Iraq, there is a role for US ground combat forces in Syria. Indigenous fighters such as the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian Kurds have fought bravely against Islamic State. But the reality is that no ground force exists today that is both willing and able to retake Raqqa. Nor will one emerge on its own. So the US should lead an effort to assemble a multinational force, including up to 10,000 American troops, to clear and hold Raqqa and destroy Islamic State in Syria. Such a force could also help to keep the peace in a post-Assad Syria, as was done in Bosnia and Kosovo. Here, too, if the West wins the war and leaves, it should not be surprised if violence and extremism return.

Finally, the US needs to roll back Islamic State's regional expansion. This will require a greater forward presence of US military and intelligence teams that can map its networks and destroy them. At the same time, Islamic State's ability to spread is directly related to the collapse of political order. Unless America does more to help these countries make the transition to just and inclusive governments, Islamic State will find havens.

Obama is fond of invoking lessons from America's recent wars. The simplest and most important lesson, however, is the one he rarely mentions: Apocalyptic terrorists cannot be allowed to have sanctuary in ungoverned spaces, from which to plan attacks against the West. Over the past seven years, those conditions have grown across the Middle East and Africa. If these threats are not removed now, and quickly, no one should be surprised when America gets attacked again.

John McCain and Lindsey Graham are Republican US senators.
The Wall Street Journal