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The Plan to Defeat ISIS: Key Decisions and Considerations

Written Testimony by Ambassador (ret) James F. Jeffrey

Philip Solondz Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, Members of the Committee, thank you for having me here to discuss this national security issue of the upmost significance.

SUMMARY

The threats the Islamic State (ISIS) poses to our homeland and those of our allies and partners, its destabilizing role throughout the Middle East, and the recent success the U.S.-led coalition has had against it, all argue for an immediate, intense effort to destroy this terrorist scourge as our most urgent priority in the region. Published reports and Administration statements indicate the Trump Administration is fully behind this goal.

But while ISIS is the most urgent priority in the region, it is not the only, or even the most dangerous, one. Iranian expansionist activity, at times partnered with Russia, poses at least an equal security risk to the region and key U.S. interests: stability of regional partners, flow of hydrocarbons to the global economy, non-proliferation and counter-terrorism. Defeating ISIS, while worthy in itself, must be done in a manner to reinforce regional stability and U.S. interests.

Today I would like to discuss considerations related to both the defeat of ISIS itself, and possible ‘day after’ scenarios, stressing how the latter play into U.S. interests, and in turn depend on not only whether, but how, and with whom, we defeat ISIS.

In short, our plan to take Raqqa in Syria, the key remaining objective, should be done in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to, Turkey. After the Turkish constitutional referendum in early April Ankara should be willing, if it understands longer-term U.S. goals, to accept additional support for the Syrian Kurdish YPG in the Raqqa battle, assuming Turkish equities in Syria are supported. And if the United States desires a rapid victory over ISIS, it probably will have to commit more supporting forces, and possibly limited ground combat formations.

The destruction of the ISIS ‘state’ in Iraq and Syria, in the context of the Syrian civil war, Iran’s quest for hegemony, and Russian reengagement, will be a watershed in the Middle East equivalent to the U.S. march into Iraq, the Iranian revolution, and America’s regional intervention during the Yom Kippur conflict. Decisions taken over the coming year by the United States and others will shape the region for decades.

As U.S. vital regional interests are at stake in the post-ISIS scenario, the United States should chose its political-military strategy for the defeat of ISIS not only from a military but from a political standpoint—to advance a ‘day after’ scenario that keeps the United States in the region, maintain our new (YPG) and old (Turkish and Iraqi) relationships, push back Iranian ambitions and ‘manage’ an inevitable Russian presence.

THE ISIS BATTLE

As Graeme Wood has written in The Atlantic, the unique nature of ISIS is based on its status as a “Caliphate,” a statelet with a population, army, economy, and government, and a claim to the Caliphate tradition from Islam’s golden age. While ISIS has offshoots in ungoverned territory throughout the Muslim world, its unique nature and threat flows from its territory in Northwestern Iraq and Eastern Syria, centered on Mosul and the ISIS capital, Raqqa. Taking those cities will destroy the ISIS “state” and defeat ISIS in its current form and dramatically reduce its threat to U.S. interests.

The U.S. led coalition’s campaign against these two cities, while coordinated, is militarily and politically differentiated. My focus in both, while it will touch on military issues, will be the political considerations underlying military decisions and goals.

IRAQ: By most accounts, the battle for West Mosul will take several months. The coalition-Iraqi game plan for that campaign is well-developed and succeeding. Once successful, the only major ISIS presence in Iraq will be Hawijah, near Kirkuk, presumably an easy target. As the Mosul victory nears, ground maneuvers, especially by the Kurdish Peshmerga and the largely Shia Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), will require careful U.S. engagement to avoid clashes and to advance longer-term U.S. interests in Iraq.

SYRIA: By all accounts the United States is preparing for a final push against Raqqa. But given the tenacity of ISIS defense of other cities, capturing Raqqa will be a major undertaking. The United States has options to generate forces for such a victory, but each has significant political-military implications.

YPG-led operation: This was the preferred solution of the Obama Administration but, according to press accounts, has been

challenged by the Trump Administration. It foresees an offensive organized around the Syrian Democratic Force (SDF), led by the Syrian Kurdish YPG, but with a minority of Sunni Arabs. But the SDF has only limited crew-served, and little or no heavy, weapons. Urban warfare typically requires integrated tank-engineer-infantry forces supported by fires. To develop such a combined arms capability the United States would have to provide heavy weapons.

Turkey is opposed to this given the YPG's relationship with the Turkish Kurdish insurgent organization, the PKK, engaged in a bitter internal conflict with Ankara. Turkey is not only opposed to the United States arming the YPG, but also to the YPG moving into Sunni Arab areas, particularly those occupying Turkey's entire Syrian border. It is difficult to see how Washington could pursue anti-ISIS operations in Syria without Turkish bases and other cooperation. In addition, according to a draft report by the Washington Institute, all four major Arab tribes around Raqqa are to one or another degree at odds with the Kurds, raising a question of 'the day after' in Raqqa if the city was liberated by Kurds, or Arab elements under their control. Finally, a largely YPG victory over ISIS in Raqqa and the expansion of the YPG over a large swath of Arab territory, as now seen in the city of Manbic, has troubling implications for regional arrangements post-ISIS, including possible YPG cooperation with Iran and Assad.

Turkish Alliance: The Turks have offered to either lead or support a coalition assault on Raqqa using their Free Syrian Army (FSA), largely Arab allies, along with the Turkish armor-infantry taskforce in northern Syria. According to reporting in the Washington Post February 2, the Turks are not seen as capable of carrying out this mission themselves, and their stalled anti-ISIS offensive in al Bab strengthens such an assessment. While the same Washington Institute report suggests that the Raqqa tribes would be less antagonistic to a Turkish presence, an expanded Turkish military role could be problematic for both the YPG and the Assad-Iran-Russia coalition.

Combination: A joint effort on two fronts by the Turks/FSA and YPG/SDF would put more military pressure on ISIS and potentially calm Turkey's concerns about the YPG. Such a joint operation would be easier for the United States politically than throwing its lot with a single YPG or Turkish-led offensive, but would still require delicate diplomacy. Turkey would need assurances on weapons to the YPG, and how far YPG forces would move into Arab territory. However, while the YPG's links with the PKK make it a threat to Turkey, part of President Erdogan's hostility to the PKK and thus YPG stems from his political alliance to win an early April Constitutional Amendment referendum. Once that is behind him, he may be more flexible with the PKK and YPG, as he was before Summer 2015. The YPG, in turn, would require assurances that its core Kurdish territory would not be pressured by Turkey.

Russian-Syrian-Iranian Support: The military capabilities of this coalition are not apparent. Russian airpower routinely targets civilian populations and lacks precision weapons. It is hard to see a military advantage it brings which could not be met by a minor increase in Coalition aircraft. Likewise, Syrian and Iranian surrogate infantry capabilities are not impressive, and employing them in Sunni Arab areas is risky. Moreover, unless it is clear that the United States, with whatever above option it chooses, cannot take Raqqa, then the benefits of recruiting Russia, Iran and Assad must be balanced against their 'sharing' a victory that the United States could obtain without them. On the other hand, acceding to a token Russian role against Raqqa, or more intensive intelligence sharing and air tasking coordination with Moscow, could complement efforts described below aimed at Iran.

U.S. and NATO forces: One reason for recent success against ISIS has been a loosening of restrictions, and personnel/equipment ceilings, on U.S. force 'enablers' (Joint Terminal Attack

Coordinators—JTAC), advisory teams, attack helicopters, artillery, and the rules of engagement they operate under. Reportedly a further loosening is under review in DoD, and that makes sense. A more decisive step would be the introduction of limited U.S. and other NATO elite ground combat forces in direct combat. In particular a relatively small (several thousand strong) U.S. armor contingent could be a decisive force multiplier with risk of casualties limited. From a political standpoint, a more robust U.S. ground presence would reassure the Turks, YPG, and residents of Raqqa about U.S. commitment and potentially increase their receptivity to U.S. initiatives.

THE DAY AFTER

Once Mosul and Raqqa have been liberated, and the Caliphate destroyed, the United States should engage diplomatically and militarily to ensure that outcomes in both Syria and Iraq are compatible with U.S. interests, especially the containment of Iran. This task has both ‘immediate’ and ‘long term’ aspects.

The immediate goals are relief to liberated populations and protection of civilians against ill-disciplined victorious factions. Generally this effort has been successful in Iraq and on a smaller scale Syria, so should not require extensive new U.S. involvement. But governance and security decisions taken immediately will have an impact on the attitudes of the population towards their liberators, and if ill-considered could encourage a return of ISIS or al Qaeda. This is obviously of interest to the United States.

The longer-term outcomes of the defeat of ISIS are of great import to the United States, as noted in the summary. Apart from preventing a new descent into chaos or extremist control, the U.S. interest for this “Syria-Iraq theater” is to preserve Iraqi unity and independence, uphold the Astana Syrian cease fire, limit Iranian influence in Iraq, react to Russia’s regional expansion, and reconcile Turkey and the YPG.

To avoid any Syrian-Iranian effort to break the Astana ceasefire and achieve a total victory over the opposition, the United States should support the Turkish zone in Northern Syria, the Rojava and Afrin YPG enclaves, and a 'free zone' around Raqqa, including with some temporary U.S. military training and liaison detachments inside Syria. Reconciliation between Turkey and the YPG (and potentially the PKK) would reinforce these efforts. The option of arming the FSA must stay on the table. Such conditions offer the best chance of splitting Russia off from Iran and Syria.

The U.S. military should press for a 'stay-behind' train and liaison presence of several thousand troops in Iraq, supporting both Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi regular military forces. This likely will require direct communications and a mix of 'carrots and sticks' with the Iranians, and with an inevitable risk of Iran lashing out at U.S. forces there.

The above steps represent an initial political-military post-conflict 'shaping of the environment' to balance the various regional actors, restore partners' credibility in U.S. military success and commitments, and buy time for a more comprehensive policy towards the region.