

DOES ISIS REALLY SUFFER IMPORTANT SETBACKS IN IRAQ AND SYRIA?

WHAT IS NEXT IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE JIHADI GROUP?

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After building its reputation on an “*aura of momentum and invincibility*”, in the last months, the jihadi group self-proclaimed the Islamic State (most common known as ISIS) was confronted with important military setbacks in Iraq and with a clear stalemate in the key Syrian Kurdish border city Kobani. If at the beginning of the year, the entire world was shocked by the incredible advance of the Islamist militants and their capacity of gaining control and governing important territories both in Iraq (Mosul) and in Syria, nowadays ISIS is facing important setbacks mainly because of its loss of oil revenue, the sustained attacks on its military capabilities, the strong support offered by the US-led coalition to the Iraqi security forces and to the Peshmerga troops and also because it is forced to wage the fight on multiple fronts. As Fysal Itani, a resident fellow at the Atlantic Council underlined, although ISIS has run an extremely effective psychological campaign of intimidating its rivals and attracting support, now it is very difficult to maintain this reputation and only time will tell if it will be able not only to militarily protect its territories but also maintain the support of the population it rules.

Following the NATO Summit in Wales, the leaders of the international community decided to form a coalition of nations to fight against the jihadi militants of ISIS, a coalition led by the US. Barack Obama stated clearly the main objective: the coalition will degrade and destroy ISIS through a comprehensive and sustained strategy of counter-terrorism. Within this approach we have witnessed a systematic campaign of airstrikes against ISIS targets both in Iraq and Syria, support (training and assistance) offered for the Iraqi security forces, joint efforts on stopping the foreign fighters from travelling into Middle East and important quantities of humanitarian aid offered for the innocent civilians that have fled the massacres and horrors of the jihadi fundamentalist reign. The EU condemned unreservedly the attacks, atrocities, killings and abuses of human rights perpetrated by ISIS as well as by the Assad regime in Syria, considering that a Syrian led political transition and inclusive governance in Iraq are crucial to sustainable peace and stability in the region.

Kobani, a key Kurdish town at the Syrian border has been under attack since mid-September, when Sunni muslim extremists seized a series of villages and important parts of the town and most of the Kurdish residents fled to Turkey, because they feared that their home will quickly fall under ISIS`s rule of terror. Although Turkey initially opposed any military implication with the US-led coalition from fear of ISIS`s military retaliation and the possible strengthen of PKK and only resumed its help to important humanitarian aid, in the end decided to allow Peshmerga forces to cross its territory in order to help Kurdish fighters in Kobani. The fate of Kobani became an important test for the success of the coalition in the fight against ISIS and it soon was pointed out by the concentrated airstrikes and the arrival of 150 armed Iraqi peshmerga that ISIS`s military offensive can be stalled. The US also air-dropped weapons and other supplies for the Kurdish fighters in Syria, this being the first time since the beginning of the country`s civil war.

What is important to underline is that ISIS has to operate on multiple fronts and becomes more and more obvious that the prolonged military confrontation for Kobani is distracting the terrorist organization from other areas of strategic importance both in Syria (Aleppo) and Iraq where the jihadi group is facing important military opposition from the Iraqi government forces, peshmerga and the Shiite militias. Although ISIS launched two months ago a surprisingly strong assault on Kobani, which is near the Turkish border, since then it has been caught in a costly battle that does not seem to be in their favour. After weeks of intense fighting against the Kurdish forces, ISIS only controls about 40% of the Kurdish town although its initial expectations were that the town will easily fall in their hands. Syrian and Kurdish activists stated that ISIS

has lost approximately 600 fighters and that now it is confronted with problems related to its personnel, accepting within its ranks inexperienced fighters to reinforce Kobani. The US-led airstrikes who targeted ISIS in Kobani have brought heavy damage upon the militant Islamic group, weakening its ability to continue an effective siege of this key border town. But what is most important to underline in this setback of ISIS in Kobane is that if in Iraq, they had a years-long presence and they managed to efficiently confront the Iraqi army severely demoralized and who strongly questioned the Iraqi government's credibility, in the Kurdish Syrian town of Kobani, the jihadi militants encountered a surprising resilience from the Kurdish fighters, who were extremely motivated. The deployment of armed Iraqi Kurdish forces in Kobani has definitely helped defending the city, making an important difference on the ground. The front lines have become more defined, the strategy of Kurdish forces is now more organized and coherent, the advance of ISIS has been stopped, but the coalition is still perfectly aware that the danger still persists. The setback for ISIS in Kobani may indeed represent an important vulnerability of the jihadi militant group, but the balance of power is still tenuous. If ISIS will withdraw from Kobani, then that will be a real indicator that the march of victory of the jihadi group has finally hit its highest point. The aura of invincibility that has been built up by ISIS after rapidly conquering Mosul has been shattered by the inability to obtain control over such a small town as Kobani.

Despite ISIS's numerous attempts of capturing Iraq's biggest oil refinery outside the town of Beiji, in the north of Baghdad, the Iraqi military troops managed to protect it and also they managed to recapture important towns near the Syrian border, underlining once again that ISIS is not able to wage effective war on multiple fronts, a fact that may be in the favour of the international coalition. Also the targeting by US and Saudi Arabia of the modular oil refineries in eastern Syria were an important effort to diminish ISIS's sources of financing, such refineries being able to produce about 2 million \$ a day in oil revenue.

Another important aspect that may emphasize ISIS's relative setback in its quest of conquering more and more territories for its Islamic Caliphate is that even in the Sunni areas it controls, it has to contend with dissent and the massacre of more than 200 Sunni tribesmen as a revenge for collaborating with the Iraqi military forces may reveal the fact that ISIS views important parts of the people it leads as a threat. Although it can be said that there may be in the future significant Sunni uprisings against the horror ISIS imposes in the areas it controls, the fact that many Sunni tribes do not have close relations with the Iraqi government and their requests for military aid were not answered, it is unlikely that Iraq's Sunnis can be motivated to fight against ISIS. On the other side, the conflict between the Shiite militias and the Sunni communities still exists in Iraq and the militias that support Iraq's government efforts against ISIS are using this as a pretext of destroying Sunni communities and thus contributing to exacerbating the existing sectarian divisions and to a clear refusal of Sunnis to join the international coalition against the jihadi group.

Important to emphasize is also that US-led airstrikes are not enough to defeat the jihadi Islamic group which will definitely try to expand its control and enhance the territory of what it calls its Caliphate. Iraq must make valuable efforts in order to reform and improve its army and security forces's performance in order to have a true chance of diminishing and degrading this terrorist group who tries to redraw the borders of the Middle East. Barack Obama's decision to send more troops to Iraq (up to 1 500), thus doubling the US forces on the ground in order to advise and train the Iraqi forces in their fight against ISIS may prove to be an efficient step, but it will have to be extremely carefully implemented so that the Sunnis in Iraq won't be more antagonized with the American presence in their country. Obama's decision expands the scope of the US campaign and some of its forces will go in the western Anbar province of Iraq, for the first time to act as advisers and the US military will establish sites to train the Iraqi army brigades and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, also establishing „*advise and assist*” operations centres. The memory of the military American intervention in Iraq and the manner in which ex Iraqi prime-minister Nouri Al-Maliki promoted highly sectarian policies, clearly disadvantaging the Sunni community have left this community with a strong aversion regarding the presence of foreign military troops in their country. It can be thus asserted that support for ISIS did not grow out of sympathy but because of the hatred the Sunni community had against the central Iraqi government and many of them joined forces with ISIS just because it opposed al Maliki's government. Not arming tribal Sunni fighters will continue to leave anti-ISIS tribes reluctant to actively

counter the jihadi group, and thus what will enhance the chances of degrading ISIS will be a cooperation between Iraq's Shiite-led government and the Sunni tribesmen. But such a scenario has to be in line with the existing policy and will be possible only through a strong cooperation with Iraqi central government. The sectarian divisions existent in Iraq must be taken into account, because the Iraqi security forces are not welcome in majority Sunni areas especially in Anbar, where the Sunni population resents former Iraqi prime minister Nuri al Maliki's Shiite majority government sectarian policies. The Sunni tribal revolt prompted the entrance of ISIS in Falluja and Ramadi, a place where the US military forces have encountered strong opposition from Sunni insurgents during their occupation of Irak.

In Syria a growing alarm signal was raised for the Obama Administration that the strategy it has for fighting ISIS in Syria is not going to be successful if Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city will fall either in the hands of ISIS or in the hands of Assad's regime forces. Aleppo is mainly controlled by Assad's military and the remaining areas are controlled by moderate rebels who are now preparing for the worst, fearing a potential siege from the governmental forces. US attacks on ISIS targets in other parts of Syria allowed the regime's forces to press their offensive in Aleppo and they may siege the town, with disastrous consequences for the people who live there. Although a few months ago, the fighters from three rebel alliances have successfully managed to force out ISIS to the periphery of Aleppo while holding off the regime army, the threat of encirclement from Assad's military forces is terrible and can develop a multipolar fight in Syria. If Aleppo is going to fall in the hands of the Syrian regime, then the moderate rebels, the potential partners of the West in stabilizing the state and the region, are at risk of being obliterated, as French foreign minister Laurent Fabius clearly stated. Thus, it is important to see how the international coalition will adapt its strategy to include the protection of Aleppo, which can blow the viability of rebel factions fighting against the Syrian regime, increase the danger of another humanitarian crisis and ISIS is also expected to escalate its own campaign of obtaining control of rebel-held territories at the Turkish border. The rebel factions are not only facing a potential siege by the Syrian forces but they also have to fight against ISIS, they are poorly equipped, there are intestine fightings and also major competition among the main actors that support them: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, US.

Although the ultimate aim of the Obama administration and its partners is to degrade and destroy the jihadi group which tries by force and terror to carve out a proto-state in the heart of the Middle East, wanting to erase the border between Iraq and Syria, this will be extremely hard to achieve. US air strikes in Syria are making anti-regime fighters to forge alliances with ISIS and there are reports of fighters from the Free Syrian Army who have defected to the jihadi group who has gained control over important territories in Syria. Also the view of the locals who wonder why US coalition members never came in their rescue from Assad's machine guns and oppression, but are running now a strong campaign against ISIS for occupying some territories is extremely relevant in illustrating the obstacles faced by the US-led coalition. Important Syrian opposition groups and fighters who although at the beginning opposed ISIS for confiscating their areas, now are at truce with them and some analysts warn that eventually many Syrian regime opposants will join the jihadi group out of disappointment with the US administration and its lack of support for the suffering of the Syrian people. The EU believes that the instability in Syria caused by Assad regime's brutal war against its own people, massive human rights violations and systematic obstruction of democratic reforms have allowed ISIS to flourish and as a consequence the Assad regime cannot be a partner in the fight against the jihadi group. The US does not want to extend its mandate of fighting ISIS in Syria so that it should include Assad's removal from power and that is the main problematic aspect in its diplomatic relations with Ankara. The Turkish Government has stated since the beginning of the military actions of the coalition against ISIS that it will allow the use of its military air base in Incirlik for attacks against jihadi targets only if regime change in Syria will also be a priority. Ankara has proposed for months the establishment of a no-fly zone, a secure zone and a buffer zone in Syria that could help ease the humanitarian crisis and help the moderate Syrian opposition regroup and continue its fight against the regime. Important Syrian rebel groups have criticised Barack Obama's actions and accused him of a de facto alliance with Bashar al Assad, whose brutality led to the terrible civil war that destroyed Syria in the last four years. Will the moderate rebel forces in Syria be able to create a viable alliance with US and the international coalition in order to fight ISIS or will they continue to prioritize the removal of Assad from power? It is clear that Assad derives some benefits from

Washington's accent on ISIS, as Chuck Hegel said, and it is extremely vital that the White House and its allies clarify their intentions with regard to the Syrian regime. If the US changes its policy regarding Syria and it will finally allow the creation of a no-fly zone and secure zone in Syria then that will determine Turkey to open its Incirlik military air base so that the coalition forces could launch attacks on ISIS's targets both in Iraq and Syria. Although the international coalition led by the US must continue to follow its ultimate purposes of degrading and destroying ISIS, they must do that in a balanced manner, careful not to be perceived as consolidating the Damascus regime and also not to exacerbate the Syrian civil war. Postponing a comprehensive strategy to tackle ISIS that takes into consideration the Assad regime cannot be a solution anymore.

ISIS is facing the *'unhappy experience of losing the element of surprise'* as Lauren Squires, a researcher with the Institute for the Study of War stated and it is true that coalition airstrikes were very effective in degrading ISIS's capabilities, military hardware, slowing their advance, limiting their freedom to move and targeting their main financial assets (oil refineries). Also the recapturing of Baiji, an important oil city north of Baghdad, seized by ISIS in June threatens a central passage corridor of the ISIS caliphate, can isolate ISIS's military areas of operation and affect its governing capacity in Mosul. But airstrikes alone are not enough! What is required now are ground troops and that would amount to an expansion in the training and advising mission, because ISIS understands how to implement operational patience and it is still an extremely flexible organization, having the ability of exploiting any weaknesses it encounters. Thus, although army units backed by Shia militias have achieved some important results in fighting ISIS, the jihadi fundamentalist group is exposing a surprising ability to defend itself under pressure. ISIS will continue to try through future attacks and fighting in Iraq and Syria to prove that it still has momentum. I do not expect that ISIS will be completely defeated by more Iraqi and Kurdish forces and by limited coalition airstrikes or even with the help of foreign military troops. But I do think that ISIS's ability of easy conquering territories and impose its reign has diminished and I also believe that on a medium-long term ISIS will confront itself with important challenges of holding onto the current territorial gains and to prove its ability to provide state-like services in the areas it controls, thus a difficulty ensuring a sufficient level of popular acceptance. The consent of the population it controls is one of the most important assets of ISIS and the fear they instil in the Sunni communities through terror is per se the biggest vulnerability of the group. The coalition will have to arm the Sunni community although the Iraqi government is not willing and they have to be able to present a more attractive alternative so that people will turn against ISIS. EU reiterates its firm commitment to Iraq's unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity and it welcomes the coalition's efforts, including the decision by individual Member States to provide military material and expertise to Iraq, to reduce ISIS capacity to attack civilian populations believing that the solution to the crisis can only be political. The coalition has to try to reach out to all components of Iraqi society and to pursue, without delay, a process of national reconciliation, so that all communities could become united in the fight against ISIS and there has to be a reinforcing of Iraqi's security and judicial system on non-sectarian lines, in order to enhance good governance and rule of law. Empowering Sunni community, promoting equal rights and representation may reduce significantly the sectarian divisions and may determine even more people in joining the fight against the barbaric ISIS.

William McCants, fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, says ISIS - in declaring a caliphate and the creation of the Islamic State - has much to lose when it has to retreat. *"Take away the state's territory and expose its brutality and rapaciousness, and you discredit the standard bearer of the idea,"* he writes in Foreign Affairs. *"You may even discredit the idea itself."* The terror ISIS inflicts upon the people who differ in their beliefs regarding the just authority of the Caliphate will in the future create a more unified opposition against the Islamic jihadi group and its dualistic world view and if the strategy of the international coalition led by the US will extend its scope of degrading ISIS to include a more comprehensive view regarding the Assad regime, then it may attract more popular support, especially from the Syrian forces and may contribute in the end to reinstating a certain type of stability in this region of the Middle East.