

Commentary & Reply

On "Fighting the 'Islamic State' The Case for US Ground Forces"

Dakota L. Wood

This commentary is in response to David E. Johnson's article "Fighting the 'Islamic State' The Case for US Ground Forces" published in the Spring 2015 issue of Parameters (vol. 45, no. 1).

I am writing to commend Dr. David Johnson on his superb essay "Fighting the Islamic State: The Case for Ground Forces." He asks the key question "does our strategy fit the war we are in," clearly explains why it does not, and then cogently makes the case why more should be done. At the heart of this issue is, or should be, the central objective of accomplishing war aims that lead to achieving national political objectives. If destruction of the Islamic State is indeed an objective, as has been stated by the White House, whether for its own value or as a necessary step to securing Iraq, then competent ground forces of sufficient capacity to accomplish the job must be committed. Anything less simply undermines the credibility of policies issued by the White House and supported by Congress, wastes resources, and incentivizes the very groups and behaviors our policies and efforts are meant to combat.

Making the case for a minimalist approach, as many do, based on the argument others should "step up" to see to their own interests misses the point. US interests should be considered first, and securing those interests should not be critically dependent on the competence of others. Conditions in Iraq and Syria affecting US interests have evolved well beyond the problems of insurgency and terrorism. The real issues are America's role in global affairs, and the perceptions of friends, allies, competitors, and enemies about America's competence and reliability. In simpler terms, the advances by the Islamic State in Iraq and the ripple effect they have in the Middle East, raises the question whether America is still a force to be reckoned with.

Withdrawing completely from Iraq would save America the cost of the blood and treasure needed to change conditions on the ground in a substantial way. But other costs would be incurred, costs measured in loss of an ability to influence outcomes, the tragic loss of life being reported on a daily basis, the entrenchment of an odious regime, and loss of reputation the United States has previously enjoyed in standing up to such brutality. Remaining minimally involved risks all the previous plus the added costs in treasure and (potentially) casualties, with little likelihood of success. Islamic State forces, and actors from Iran to Hezbollah, can then earn propaganda points by gaining victories even with the United States "involved." Increased US commitment, along the lines proposed by Johnson, though it incurs risks, offers an opportunity for the United States to reassert itself, change the conditions enabling and incentivizing Iran and others in the Middle East, and to send clear

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messages to Russia, China, North Korea, and a host of friends/allies that the United States remains the preeminent power and must be accounted for in their calculations.

Per Johnson's call for strategic clarity, there is an urgent need for such signals well beyond our immediate interests in Iraq. Like a matryoshka doll, individual incidents, though small in their local context, actually nest within larger matters that ultimately have profound, strategic importance. We may not care whether the Islamic State or the Iraqi government controls some small border town, but placed in the larger context of regional stability, competitions for power and influence, and the deterrent value of perceived power, our interest and involvement in the battle between the Islamic State and the Iraqi government have far-reaching consequences. Thus, our involvement should be assessed within this larger strategic context.

In light of the above and his call for action, I am curious whether the author has considered the vexing question: "What then?" Even if the United States found the will to commit ground forces for the purpose of "removing the Islamic State from Iraq," what strategic end would it serve? Does the author presume the United States would unilaterally withdraw—satisfied with "mission accomplished" vis-à-vis the Islamic State ejected from Iraq; continue operations into Syria to destroy the Islamic State as a viable conventional military force; and/or perhaps sustain some sort of military presence in Iraq for some larger purpose? Destroying the Islamic State has value if only to rid the region, and the world, of its evil. But absent some larger purpose, it will be a hard sell to convince anyone in Washington or the American public at large that it is worth hazarding the lives of their sons and daughters to revisit a place that does not seem to worry much about its own long-term interests.

On "Fighting the 'Islamic State' The Case for US Ground Forces"

Michael Spangler

I was dismayed by David Johnson's article on "Fighting the Islamic State." Because the article contains strong implications for US foreign policy, it deserves a serious counterargument to the commitment of US ground forces to Iraq (and Syria).

Initially, it is hard to refute David Johnson's argument that the United States needs to commit US ground forces to defeat and not merely degrade ISIS. Johnson makes a clear case for ISIS to be considered a proto-state that will continue to exploit serious deficiencies in the Iraqi Security Forces stemming from their lack of basic "enablers" such as air, artillery, intelligence and logistics support. In addition, ISIS benefits from its blitzkrieg seizure of several Iraqi and Syrian cities and

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their financial resources, largely due to the military leadership of many of Saddam Hussein's former senior officers. The US failure to keep intact much of Saddam's civilian and military bureaucracy as well as later abandoning the largely Sunni "Sons of Iraq" partnership which formed in 2006-2007 directly undermined the US strategic intent for Iraq and now Syria. Finally, Johnson reminds us Iran-backed Shia militias and the Kurdish Peshmerga are hardly disinterested security providers but constitute often virulently anti-Arab Sunni elements in the fight. Thus, Johnson makes his case for US ground forces as the "last man standing" to defeat ISIS.

Despite the cogency of Johnson's argument, I believe the commitment of US ground forces would be a strategic mistake for three main reasons. First, a US intervention would likely attract greater numbers of recruits and money to the ISIS cause. The United States remains highly unpopular in many Muslim countries for a number of reasons, but its entry at this time would only strengthen ISIS's claim that it is the vanguard advancing the Islamist cause against non-believers and crusaders. Secondly, a US ground force commitment, as we all know, must be sized and financed. How many ground forces are required in Iraq and Syria and for how long? Estimates range from 150,000 to 300,000 troops, depending on the model used, costing about 150 to 300 billion dollars per year. This posture is simply politically and financially unsustainable for the United States over the long term. Finally, the commitment of US ground forces is likely to fall into another "dependency" trap where host-nation forces cannot stand on their own feet because we assume they can never be adequately recruited, trained, and equipped. Hence the United States would be trapped in what Dexter Filkins calls the "forever war."

As military commentaries, books, and articles proliferate on the ISIS fight, I am concerned so few of them discuss the shortfalls and mistakes the United States made in providing initial assistance and advice to the Iraqi Security Forces. I encourage a dialogue to discuss what the United States and its allies did, both right and wrong, and how it can improve on such efforts in the future. It is only through more effective train-and-equip programs standing up more socially inclusive, locally based, and resilient security forces that the United States can truly help "defeat" extremist proto-states such as ISIS.

Of course, the starting point of this security assistance dialogue must include the formulation of clear strategic goals for the purpose of identifying and developing capabilities to support those goals. In other words, what is the strategic effect (both political changes and security-related partnerships) pursued by the United States in the region? Without this consideration, the United States may find itself elevating a supporting strategy as a strategic goal, just as it did during the Vietnam conflict.

The Author Replies

David E. Johnson

Let me begin by thanking Colonel Wood and Dr. Spangler for their thoughtful replies to my commentary. Indeed, they have strengthened my argument for greater US involvement against the Islamic State by placing it in a larger strategic context.

Both ask the obvious question if my call for action is heeded: “What then?”

The answer is: In the aftermath of the destruction of the Islamic State, the United States should maintain its training efforts to create Iraqi Security Forces competent to suppress the resurgence of the Islamic State, without the future need for US ground forces.

My reasoning is as follows. I believe the administration needs to put the fight against the Islamic State in the broader context of what its existence means for the region, our allies, and—most importantly—our own security interests. In my view, Iraq is a secondary issue—it is where the Islamic State has chosen to establish a large part of its so-called caliphate. It is a cancer in the region that is spreading. The Islamic State is also beyond the capacity of the Iraqi Government and current US efforts to eradicate. Thus, the burden of defeating the Islamic State must be taken up by US ground forces.

Combined US and Iraqi forces faced a similar situation in the 2004 Second Battle of Fallujah and the 2008 Battle of Sadr City. In each case, terrorists had concentrated themselves in urban areas and created conditions that enabled their apparent destruction. In reality, the al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Shi’a militias were not eradicated, although many fighters were killed. The Islamic State, the successor to AQI, and the Shi’a militias have returned. The Shi’a militias are challenging the legitimacy of the Government of Iraq, while the Islamic State is a growing threat to the region and the broader world as it expands its proto-state and becomes a base for terrorist attacks, radicalization, and encourages lone wolf attackers world-wide.

Our current strategy reminds me of the sad story of Steve Jobs, Apple’s CEO. In October 2003, Jobs was diagnosed with a rare form of pancreatic cancer that could have been arrested if he had agreed to undergo immediate surgery and chemotherapy before the cancer could spread further. According to Walter Isaacson, Job’s biographer, “To the horror of his friends and wife, Jobs decided not to have surgery to remove the tumor, which was the only accepted medical approach.” Instead, he pursued homeopathic remedies he found on the internet and through personal contacts.

Jobs finally had surgery nine months after initial diagnosis. The cancer had spread to his liver; his doctors believed that if they had operated when the cancer was first detected, “they might have caught it before it spread.” After extended medical interventions, including a liver

transplant, Jobs died on October 5, 2011 at age 56, from complications from pancreatic cancer.

A friend of Jobs recalled that “He has that ability to ignore stuff that he doesn’t want to confront.” This situation is not unlike our current reluctance to introduce US ground forces into the fight against the Islamic State. The relevance of Steve Jobs’s ordeal to the question of “What then” may seem a bit strained, but I believe it is relevant. The rapid conquest of key areas of Iraq—and the totally ineffectual performance of the Iraqi Army—was a tremendous shock to the US security apparatus. But, what was to be done? As I outlined in my commentary, the United States, as did Steve Jobs, has tried everything it could to avoid the hard choice of life-saving surgery. In the case of the Islamic State, competent US ground forces are needed to eliminate its presence in Iraq before it spreads further. US policy-makers have avoided this difficult choice, even though the American people (57% according to a February 2015 *CBS News* poll) seem to be increasingly supportive of sending US ground forces to fight the Islamic State.

What would follow a US ground intervention is a reasonable question that must be answered. I believe competent US joint air-ground forces would present the Islamic State with an existential crisis. The advance of US ground forces would force the Islamic State fighters to react, much like they did in Fallujah and Sadr City, in ways that would make them visible and vulnerable to destruction by direct or indirect fires from ground or air systems. I also believe the Islamic State cannot cede large swaths of territory in Iraq and maintain its proto-state and appeal. It would have to send reinforcements from Syria to attempt to maintain its territory in Iraq, which would open these reinforcements to air and other attacks. As I wrote in my original essay, the Islamic State is not an insurgency, it is proto-state. Destroy the state, and there is no base for receiving recruits or radicalizing foreign would be jihadists. This would be, in my view, the ultimate and larger strategic purpose for the US ground intervention.

