



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on September 1, 2014

Airstrikes Alone Won't Defeat ISIS, Kerry Says

Airstrikes alone won't defeat this enemy," wrote Secretary of State John Kerry, describing the threat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria poses to the United States and the rest of the world.

In an August 29 [op-ed published in the New York Times](#), Kerry gave no indication that the Obama administration would reverse itself on the president's pledge to put no "boots on the ground" in Iraq. He called instead for a "much fuller response" from nations around the world to "support Iraqi forces and the moderate Syrian opposition, who are facing ISIS on the front lines. We need to disrupt and degrade ISIS' capabilities and counter its extremist message in the media," Kerry wrote. "And we need to strengthen our own defenses and cooperation in protecting our people."



The opposition in Syria, even the "moderate opposition," is fighting the Assad regime, which is also fighting ISIS. So we need the nations of the world to support forces fighting the Syrian army while it is fighting ISIS in order to defeat ISIS? And that's assuming that we can accurately discern the "moderate" from the "extremist" forces in the Syrian opposition in Iraq and support the one without strengthening the other. As Kerry said, it is "a polarized region and a complicated world."

Noting ISIS had its origins in al-Qaeda, Kerry said the latest terrorist threat, with its "nihilistic vision and genocidal agenda," is even "larger and better funded in this new incarnation, using pirated oil, kidnapping and extortion to finance operations in Syria and Iraq. They are equipped with sophisticated heavy weapons looted from the battlefield. They have already demonstrated the ability to seize and hold more territory than any other terrorist organization, in a strategic region that borders Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey and is perilously close to Israel." Citing success from airstrikes in northern Iraq, "providing space for Iraqi and Kurdish forces to go on the offensive," Kerry nonetheless said it will take more than airborne bombs to defeat ISIS.

In this battle, there is a role for almost every country. Some will provide military assistance, direct and indirect. Some will provide desperately needed humanitarian assistance for the millions who have been displaced and victimized across the region. Others will help restore not just shattered economies but broken trust among neighbors. This effort is underway in Iraq, where other countries have joined us in providing humanitarian aid, military assistance and support for an inclusive government.

That looks like a plan — the plan the United States and its coalition partners followed in the years 2003-2011. There was certainly plenty of humanitarian aid and "military assistance, direct and indirect." Many, if not all, of the "sophisticated heavy weapons" that ISIS "looted from the battlefield"



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were made in the USA after Americans in Iraq trained and equipped an Iraqi army that dropped its weapons and fled at the first confrontation with ISIS.

Other arms now being employed by ISIS may have been [supplied by the CIA](#) to insurgents (no doubt the “moderate” ones) fighting in Syria. There were millions of “displaced and victimized” people in Iraq before the rise of ISIS thanks largely to American bombs and their “collateral damage” and to the religious and tribal warfare let loose in the power vacuum created by the overthrow of the long-standing secular government of Saddam Hussein. And an “inclusive government” for Iraq was supposed to be the result of all the purple-thumbed elections held under the supervision of the U.S.-led coalition. All of that brought Iraq to the current crisis, which Kerry notes is worse than the one that preceded it. And what he describes as the solution looks an awful lot like more of what created this latest threat.

Senators John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) have weighed in with an [op-ed](#) of their own, calling for an all out effort to “mobilize America’s partners in a coordinated, multilateral effort” to “defeat ISIS, wherever it is.”

“Such a plan,” the senators wrote, “would seek to strengthen partners who are already resisting ISIS: the Kurdish pesh merga, Sunni tribes, moderate forces in Syria, and effective units of Iraq’s security forces. Our partners are the boots on the ground, and the United States should provide them directly with arms, intelligence and other military assistance.” While “our partners” would provide the “boots on the ground,” the senators do see a role for American special forces, which we may assume would not enter the fray barefoot.

“We should embed additional United States special forces and advisers with our partners on the ground — not to engage in combat, but to help our partners fight ISIS and direct airstrikes against it,” they wrote. “Regional allies should play a key role in this effort. No one is advocating unilateral invasion, occupation or nation building. This should be more like Afghanistan in 2001, where limited numbers of advisers helped local forces, with airstrikes and military aid, to rout an extremist army.”

But Afghanistan in 2001 led to Afghanistan in 2002 and 2003 and Americans fighting and dying in Afghanistan in every year up to the present. The “limited number of advisers” grew to a force of about 160,000, as “mission creep” led to mission gallop. And while McCain and Graham both enthusiastically supported President George W. Bush’s decision to invade and occupy Iraq in 2003, one might search in vain through their speeches and commentaries to find either of them calling for a withdrawal from Afghanistan and our nation building there after the local forces have supposedly managed to “rout an extremist army.”

Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson has called Syria “[a matter of homeland security](#),” McCain and Graham remind us. An intriguing aspect of the ISIS threat as described by the senators is that the jihadist organization has within its ranks “thousands of radicals holding Western passports, including some Americans. They require nothing more than a plane ticket to travel to United States cities.” That being the case, defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria wouldn’t necessarily stop them, unless we are to imagine we can capture or kill them all before they get their plane tickets — if they don’t already have them. They can make that trip to U.S. cities whether or not the Islamic State maintains a caliphate in Iraq and Syria or elsewhere in the Arab world. What territories did al-Qaeda hold when allegedly 19 of them, including 15 Saudis, came here and carried out the terrorist attacks of 9/11?

Security for the United States might be better served if the secretary of Homeland Security would concentrate more on securing America’s borders and less on attempting to make Syria a part of “the



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homeland.”

Finally, McCain and Graham reminded readers that they have “consistently advocated revising the Authorization for Use of Military Force that has provided congressional backing for counter-terrorism operations since September 2001. Now could be the right time to update this authorization in light of evolving terrorist threats like ISIS.” Were the senators to advocate declaring war on ISIS, they would be, not surprisingly, advocating another needless and costly U.S. war. But they would at least be on more solid constitutional ground.

But to approve another resolution authorizing the president carte blanche to commit American forces to fight terrorism whenever and wherever he finds it, and where he alone determines it a threat to American security, would be a cop out on the part of Congress and an abandonment of its constitutional power to declare war — not to pass that power off to the White House for a unilateral decision by the commander-in-chief.

When Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal gave birth to an imperial presidency, Republicans resisted the aggrandizement of executive power. In more recent times they seem to have become enamored of it. Harry Truman put a sign on his desk that said, “The buck stops here.” Congress might as well put a sign over the Capitol dome that reads, “The buck’s passed here.”



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