



# No Substitute For Seriousness In Iraq

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A recent weekend brought two very different dispatches from the front lines of the global war on terror. The first was a tale of tactical success; the second a narrative of strategic failure.

On May 16, a detachment of U.S. special operators carried out a daring nighttime raid against Islamic State militants in eastern Syria. In the process, they killed Abu Sayyaf, a high-level official responsible for overseeing much of the group's oil revenues in Syria.

But this good news was counterbalanced by a decidedly less favorable development, and on a much larger scale. Just a day after the Syrian raid, the Islamic State scored a major battlefield victory when it successfully seized control of Ramadi, the capital of Iraq's western Anbar province. It did so despite significant opposition from Iraq's military, and in spite of nearly 200 airstrikes carried out there by the United States in preceding days.

Washington and its allies, in other words, may be winning battles in the fight against the Islamic State. But they are now in danger of losing the war.

This might come as a surprise to most Americans, since the White House has consistently promoted a rosy narrative of the war effort against the terrorist group. As recently as two days before the fall of Ramadi, a top U.S. military official was telling reporters that the Islamic State was "on the defensive throughout Iraq and Syria," and merely "attempting to hold previous gains." That assessment now clearly needs to be revised, and not in our favor.

Where does Washington go from here? The White House has come under withering criticism for what is now widely seen as a bankrupt approach to Iraq. But in truth, a real comprehensive strategy against the Islamic State hasn't been attempted at all. Rather, the Obama administration has long pursued a policy of deliberate minimalism against the next great terrorist threat.

It has ruled out the large-scale deployment of ground forces to the Iraqi battlefield, opting instead for limited air operations in support of Iraqi troops. Simultaneously, it has mapped out five "lines of effort" designed to degrade and defeat the Islamic State. Yet on virtually all of these fronts, Washington isn't doing much at all.

American and allied efforts to put a crimp in the Islamic State's finances, for example, have only made a difference on the margins. Despite a major international drive to curb the group's illicit oil and antiquities trades, a recent assessment by the RAND Corp. concludes that the Islamic State is diversified enough economically to sustain itself - at least in the short run.

On other fronts, the White House has done even less. The United States has been slow to help train and arm anti-ISIS forces in Iraq and Syria, fearful of getting too deeply enmeshed in the Syrian civil war. Nor has it yet put the squeeze on NATO ally Turkey to adopt a more constructive counterterrorism role, despite the fact that an estimated 1,000 foreign fighters join the ranks of the Islamic State monthly - and most do so by transiting Turkish soil. Most significantly, official Washington hasn't done much of substance to counter the Islamic State's corrosive ideology, something that requires formulating - and then disseminating - a compelling counternarrative aimed at discrediting the group and dampening its global appeal.

Part of the administration's foot-dragging is doubtless political. For President Obama, who long has labeled Iraq the "wrong war" and expended enormous capital to bring the U.S. engagement there to a close, a forced return to the Iraqi battlefield is bound to represent a personal defeat. At least a measure of Washington's dithering has been informed by official hopes that neighboring Iran - with whom the White House believes it is on the verge of a historic diplomatic compromise - is ready and able to serve as its strategic proxy in rooting out the Islamic State.

The events of the past month have laid bare the bankruptcy of such half-measures. For policymakers in Washington, the Islamic State's recent advances should hammer home the need for a far more comprehensive war effort than the one being implemented currently. There is simply no substitute for seriousness.