# AFTER THE FIGHT IS BEFORE THE FIGHT – ONE YEAR ANTI-IS-CAMPAIGN

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**One year after the beginning of the international campaign to defeat the so-called Islamic State (IS), the group has expanded its territorial control, metastasised to form a number of offshoots across multiple regions and increased its perception as the „invincible Islamic State", despite intense air strikes by the multi-national alliance.**

### The failed Anti-IS-campaign

The strategy of the anti-IS coalition as articulated by US President Obama, speaks of „degrading and ultimately destroying" IS, however this is done without defining the desired final state, the strategic objectives and the required resources. The key elements of this campaign include:

- The deployment of US- and coalition-military advisers to train and equip local forces in Iraq and Syria and to provide air support to the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Kurdish Peshmerga

- Airstrikes in both Iraq and Syria against IS senior leaders, infrastructure, fighting positions, convoys, equipment storage as well as oil and gas facilities that provide the group with a source of revenue

- Information sharing with partners on border security and containment of the flow of foreign terrorist fighters into Syria and Iraq

- Multilateral cooperation to track and disrupt illicit financing of IS

- Diplomatic efforts to push Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to build a more inclusive central government that represents and serves all Iraqis – Shia, Sunni, and Kurds – and transfers more authority and resources to the provinces

- Discussions with key actors regarding a negotiated transition to a post-Assad government in Syria

- Efforts to discredit IS' narrative and counter its propaganda online

In practice, these efforts were basically only stating the commitment of the coalition. On the one side the anti-IS campaign suffered from being underfinanced, whilst on the other side the agreed points were not implemented into meaningful programmes and active measures. Further, the limited international military effectiveness became visible after IS seized areas in western Iraq under their

control. An additional example for the failure of the anti-IS campaign is the USD 500 million worth „Train & Equip" programme, through which 5,000 moderate Syrian rebels should have been armed by the US annually in fighting IS. Five months after the initiation of the programme only 5 out of 60 trained rebels are still actively fighting.

The international community was inactive for years, which contributed to the development of a conflict that escalated from a civil rebellion to a bloody civil war and a new hotspot for international terrorism. Each single regional conflict actor is following its own agenda: Turkey is fighting the Kurds, Iran is targeting the rebels, which are supported by Saudi Arabia, the US is solely focused on attacking IS and Russia is gaining reputation by being a counterpart to the West. There is only one beneficiary arising out of the fact that rivalling and allied parties are becoming fluid: Bashar al-Assad. Russia's suggestion to form a coalition of like-minded states in order to attack IS together with the Assad-regime is endorsing the assumption that the international parties' lowest common denominator is indeed fighting terrorism. Suggested measures, like the 'IS-free zone' by Turkey or the training and equipping of 'moderate' opposition fighters are simply combatting the symptoms and are leaving the cores of the conflict out of sight. Hence, a comprehensive approach is needed in order to fight IS sustainably and to counteract existing extremist tendencies. In this sense it is necessary to oppose IS on three levels: 1. breaking the state-like IS structures 2. combatting the IS terror organisation and 3. deconstructing the ideology of IS, in order to prevent a possible revival of other terror-organisations with similar motives.

**1. Breaking the state-like IS structures**

The IS slogan „maintain and expand" is suggesting that the maintenance of the caliphate is the central ambition. A possible loss of area and population control would undermine the legitimacy of IS as well as its claim to rule over the entire Muslim world. Hence, its biggest weakness lies in the long-term funding and provision of social and financial goods. Therefore IS needs to sustain its resources in order to prevent the collapse of its state-like structures. The international coalition, in alliance with the central actors Turkey, Iraq and the Kurdish regional government, should enforce measures to break the IS logistic and financial supply networks, through for instance fighting corruption. These networks are exercising significant influence over the military capacities as well as the salaries of IS-fighters.

An expansion of aimed airstrikes is hindering IS to take control over profitable oil fields. If its earnings from selling oil and plundering are declining, IS is forced to develop new ways of generating income through repressive actions – such as blackmail and taxation in occupied areas – which could lead to public resentment and possibly to the internal breakdown of the Islamic State.

**2. Combatting the IS terror organisation**

Even if the state-like structures of the Islamic State collapse, the group could still adapt their strategies and continue existing as a traditional terrorist organisation.

Through Obama's „Iraq First Strategy", military efforts to combat IS are currently more pronounced in Iraq than in Syria, especially because the coalition's ground allies – the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), the Shiite militias and the Kurdish Peshmerga – are able to take advantage of the airstrikes. Yet, the biggest weakness of the ISF counteroffensive can be ascribed to Iraq's non-inclusive army that is negatively perceived and unwelcome in the Sunni heartland. However, it takes time to set up and to re-build a professional Iraqi army. Due to sluggish mobilisation it has only been possible to train 7,000 soldiers out of the initially planned 24,000. In addition, the growing Iranian presence is feeding fears of further discrimination against the Sunni

population. For this reason, a comprehensive political-military plan is necessary in Iraq, to address the provision of power and resources at the provincial level as well as the establishment of a National Guard for the integration of Sunni tribal militias into the ISF. Given Iran's strong influence on the sustainable development of a multi-confessional Iraq, it is the international community's responsibility to convince Tehran that excluding the Sunni population from participation will only deepen the country's fragmentation and will further create fertile ground for IS.

The Syrian conflict is essentially a political one, and any initiative that fails to look for a political solution, is doomed to fail. It is a mistake to solely focus on the fight against IS. Rather, it is necessary to find and support a political alternative to the Assad regime since the IS has presented itself as the protector of all Sunnis. The goal in Syria, as well as in Iraq, is to have a national-unity government that can independently continue to tackle extremists on its soil. The West, as well as regional allies – including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar – would probably have no objections to this strategy. The expansion of an air campaign in Syria consequently requires coordinated action between the essential actors. The previous insistence of various countries' support to individual ideologically aligned rebel groups has affected their success at the front. The establishment of a coordinated coalition, where foreign governments specifically provide material and military support, and where participants can be held to account, could usher in a new military dynamic.

Moreover, it is crucial for the Turkey-based Syrian National Coalition (SNC), perceived as „alien" by the Syrian people, to move to Syrian soil to manifest and develop credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the population. This measure could counteract the extremist group's ability to fill an emerging vacuum after Assad's fall – a possibility particularly feared by the West. The establishment of safe zones, such as through local ceasefires,

would not only allow the SNC to collect first administrative experience on Syrian soil, but could also protect opposition fighters efficiently. Ultimately, the Assad regime will not agree to any negotiations, as long as it can stand its ground and persevere on the military fronts.

Another important measure is to support particularly affected neighbouring countries – especially Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. With 4 million refugees, these states are carrying most of the burden and require international assistance to prevent a so-called „spill-over".

## 3. Deconstructing the ideology of IS

Regardless of the long-term success of the anti-IS coalition and their defeat of IS as a terrorist organisation, the ideology of the group cannot be fought militarily. By bombing IS positions, while on-going airstrikes by the Syrian regime are ignored, the jihadist-conspiratorial worldview has gained more ground: „the battle of the West – joined by its allies, Shiite Iran, the Syrian regime and the apostate Arab rulers – against Islam!"

More than any other terrorist organisation, the IS has used social media to spread its propaganda, to radicalise, to recruit new followers and to gain new potential perpetrators in the West to conduct terrorist attacks. A more coordinated digital strategy is required, capable of binding important partners in the private sector (e.g. Google, YouTube, etc.) with NGOs. Measures that attempt to discredit the IS ideology „on and offline" and that try to expose their propaganda, should also include the dissemination of moderate voices within Islam and the integration of „reformed" Syrian fighters.

So far, the fight against IS has focused on the military defeat of the group and has neglected the causes to their emergence and success. The rise of IS is a symptom of the long-term marginalisation of the Sunnis and the resulting civil war, but it is not the single most important

threat. Without the reinstatement of stable state institutions, the political participation of all religious and ethnic minorities, and the attempt to find political, economic and social solutions by regional powers, even if IS gets defeated and collapses, other terrorist groups will emerge and will continue to pursue the mission to re-establish the caliphate.

## Findings and recommendations

- A rapprochement between the US and Russia in combatting IS should be tied to the condition of Assad's withdrawal. Assad has lost his legitimacy among the Syrian population and his stay would mean a continuation of fighting by numerous rebel groups whose single goal is to see Assad fall.

- Russia's military support for the Assad regime could also result in a reinforced support for the rebel groups by regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar. Besides, it encourages the radicalisation of Muslims and could evoke memories of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. To prevent an escalation, negotiations between all relevant actors to the conflict should be stepped up immediately.

- The nuclear agreement and the economic opening of Iran to the West should be used as an occasion to convince Iran to reconsider its support for Assad and to allow a political solution to settle the conflict.

- Despite the threat from IS to the West, the conflict in Syria and Iraq should not be reduced to the fight against terrorism. The main objective should be Assad's retreat and the establishment of an inclusive government that includes all religions and ethnic groups.

- The establishment of safe zones, would on the one hand offer protection to opposition fighters, and on the other hand – in preparation for a post-Assad era – lead to the strengthening of a credible alternative on Syrian soil. In this context, the efforts of the UN special envoy to Syria to establish local ceasefire zones, should be supported.

- A comprehensive political-military plan should be implemented for Iraq. It should include the establishment of a cross-community army, the devolution of authority and resources on provincial level, as well as the withdrawal of Iran and its influence in order to promote a multi-confessional Iraq.

- The international community is required to render economic and humanitarian support to neighbouring countries to prevent their destabilisation, particularly Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

- A more co-ordinated digital effort is needed, which should also involve IT companies specialised in internet-related services and NGOs, to counter IS propaganda and to prevent the radicalisation of citizens.

***Personal Data:***

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Note: This contribution exclusively represents the author's own opinion.