

How to Handle the ISIS Threat

After ISIS murdered a second American hostage freelance journalist Steven Sotloff pressure mounted on President Obama to react. But a contrary view is that ISIS doesn't threaten the U.S. homeland and regional powers could best defeat this brutal group, as Independent Institute's Ivan Eland suggests.

By Ivan Eland

Sometime back, the surprise invasion of northern Iraq by the vicious Islamist group Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) raised eyebrows in Washington policy-making circles and the American media. However, it took gruesome footage of the beheading of journalist James Foley to throw these foreign policy elites into hysteria.

There is no question that ISIS is one of the most brutal terrorist organizations in the world, but the real question is: How big of a threat is the group to U.S. security?

The answer is not very much unless the U.S. government makes it so. ISIS has some potential to turn into a threat to the American homeland if Uncle Sam again goes in like gangbusters and makes new enemies, as it already has in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia. Unfortunately, the U.S. tendency to see any foreign civil war or brutal group as a threat and be on a hair trigger to use military power has been in evidence with the limited U.S. airstrikes in Iraq against the group now being undertaken.

ISIS funds its operations, in part, by extorting ransom for hostages. In the case of Foley, the group had to forgo a potentially lucrative bounty to tragically and heinously kill an innocent American hostage to make a retaliatory political point. That graphic statement came in response to U.S. airstrikes to stop the group's progress in Iraq.

Yet ISIS is still a regional threat, not a threat to the U.S. homeland. But don't take my word for it, listen to the General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the President's top military adviser. Dempsey said that there is no sign that ISIS militants are engaged in "active plotting against the homeland."

He also said that if the group eventually does threaten the United States, he would not hesitate to recommend taking U.S. military action against the group in Syria, but reiterated that that is not the case now.

Dempsey's remarks were likely aimed at diffusing strident demands by the

Keystone (World) Cops – John McCain and Lindsey Graham – and other war(talking)heads demanding that the United States escalate the violence and bomb ISIS in Syria too.

The threat from ISIS's small force of 3,000 fighters has now been blunted and contained. The likelihood is nil that the Sunni group would get much popular support in any invasion of Shi'ite southern Iraq, and it is now getting more effective push back from the Kurdish pesh merga militias in northeastern Iraq.

The only reason the Sunni Arab tribes did not resist ISIS's reentry into Iraq – remember the group left Iraq as al-Qaeda in Iraq, which had been created as a response to George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq, because Sunni tribes threw them out owing to their excessive brutality – was that the U.S.-friendly Shi'ite government of Nouri al Maliki had been oppressing Sunnis.

Even more barbaric than its violent precursor al-Qaeda in Iraq, ISIS may be again evicted by the Iraqi Sunni tribes if the new Shi'ite-dominant government in Iraq treats Sunnis better than did the ousted al-Maliki autocracy or if, even better, Iraq were to be reconfigured into a loose confederation of autonomous regions in which each of the groups had self-rule.

Dempsey also cogently noted that U.S.-friendly countries in the region, such as Turkey, Jordan and Saudi Arabia would have an incentive to stop such a radical group. According to Dempsey, those regional friendlies could cooperate and squeeze ISIS "from multiple directions in order to initially disrupt and eventually defeat them. It has to happen with them, much less with us."

He did not mention that the less U.S.-friendly Shi'ite power in the region – Iran – would have an even bigger incentive to defeat the group and could even cooperate under the table with these regional rivals to get the job done.

So now that U.S. bombing in Iraq has blunted and contained the ISIS threat, instead of U.S. escalation to begin bombing the group in Syria, the best option is for the United States to de-escalate and turn the ultimate destruction of the group over to regional countries.

Dempsey did suggest one possibility that should be rejected: U.S. forces could provide more expanded advice and assistance to the Iraqi armed forces. To date, the United States has inserted only a small number of troops back on the ground in Iraq, supposedly to guard U.S. facilities. However, more troops for this added advice-and-assistance mission could drag the United States back into another Iraqi morass, the way such a modest beginning pulled the United States into the Vietnam War.

Besides, the retaliatory killing of Foley shows that what really unnecessarily

stirs the hornets' nest with barbaric Islamists is non-Muslim attacks on Muslim soil. So instead of the usual jumping in as the world's policemen, why doesn't the United States let regional friends take the lead in vanquishing the relatively small ISIS group?

The United States should terminate air strikes and turn the fight over to countries in the area that are directly threatened by ISIS. This course of action would dramatically lessen the chance that the United States would needlessly make another enemy in a war it should have avoided.

Ivan Eland is Director of the Center on Peace & Liberty at The Independent Institute. Dr. Eland has spent 15 years working for Congress on national security issues, including stints as an investigator for the House Foreign Affairs Committee and Principal Defense Analyst at the Congressional Budget Office. His books include Partitioning for Peace: An Exit Strategy for Iraq The Empire Has No Clothes: U.S. Foreign Policy Exposed, and Putting "Defense" Back into U.S. Defense Policy.
