



Statement before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform
Subcommittee on National Security
On “Battlefield Successes and Challenges: Recent Efforts to Win the War Against ISIS”

Moving the Needle from Degradation to Defeat

Aligning Ends, Ways, and Means in the Fight Against the
Islamic State

PHILLIP LOHAUS
Research Fellow

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“Battlefield Successes and Challenges: Recent Efforts to Win the War Against ISIS”

Chairman DeSantis, Ranking Member Lynch, and honorable members of the Subcommittee on National Security, I am honored by the opportunity to testify before you today as you examine recent successes and challenges in our nation’s effort to defeat the Islamic State. For the past five years, I have conducted research and published numerous articles on the evolving use of our nation’s special operations forces, the intelligence community, and our national security strategy. I continue to work closely with military and civilian leaders to devise innovative and adaptive operational approaches for some of the most pressing threats facing the United States. My understanding of the international threat environment draws from prior service in the intelligence community, during which time I served as an embedded analyst with the US military in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

My testimony today will discuss the current state of the fight against the Islamic State and contrast the approaches of Presidents Obama and Trump. It will show that while both Presidents played a role in decimating the Islamic State’s presence in Iraq and Syria, the processes and policies in place during Obama’s tenure may have inhibited the pace of battlefield success. The reforms made by the Trump administration have been timely and correspond appropriately with the later stage of the fight they inherited from their predecessors. Whether this administration will resist the temptation to declare victory over the Islamic State and reduce America’s presence in the Middle East remains an open question, as does the future of America’s approach to countering Islamic extremism. Taking a realistic stock of the ends, ways, and means associated with the fight against the Islamic State is the first step to devising a long-term strategy to move from “degrading” it to finally “defeating” it. I conclude by providing a few thoughts on how the current administration may accomplish this.

Carl von Clausewitz defined strategy as the “use of engagements for the object of war.”¹ Though now ubiquitous, the “ends + ways + means = strategy” formula was not put forth until 1989. The elegance of the formula led to its widespread adoption, but its simplicity suggests an equal weight to each variable on the left side of the equation.² As the ongoing struggle against comparatively resource-poor groups such as the Islamic State shows, the ways that resources are employed often explains more about strategic success than does a comparative enumeration of military equipment and tools.

Ends, ways, and means of warfare are all impacted by policy decisions. The United States, compared to other countries and organizations, does not want for means. However, America has not always succeeded in aligning its stated goals with its willingness to employ the ways required to achieve victory. Sometimes, such as in Operation Iraqi Freedom, these imbalances have been corrected mid-campaign, but sometimes, as in Vietnam, they have not. Political will, friction within the national security establishment, and a short-term, crisis-oriented outlook have all affected America’s ability to deliver strategic success, particularly in protracted low-intensity campaigns.³ Examining how national security resources are applied is thus critical to understanding how strategic misalignment impedes success.

Since the conclusion of the prior administration, ends concerning ISIS have been refined, and additional means of military power have been made available for employment in the battlefield. Though significant gains in the battle against the Islamic State have been made, moving the

needle from degradation to defeat will require additional adjustments to the way America approaches the enemy, and above all, a greater understanding of the long-term nature of the fight against Islamic extremism. To quote strategist B.H. Liddell Hart, “in strategy, the longest way round is often the shortest way home.”⁴

America’s current position concerning the Islamic State is rooted in the context of the procedures employed during the prior administration, both in the field and in Washington.

Not long after the drawdown of American troops in 2011, the Islamic State threatened to overwhelm Iraq’s ability to defend itself, a development that was both politically inconvenient and, potentially, strategically disastrous to the United States. To square the circle, President Obama took a measured and cautious approach to re-establishing Iraq’s internal security. The administration’s methodology lay primarily in conducting airstrikes and deploying a small cadre of special operators to build the capacity of the fledgling Iraqi military. The administration would later take a similar approach to fighting ISIS in Syria.

In the field, airstrikes were authorized against ISIS targets beginning in August of 2014. Though the air campaign initially focused on providing supplies to isolated groups such as the Yazidis on Mount Sinjar, the number of munitions released by the US military and its coalition partners increased dramatically in the years to come.⁵ Airstrikes thus quickly took a central role in the campaign against ISIS, though American forces were not responsible for all of these airstrikes.⁶ The administration exempted airstrikes against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria from collateral damage regulations,⁷ but in practice, the theaters received differing treatment. In Iraq, the administration largely delegated targeting authority for airstrikes to the military. Strikes conducted in Syria, however, underwent additional scrutiny from the White House.⁸

Despite promises to not deploy additional ground troops to the Middle East, the Obama administration devised an approach that would eventually have American special operators on the ground in both Iraq and Syria. Guided by the principle that U.S. forces would act primarily to enable local forces rather than act in combat roles, the administration deployed 300 military advisers to Iraq in June 2014, a number that would grow to 5,200 by the end of Obama’s second term.⁹

In Iraq, special operations advisers faced strict limitations on engagement with the enemy, such that, initially, few left their headquarters base at all. Eventually, trainers were allowed to accompany smaller units into the field. However, American forces were still subject to highly restrictive rules of engagement, which curtailed their ability to join their trainees on many missions. Despite eventual successes in training Iraqi Special Forces, political infighting in the Iraqi government, the rise of Shi’a militias, and the size of the American trainer cadre hindered the wide-scale improvement to the Iraqi military that the administration had envisioned attaining.¹⁰ The Iraqi military grew more adept at fighting ISIS, but only after the latter had weakened significantly.

With respect to Syria, American forces were initially limited to training local fighters outside of the country. When this effort proved unsuccessful, if not counterproductive, a small number of American special operators were deployed to train Kurdish fighters inside of Syria. This

initiative, which originated and was advocated for years prior, proved highly successful. Whether pursuing it earlier would have made a difference in the fight against ISIS, however, remains an open question, as deeper cooperation with the Kurds came with the risk of upsetting Turkey.

In Washington, the White House’s style of oversight complicated efforts to “degrade and defeat” ISIS. Some of the friction points between the west wing and subordinate agencies were hardly unique to the Obama administration. It is not uncommon, for example, for civilian leadership to place certain constraints on processes related to targeting. The magnitude of friction, however, was amplified by an emphasis on caution and an aversion to risk, an inefficient target nominations process, and, above all, the involvement of the National Security Council—and often the President himself—in day-to-day operational and tactical decision-making. The targeting process resulted in missed drone strike opportunities, which, outside of “areas of active hostilities,” required explicit White House approval, and also reportedly increased the weight of political considerations in decisions affecting national security.¹¹ Most importantly, these processes would have impacted the ability of SOF to innovate and adapt to changing operational circumstances on the fly, undermining the effectiveness of the instrument most central to the White House’s approach to counterterrorism.¹² In short, the White House’s decision-making style made for an incremental and laborious approach to a problem that required decisive and rapid responses to an enemy that was quickly metastasizing around the world.

Despite these shortcomings, one cannot deny the progress made in the fight against the Islamic State, particularly in Iraq and Syria. The siege of Mosul, however delayed, resulted in the ouster of the Islamic State from that city, as did the siege of Raqqa. As of October 2017, the overall territory controlled by ISIS had shrunk from a wide swath extending from central Syria to the outskirts of Baghdad to an isolated rump along the Iraq/Syria border.

These successes would not have been achievable without the efforts of American forces on the ground and in the air. Their accomplishments on the battlefield deserve applause. It is worth asking, however, whether the degradation of ISIS would have occurred sooner—or its rise prevented entirely—if friction points between the military and its civilian leadership had not impeded America’s responsiveness, and if the ends, ways, and means of strategy had been aligned more effectively.

Although the pace of operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria accelerated under President Trump,¹³ it would be disingenuous to attribute all of the recent successes in the fight against the Islamic State to the current administration—the siege of Mosul, after all, began prior to the 2016 election. Nonetheless, specific reforms that have taken place since that time have enhanced the ability of America and its coalition partners to eradicate the Islamic State from its former sanctuary.

For one, the Trump administration’s willingness to rely upon the expertise of military advisers contrasts with the more civilian-centric approach of the prior administration. Increased reliance on military expertise should not be viewed as a categorical positive, as an overreliance on advice of the military can erode the ability of civilians to oversee the military and lead to a discounting of other tools of national power.¹⁴ Rules and constraints have a proper role in regulating military actions—including tactical ones. Once these rules are in place, however, devolving judgment to

lower levels of the hierarchy enhances operational responsiveness and allows for unforeseen synergies within the services, and also with interagency and international partners.¹⁵ This is particularly important in the latter phases of conflict when the destruction of the enemy is in sight. In this sense, the Trump administration’s change in approach was timely.

The increased influence and autonomy of military advisers accompanied a more aggressive stance toward jihadist groups, both in Iraq and Syria, as well as further afield. For example, the President rescinded Obama-era regulations on drone strikes and loosened restrictions on how the military operated in Yemen. Trump also authorized the deployment of 400 Marines and Army Rangers to Syria, and approved arming the YPG, in advance of the siege of Raqqa, and the number of airstrikes authorized by the administration in US Central Command’s area of responsibility has increased dramatically.¹⁶ When taken into account with the streamlining of National Security Council involvement, these developments will aid in the military’s ability to execute upon their commander’s intent.

In many respects, however, the current administration has simply amplified Obama’s approach. They have streamlined processes, brought additional means to bear on the battlefield, and created space for operational and tactical innovation. Yet the fundamentals of their counterterrorism strategy remain similar to those of their predecessor, including an emphasis on the direct-action missions of special operations forces, drones, and airstrikes. Perhaps most importantly, like prior administrations, they have yet to devise a plan for what US policy toward a post-Islamic State Iraq and Syria should look like, or how US counterterrorism strategy writ large might be improved to move the needle from “degrade” to “defeat.”

Another danger, one that is hardly unique to this administration, is that recent gains will be viewed as signs of total victory, and therefore used as a reason to reduce America’s involvement in the region. The decimation of the Islamic State’s presence in Iraq and Syria represents just one battle in a much larger war against Islamic extremism. The Trump administration has accelerated the degradation of ISIS that commenced during the Obama administration, but the Islamic State has not yet been “defeated.”

Defeating a group like ISIS and other instantiations of Islamic extremism will require more than just military victories on the battlefield. It will require a sustained commitment to our partners and allies, and the creation of new ones. It will require an understanding of the ideological appeal of extremism, and efforts to reduce that appeal. It will require the use of all tools of national power, orchestrated in a manner that facilitates adaptation and innovation, and alignment towards clearly articulated ends. Above all, it will require that, if our goal is to extinguish the power and lure of extremist groups, political leaders are honest with themselves and their constituents about the need for an extended commitment to these endeavors.

The United States is at a strategic crossroads concerning its fight against Islamic extremism. The path of least resistance would be to declare victory over ISIS and reduce our presence in the Middle East. This course of action would likely open new opportunities for ISIS and similar groups to reconstitute, and could potentially create the need for the United States to intervene, with significant cost of lives and treasure, at some point in the future. Alternatively, the United States could maintain or expand its efforts to support regional security in the Middle East and

beyond. Cost-wise, this choice would forego small savings today for larger savings tomorrow. The prudent choice is clear.

In a concrete sense, there are a few measures that the United States could take to help move the needle from “degrade” to “defeat.” First, we should develop a blueprint that articulates explicitly how individual agencies and partners should pursue the counter-jihadist terrorism provisions in the recent National Security Strategy. For its part, Congress could significantly enhance the effectiveness of such a blueprint by revising US Code that governs agency authorities (e.g., Titles 10, 50, and 22) to better reflect the overlapping nature of government-wide counterterrorism efforts.¹⁷ Jihadist groups benefit from their size and structure, which permits flexible and nimble responses that challenge the ability of America to respond quickly and effectively. Revising US Code would be a first step toward mitigating this advantage.

Second, the US should reassert its commitment to diplomatic initiatives in the Muslim world. Specifically, it should redouble efforts to counter violent extremism, particularly concerning the development of compelling counter-narratives. Sophisticated public diplomacy efforts, especially online, and through third parties when possible, will be critical to winning the ideological war against Islamic extremists. American diplomats should continue to work with partners in other countries to devise bespoke strategies for particular contexts, settings, and mediums.

Third, the US should take a hard look at the disposition of its intelligence and special operations personnel around the globe, and consider whether current allocations and positioning align with the ideological nature of the fight. Emphasis should be placed on military information support operations, human intelligence, and Special Forces, as bombing campaigns and direct-action missions cannot succeed without, or be replaced by, the knowledge gained by ground assets. These elements should expand efforts to foster long-term relationships with key partners, and continue to build the capacity of our allies to eradicate extremism within their borders. The resources brought to bear by these frequently overlooked professionals are particularly well suited to creating strategic advantages before extremist organizations grow to the point where direct action is required. The Islamic State made many counterproductive choices on its road to failure; the United States should develop ways to compel them and other extremist groups to continue to make decisions that lead to their own demise. It is time for America to think two steps ahead.

To summarize, the United States has made significant battlefield gains against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Still, a danger remains that these successes will distract from the amount of work left to effectively counter Islamic extremism around the globe. Though the framework created by President Obama to counter ISIS manifested in gradual achievements, friction emanating from the White House delayed and presented significant complications to battlefield success. The Trump administration has taken action to address the missteps of their predecessors, and loosened the reigns of the military in conjunction with the heightened pace of operations that the recent battles against ISIS have required.

Moving forward, the Trump administration should carefully consider the ends, ways, and means pertaining to its efforts to counter Islamic extremism. With respect to ends, it should consider whether the true goal of US policy is to eradicate (“defeat”) Islamic extremism or to simply

“Battlefield Successes and Challenges: Recent Efforts to Win the War Against ISIS”

mitigate or minimize (“degrade”) it. If the current administration’s goal is to defeat it, I hope that I have provided several recommendations today that demonstrate how we might go about optimizing the employment of the American people’s resources. I thank the committee for the opportunity to discuss these issues and look forward to your questions.

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War, Indexed Edition*, trans. Michael Eliot Howard and Peter Paret,

² See Jeffrey W. Meiser, “Ends + Ways + Means = (Bad) Strategy,” *Parameters* 46, no. 4 (Winter - 2017 2016), https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/issues/Winter_2016-17/10_Meiser.pdf.

³ See Phillip Lohaus, “A Missing Shade of Gray: Political Will and Waging Something Short of War,” *War on The Rocks*, January 11, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/01/a-missing-shade-of-gray-political-will-and-waging-something-short-of-war/> The piece discusses how these dynamics impact political will to fight in the gray zone, but much of the analysis is extendable to other kinds of conflict.

⁴ B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*, Reprint Edition (Pentagon Press, 2012), 25.

⁵ In 2014, according to the Combined Forces Air Component Command, from the initiation of airstrikes in August 2014 to December 2014, 6,292 coalition weapons were released as part of Operation Inherent Resolve. Those numbers increased to 28,696 and 30,743 in 2015 and 2016, respectively. Taking into account the shorter reporting period in 2014, the rate of munitions releases more than doubled from 2014 to 2015, and increased slightly in 2016.

⁶ In December 2016, the White House reported that the US had conducted 16,000 airstrikes against the Islamic State. See Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Administration’s Approach to Counterterrorism” (MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, December 6, 2016), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/06/remarks-president-administrations-approach-counterterrorism>.

⁷ Jim Acosta and Kevin Liptak, “White House Exempts ISIS Strikes from Civilian Casualty Guidelines,” *CNN*, October 2, 2014, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/10/01/politics/wh-isis-civilians/>.

⁸ Julian Barnes and Carol Lee, “Obama Plans to Tightly Control Strikes on Syria,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 17, 2014, sec. Middle East, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-u-s-military-commanders-discuss-fight-against-islamic-state-1410969352?mg=prod/accounts-wsj>.

⁹ Mark Gordon and Michael Landler, “U.S. to Send Up to 300 Military Advisers to Iraq,” *New York Times*, June 19, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/20/us/obama-to-address-nation-on-iraq-crisis.html>; Molly Hennessy-Fiske, “Americans Adjust to a Changed Role in Iraq,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 16, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-americans-iraq-20161217-story.html>.

¹⁰ See Ned Parker and Jonathan Landay, “U.S. Falters in Campaign to Revive Iraqi Army, Officials Say,” *Reuters*, June 3, 2016, sec. World News, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-exclusive/exclusive-u-s-falters-in-campaign-to-revive-iraqi-army-officials-say-idUSKCN0YP2DO>.

¹¹ In his memoir, Leon Panetta, White House staff would “regularly put politics over the advice of intelligence and military advisers. See Leon Panetta and Jim Newton, *Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace*, Reprint edition (New York: Penguin Books, 2015); David Ignatius, “A CIA Director and Defense Secretary Uncensored,” *Washington Post*, October 6, 2014, sec. Opinions, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/book-review-leon-panettas-worthy-fights/2014/10/06/ed517c6e-4d70-11e4-aa5e-7153e466a02d_story.html.

¹² As the military’s primary sources of innovative and adaptive operational thinking, special operations forces are most effective when allowed to execute on a commander’s intent with minimal outside involvement. See Phillip Lohaus, *A Precarious Balance: Preserving the Right Mix of Conventional and Special Operations Forces* (American Enterprise Institute, 2014).

¹³ Karen DeYoung, “Under Trump, Gains against ISIS Have ‘Dramatically Accelerated,’” *Washington Post*, August 4, 2017, sec. National Security, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/under-trump-gains-against-isis-have-dramatically-accelerated/2017/08/04/8ad29d40-7958-11e7-8f39-eeb7d3a2d304_story.html.

¹⁴ The proper relationship between civilians and the military, as well as how to characterize its

current state, is the subject of much academic debate. For a summary of some foundational arguments in the context of the current presidency, see Sara Plana, “Civil-Military Relations Under President Trump,” Newsletter, précis Student Piece (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Fall 2017), <http://cis.mit.edu/publications/newsletter/civil-military-relations-under-president-trump>; for more recent treatments of the subject, see also Janine Davidson, Emerson Brooking, and Benjamin Fernandez, “Mending the Broken Dialogue” (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, December 2016), <https://www.cfr.org/report/mending-broken-dialogue>; and Jim Mattis and Kori N. Schake, eds., *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of Our Military* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 2016).

¹⁵ This was the central argument of Stanley McChrystal, whose approach to the special operations forces and intelligence officers under his command (of which this author was one) that resulted in the now ubiquitous “fusion” of many sources into a common operating picture. See General Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*, Reprint edition (Portfolio Trade, 2014).

¹⁶ Note that recent airstrike increases have occurred concurrently with a higher operations tempo. See United States Department of Defense, “AFCENT Airpower Summary” (United States Air Forces Central Command - Combined Air Operations Center, November 30, 2017), <http://www.afcent.af.mil/Portals/82/Documents/Airpower%20summary/Airpower%20Summary%20-%20November%202017.pdf?ver=2017-12-14-053557-530>.

¹⁷ Andru E. Wall, “Demystifying the Title 10-Title 50 Debate,” *Harvard Law School National Security Journal* 3 (December 2011), <http://www.soc.mil/528th/PDFs/Title10Title50.pdf>.

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Page 1 of 1

Phillip Lohaus is a research fellow in the Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), where he blends practical experience gained from serving in the intelligence community with a broad interest in emerging foreign military capabilities. His current research focuses on the unconventional and emerging national security challenges posed by Russia, Iran, China, and the Islamic State. In addition to numerous reports and articles, he is the author of a forthcoming book in which he explores how America's adversaries gain strategic advantage in the space between war and peace.

Before joining AEI, Mr. Lohaus served as an analyst with the Department of Defense and the Multi-National Force – Iraq. He was also embedded with the US Army in eastern Afghanistan, where he supported the counterterrorism efforts of US Special Operations Command. While in government, he focused on counterproliferation, counterterrorism, and economic security issues related to the Middle East.

Mr. Lohaus' writings have appeared in a variety of publications, including *The Hill*, *PBS News Hour*, *The National Interest*, and *US News & World Report*. At AEI, he has conducted studies on foreign denial and deception capabilities and on the balance between special operations and conventional forces. He has also served as the executive director of AEI's American Internationalism Project. His awards include a Joint Civilian Service Commendation Medal from USSOCOM.

A graduate of the University of Florida, Mr. Lohaus holds an M.A. in Strategic Studies from the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.