Creeping Incrementalism: U.S. Strategy in Iraq and Syria from 2011 to 2015

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Note: This draft is being circulated for comments and suggestions. Please provide them to acordesman@gmail.com
President Obama’s decision to allow up to 50 Special Forces to deploy in northern Syria has triggered an almost inevitable debate over crossing the threshold from train and assist into deploying combat personnel. So far that debate has taken three forms. One has focused on the President’s past statements about not sending “boots on the ground.” The second has focused on the risk this could be the start of a major combat presence and serious U.S. casualties. The third has focused on whether this step -- and the other small increments in the U.S. effort announced after General Joseph Dunford, the Chairman of the U.S. Joint
Chiefs of staff visited the region in October 2015 – will still fall short of the levels necessary to have meaningful results.

The first form of this debate is political and irrelevant in military terms. It does not judge the merits of the decision and implies that a President should not react to changing conditions – the kind of “gotcha” issue that suits the politics of what have become election years. It is totally dysfunctional in national security terms because it assume that President’s can predict the future and make pledges regardless of how things change and the need to act in ways that serve the national interest.

The second form of the debate touches on a valid strategic issue: whether the U.S. should send major land combat units back to Iraq and/or into Syria. However, it focuses on an option the U.S. rejected long ago -- a decision that seems even more valid today. Thrusting U.S. land combat units into the middle of the sectarian and ethnic quarrels and fighting in either Iraq or Syria seems almost certain to create new enemies and more divisions in both countries, and confront the U.S. with having to take sides in their internal struggles.

The third form of the debate is all too relevant. Deploying 50 Special Forces forward in Syria is probably a useful step, but it is scarcely a meaningful game changer. Ever since 2011, the U.S. has failed to develop any grand strategy for either Iraq or Syria, to cope with the emerging civil war in Syria and growing sectarian and ethnic tensions in Iraq, or to take decisive enough military action to make a major impact. The U.S. has not shown strategic patience. It has instead reacted to events with creeping incrementalism that is largely focused on ISIS and almost exclusively focused on security.

Once one looks beyond the conceptual rhetoric that the Administration has issue with each new crisis in Iraq and Syria, it is remarkably hard to see anything approaching an effective level of execution. U.S. actions have never addressed the key issues involved in any meaningful way or shown the U.S. has a credible overall strategy for Iran and Syria other than simply degrading and destroying ISIS.

Any grand strategic success has to bring lasting security and stability to both Syria and Iraq. It has to go beyond security, and deal with the fundamental problems in politics, governance, economics and demographic pressures that have made both Iraq and Syria failed states.

So far, neither the U.S. nor anyone else has given an indication it has a strategy for looking beyond security and the use of force. The Obama Administration has focused on fighting ISIS in ways that have done little more than partially contain the “caliphate” in Iraq and Syria. ISIS had had some reversals in Iraq and Syria but still advances in other areas, and increasingly competes with Al Qa’ida on a broader regional level.

When it comes to the sectarian and ethnic conflicts in Iraq and Syria, the U.S. has not developed an clear path to creating a solution to either state’s worst security problems. And, as the later portions of this analysis show, it is far from clear that any measures that have come out of Chairman Dunford’s visit to the region – 50 Special Forces notwithstanding – will be anything more than another step in creeping incrementalism on a military level.
The “Impossible” American Grand Strategic Objective: Iraqi and Syrian Stability and Security

In fairness, there are severe limits to what the U.S. can do. There is no clear way that the U.S. -- or any combination of outside powers -- can achieve the grand strategic objective of stability or security for either Iraq or Syria. They can only assist Iraqis and Syrians in finding such solutions, and no broad effort at solving either country’s problems can succeed without stronger efforts within.

The entire history of development since World War II shows that if there is any general law of development and stability that has emerged out of the history of developing states, it is that the only states that can achieve these objectives are states which can take primary responsibility for developing themselves.

Europe and Japan could recover after World War II because they were already developed states that had the leaders and institution that could deal with their wartime problems in politics, governance, and economics. Only a few developing states -- principally Asia states like China, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan -- have since moved to full development unless they have had massive natural resources they could use to finance themselves.

Iraq is a warning, not a success. America’s intervention in Iraq between March 19, 2003 and December 18, 2011 failed in spite of the creation of a democratic system of government, fighting an apparently successful war against Sunni and Shi’ite opposition, and something approaching two trillion dollars in cost, including some $26 billion in aid. In spite of a massive outside effort, it did not create a viable political system, effective governance, a stability economy, or security.

The US invasion removed the authoritarian cap on sectarian and ethnic tensions that had lasted for decades. It exposed failures to develop effective governance and economic development -- that the monarchy and various warlords had enforced since Iraq’s founding, and which Saddam Hussein had turned into repressive disaster in his fighting against the Kurds, invasion of Iran, Invasion of Kuwait, and confrontation with the UN and US after 1992.

More broadly, however, Syria shows that the genie does eventually get out of the bottle now matter how repressive the regime may be. As the broader political upheavals in the Arab world that began in 2011 have also shown, Syria and Iraq were both part of the all too many repressive Arab states that suffered from a combination of political, governance, economic, demographic, and security problems.

These problems made corrupt and repressive regimes stop gaps that could only than bottle up a growing set of hostile forces that eventually had to explode, while ensuring that there was no effective moderate opposition or route to political change. These forces were also ones that many Arab economists and demographers had warned about long before Islamist extremism became an issue, and that the UN’s Arab Development Reports had warned about in detail since 2002.

They were not the result of outside pressures or interference, but rather of the mistakes y the leaders and elites of states like Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen made over decades. No outside conspiracies triggered the chain reaction that followed the
first upheaval in Tunisia that began with Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation on December 17, 2012. There was no magic effort by the U.S. or outside powers than made it possible for Pakistan’s support of Islamist extremist leaders in Afghanistan to trigger a far broader form of religious extremism and terrorism in the Islamic world.

Failed secularism at every level laid the groundwork for the slow collapse of Syria’s government in the first half of 2011, the formation of the Free Syrian Army, the inability to form any stable alternatives to Assad, and the civil war that has grown steadily worse since early 2012. Bad as many U.S. mistakes in Iraq were -- and there were many -- it took 16 years of military leaders and factional fighting after the fall of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958, and some 30 years of Saddam Hussein’s role from the war against the Kurds in the mid-1970s to 2003, to lay the groundwork for what has gone wrong in Iraq.

Ironically, for all the talk of the failure of “Sykes-Picot,” the Arab world’s “artificial” monarchies avoided similar upheavals more because they served their people’s interests better than “modern” authoritarian leaders over time. As states like Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait and Morocco have already shown, however, population, economic, and factional pressures are still rising in the rest of the region. They also are not problems that can be solved by the use of force. Security can only enable civil efforts, not create any form of lasting stability.

Outside states like the U.S. can help the governments of failed states like Iraq and Syria help themselves, but such efforts cannot succeed until each state is ready to help itself. Without that level of internal unity – whether it is achieved out of some form of consensus or the sheer burn out from a lingering civil war – no amount of U.S. military assistance and economic aid – or sustained repression from within – can achieve lasting grand strategic results in countries like Iraq and Syria.

The U.S. other states, the UN, and international institutions like the World Bank and IMF can certainly help a state capable of helping itself. The U.S., however, is not a genie and does not even have a magic wand. The most it can do is help, and largely in the security dimension.

The U.S. ability to perform effective emergency, humanitarian, and project aid is not matched by any clear ability to help nations move towards effective overall political development, governance, or economic planning – and the U.S. now seems unable to discuss, much less aid, the problems caused by population growth.

Accordingly, any criticism of U.S. strategy in Iraq and Syria should begin with the fact the U.S. has never clearly acknowledged that its efforts cannot have lasting success in any state incapable of managing its own broader efforts at nation building. The U.S. cannot hope to achieve grand strategic success simply by helping achieve a limited shake up in the Iraqi government, or replacing Assad in Syria with others who cannot govern. Rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic is almost functional by comparison.

The U.S. – and every other outside and regional state as well as Iraqi and Syria faction -- can only succeed in achieving the grand strategic objective that counts by understanding that the success of outside aid is conditional on inside success in making that aid effective.
Mission “Possible?” -- Relying on Creeping Incrementalism for Security Aid

At the same time, the security dimension is a critical enabler, and the Obama Administration can be criticized for moving far too slowly and for taking half-measures that almost inevitably limit the U.S. chance of success and that prolong the fighting and broader civilian agony in both Iraq and Syria.

The problem is not that the Administration is openly putting some 50 Special Forces at risk in more forward train and assist missions. Putting a small number of experts into forward based train and assist missions with the Kurdish and Arab forces in Northern Syria that have proved to be some of the most effective fighters against ISIS and a critical counterbalance to Assad is precisely the kind of step that is necessary on a far broader level to have a real chance of success in the security mission in either Iraq or Syria.

There also is nothing new about a CIA and Special Forces presence that involves limited risks of this kind, or the risk of Iraqi or Syrian “green and blue” attacks on U.S. train and assist personnel further in the year. The U.S. has flown a massive number of missions over Iraq and Syria since August 2014, and aircraft can crash and aircrews are vulnerable. More and more “Boots” have been on the “ground” since early 2014, and risk free U.S. intervention overseas is a myth.

The key risk has always been in reintroducing major U.S. ground combat units, and here President Obama has almost certainly been right in showing restraint. There is no way that U.S. combat units can be inserted into either Iraq or Syria without becoming deeply involved in their other sectarian and ethnic struggles, a major source of further confrontation with Iran, and raising new fears of U.S. efforts to take over either state in both Iraq and Syria and other parts of the Arab world. Worse, such an introduction of major U.S. ground forces could easily further polarize factions that are already involved in at least a low-level state of civil war against each other -- as well as make the U.S. seem responsible for the overall outcome of each conflict.

If anything, the U.S. needs to make conditionality more explicit. It needs to make it clear to every element in Iraq, Syria, and regional states that it can help bring security, but that the U.S. cannot assume responsibility for the overall success of the security effort. Both security and stability can only evolve in Iraq and Syria if key factions in both countries take responsibility for both military success on the ground and for creating some form of political structure and governance that will create stability. Horrible as some aspects of the human tragedy in both countries may be, the U.S. should make it clear that it can and will shift to a strategy of containment if it does not see such progress.

Strategic Incrementalism on the Ground

The key problem in the Obama Administrations actions to date is not that it cannot perform mission impossible, that the Administration is responding to new facts on the ground, or that it is failing to deploy major ground forces. It is rather that the implementation of the security aspects of U.S. strategy has taken the form of creeping incrementalism in ways that do have a clear chance of being decisive even in reaching the limited strategic objective of defeating ISIS, much less bringing any broader form of security to either Iraq or Syria.
So far, the U.S. has taken half measures in the train and assist mission, in the transfer of arms, and in using airpower. It has reacted to every new challenge or problem in reaching an objective by slowly raising the ante: It has slowly deployed more airpower, more training and assist personnel, more equipment transfers, and more of a combat presence without ever creating the kind of train and assist mission really needed in Iraq, creating an effective effort of any kind in Syria, properly coordinating with its Arab allies, and showing that it is really committed to a full scale security effort.

**Fighting ISIS by Intervening in an Iraqi Civil War**

Since ISIS first invaded Iraq in late 2013, the U.S. has built up its military presence in Iraq from several hundred personnel in a small Office of Military cooperation to over 4,000 thousand personnel in Iraq, and an unknown number of personnel in Turkey, Jordan, and possibly Syria and Saudi Arabia. It has also initiated a major air campaign, effort to rebuild Iraqi government forces, efforts to assist various Kurdish forces, and efforts to create some form of “moderate” Arab forces in Syria.

The timing of this effort has, however, presented major problems since its very beginning. It came some three years after the last U.S. advisory forces had left, and after three years of efforts by Prime Minister Maliki to consolidate power by relying on a Shi’ite base and Iraqi military and police forces which were allowed to become steadily more corrupt, and where loyalty to the Prime Minister became the key criteria for rank and promotion.

During 2001-2013 Maliki steadily alienated Iraq’s Sunnis and used the Army and police to suppress peaceful demonstrations, particularly in western Iraq. Low-level violence steadily increased during this period, and UN casualty data show that rose back to the levels it had reached in 2008 by later 2013 – when the first ISIS advance from Syria into Anbar took place. The level of Sunni violent attacks on Shi’ite areas in East Iraq also rose steadily during this period, and while Maliki sometimes allied himself with the Kurds against the Sunnis, the level of tension between the Shi’ite dominated central government and the Kurds steadily increased over time.

The U.S. did continue to publically support Maliki until ISIS began to score decisive victories in 2014, but also tried to moderate and alter his conduct. Maliki, however, seems to have deliberately helped create the conditions that made it impossible for the U.S. to keep train and assist forces in Iraq after 2011. He alienated Iraq’s main Sunni political leaders, and failed as badly in governance, reducing corruption, and developing the Iraqi economy as he did in creating effective security forces.

The withdrawal of U.S. forces also had the strategic effect of making Iran a far stronger rival to the U.S. Iran steadily strengthened its advisory role as the U.S. departed, and had the advantage that it could take Maliki’s side as long as that benefited the Shi’ite and Iran’s influence over the Shi’ite portions of Iraq, and could actively disperse Al Quds Force, other IRGC personnel, MOIS intelligence officers, and Iranian civilians in the field. Iran does not seem to have been concerned with the risk of dividing Iraq or the growth of serious Sunni resistance, although some sources feel it did attempt to moderate Maliki as he became steadily more focused on eliminating any Sunni or other opposition.

By late 2013, Maliki’s tensions with the Sunni had reached the point where the Iraqi Army failed to suppress a protest camp in Anbar and central government elements of the police
became isolated in their bases. By December 2013, the Army was actively fighting the Dulaimi tribe in Anbar, Sunnis had formed a Military Council and Tribal Revolutionaries. This included elements of at least three other Sunni tribes in addition to the Dulaimi.

According to some reports, the Military Council and Tribal Revolutionaries came to include elements of other Sunni groups such as the JRTN, 1920 Revolution Brigade, the Islamic Army in Iraq, the Jaish al-Rashideen, Iraqi Hamas, and the former Mujahideen Shura Council of Abdullah al-Janabi. Two other Sunni opposition groups also seem to have formed, including the Anbar Tribes Revolutionary Council and possibly an Army of Pride and Dignity.¹

At the end of December 2013, Iraqi Army forces attempted to tear down a Sunni protest camp near Ramadi. Sunni tribal forces forced the Army to withdraw, and attacked four police stations in Ramadi on January 1, 2014. The end result was that Iraq was effectively in a low-level state of civil war between Sunni and Shi’ite when ISIS first sent limited forces from Syria into Anbar.

This was the point at which the fighting in the Syrian civil war began to have a major impact on Iraq. During 2012-2013, ISIS (ISIL, Daesh, Islamic state) – which had grown out of Al Qa’ida in Mesopotamia in Iraq – was already a major rebel force in Syria. ISIS had split with Al Qa’ida central earlier in 2013, when Al Qa’ida central endorsed the rival Al Nusra Front. ISIS’s main forces were located in Eastern Syria, and were able to take quick advantage of the new fighting in Iraq, and invaded Iraq in early January, taking control of Fallujah by January 4, 2014.

During January to June 2014, ISIS came to dominate the Iraq Sunni rebel forces in Anbar and steadily acquired influence over Sunni rebel elements to the north in Ninewa. The U.S. did accelerate the delivery of arms like Hellfire and UAVs to Iraq during this period, but did not take further steps until ISIS invaded Mosul in early June 2014.

Some 1,500 ISIS fighters and an unknown number of local fighters suddenly proved able to shatter Iraqi government forces that were some 15 times larger on paper. They, captured Mosul in a matter of days, and elements of ISIS rushed forward into Arab Shi’ite areas along the river, to the outskirts of Baghdad, and into Kurdish control areas in the KRG.

**Intervening Too Little, Too Late, and in the Wrong Way**

It was only after the ISIS seizure of Mosul during June 4-10, 2014 that the U.S. began its slow incremental deployments to Iraq. The new round of U.S. interventions in Iraq began on June 15, 2014, when the U.S. announced it would raise its number of military personnel from 180 to 480. By July 2014, the total number of forces protecting U.S. facilities and the train and assist effort had risen to at least 800. The U.S. also began to fly air reconnaissance missions over Iraq during the following week.

These U.S. advisory levels were very small, given the fact that a U.S. assessment of Iraqi government forces early in 2014 had concluded that the Iraqi security forces had virtually collapsed as a result of the corruption and politicization that had occurred in Maliki’s efforts to consolidate power by politicizing the security forces following a disputed March 2010 election. By June 2014, the Iraqi Army was down to a few marginally effective brigades, the police was ineffective as both a paramilitary and law enforcement force, and
the Sunni militias or “Sons of Iraq” or Sahwa had been left without support and many Arab Sunnis had been alienated.

Moreover, it came at a time when the dominant security development in the Shi’ite Arab forces was the creation of the Popular Mobilization Forces/Units/Committee – a mix of some 30-40 different small to significant Shi’ite-dominated militias that were made part of a formal Iraqi Ministry of the Interior People’s Mobilization Committee in June 2014. While some Western sources treat these forces as non-state actors, the Popular Mobilization Forces were given formal status on June 15, 2014. This came two days after the Marja Ali al-Sistani issued a right jihad calling for national popular resistance to the rise of ISIS and five days after the fall of Mosul.

While Sistani had called for a national effort, and the Ministry of Interior did recruit some Sunni tribal elements, the end result was to create a mix of more independent new Shi’ite forces and greatly strengthen the existing hardline Shi’ite militias supported by Iran. It effectively overtook an uncertain U.S. effort to persuade the Iraq central government to create provincial national guards that would have given Sunnis and Kurds independent paramilitary forces, and meant Iran would expand its role and efforts far more quickly than those of the U.S.

While there are no reliable elements of such forces, some reports put the totals at some 20,000 militiamen in the fighting around Tikrit, with a total strength of 60,000 – 90,000 to 100,000 – 120,000 armed men, including some 1,000 to 3,000 Sunni fighters. While some were new, other were existing militias heavily influenced by Iran and the Al Quds Force and/or tied to Shi’ite political parties that had little real concern for Iraq’s Sunnis. These included elements of the militia’s of the Badr Organization, Sadr’s Mahdi Army, Kata’ib Hezbollah, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Kata’ib al-Imam Ali, and Kais al-Khazali’s Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq.²

This meant that many of these Iraqi security forces would be Arab Shi’ite forces that not only would increase Iranian influence far more quickly than the limited build up of U./S. advisors, but Shi’ite forces would more than willing to take advantage or revenge if deployed in Arab Sunni or Shi’ite areas. Many had a level of hostility towards Sunnis that became all too clear when they were used to “liberate” Tikrit – effectively looting and destroying much of what they were supposed to liberate and abusing the Sunni civil population.

The low level of U.S. strategic incrementalism also ignored the broader strategic context of the fighting in Syria. The U.S. had chosen not to intervene in the Syria civil war when the rebels were still dominated by the more secular and moderate elements that had led the uprisings in 2011. By 2014, the Syrian Arab rebel forces were largely Sunni Islamist in character, and dominated by Islamist extremist groups like the Al Nusra Front and ISIS. Most were supported a mix of outside Arab states – principally Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait—that initially were far more concerned with ousting Assad and ending Iranian influence than defeating ISIS.

Each set of U.S. deployments was also designed to minimize the risk of U.S. combat casualties -- and minimize cost and risk. This decision was taken, and maintained through early November 2015, in spite of substantial military advice that the U.S. would need a much large train and assist mission to successfully rebuild the Iraqi forces, and one that
could deploy advisors directly to major Iraq combat units combat unit level in spite of the risk this could lead to U.S. casualties. They also were part of an “Iraq first” strategy that provided only minimal real-world support to Syrian rebel forces.

At no point did the U.S. have a public strategy to link even the security aspects of the fighting in Iraq to the fighting in Syria, or to deal with the fact that ISIS was deployed in both Syria and Iraq. The U.S. was committed to training its own mix of Sunni rebels in Syria in spite of the fact that the moderates it backed in Syria proved weak and were defeated in 2014 by Sunni Islamist forces like the Al Nusra Front. It set goals of training some 5,000 volunteers a year to fight ISIS that it ultimately had to abandon, and only came partially to grips with trying to work with the Arab states backing the main Arab rebel forces during 2015, and after this effort collapsed – never having fully addressed the problem of finding secure ways to transfer key weapons like anti-armor missiles and short-range air defense systems.

As is discussed in more depth shortly, the U.S. did commit U.S. combat airpower. President Obama announced that the U.S. would start flying strike missions in Iraq and Syria from bases in neighboring Arab states on August 7, 2014 – after new ISIS gains and attacks on the Yazdi minority in the Sinjar mountains. He had previously authorized emergency airdrops to the Yazdis on August 3rd. Actual air strikes began on August 8, 2014. The U.S. had conducted 240 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria, as well as 1,300 tanker refueling missions, totaling 3,800 sorties by all types of aircraft by the end of September 2014, and the U.S. combat air missions have continued ever since. 3

Further increases in U.S. military manpower took place as ISIS continued to make limited gains and take firm hold of occupied territory, and as it became clear that Iraqi forces had deteriorated even more than the U.S. had originally estimated and the U.S. failed to create effective moderate Arab rebel forces in Syria. The White House announced on September 3, 2014, that the US. was deploying 350 more servicemen to Baghdad, increasing the total U.S. forces in Baghdad to 820, and that the total U.S. forces in Iraq were rising to 1,213.

On September 10, 2014, President Obama announced that U.S. forces would not fight in combat, but that 500 more troops would be deployed. At the end of September, it was announced that 1,600 more military advisors would be sent to Iraqi government and Pesh Merga forces – with 800 providing security and others hundreds training and advising Iraqi and Kurdish forces how to fight ISIL. White House sources then talked about deploying 1,000 more.

Incrementing Ineffectively in 2015

The build-up of U.S. forces did improve in late 2014 and 2015, but continued to be too little and too late to have a major strategic impact. Some Press sources indicate that the total number of U.S. military personnel had risen to at least 3,100 by November 9, 2014, then to 4,400 in January 2015, and 4,500 by early February 2015. 4

Other media sources reported that there were 3,050 U.S. forces in Iraq in June 2015, and that some 2,250 were supporting Iraqi security forces, approximately 450 were training Iraqi troops and about 200 more were acting in advising and assisting roles. The White House then announced on June 10th that the U.S. was deploying 450 more and that the total might rise to 1,000. 5
There is no clear way to reliably track the size and timing of the steps in this slow increase in U.S. efforts, or to track the number of allied forces the U.S. persuade to join the coalition against ISIS. Press sources do indicate, however, that these did include small elements of Australian, Canadian, Danish, New Zealand, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish ground forces; and Australian, Belgian, Canadian, Danish, French, Jordanian, Moroccan, Netherlands, Turkish, and United Kingdom air units.

Official U.S. statements and media reports also do not provide a clear picture of the build up over time, personnel in related missions in other countries, air personnel data, Special Forces data, protection and support personnel totals, and contractors – where the totals can sometimes be much larger than the number of military and U.S government personnel. They also do not include allied personnel, which do not suddenly appear by magic. They usually come because the U.S. asks.

What these sources do indicate, however, is that the U.S. never formally committed its train and assist forces forward to provide direct support of Iraqi combat units. It instead created separate secure training centers in the rear for Iraqi government and Kurdish Pesh Merga forces, and created a similar capability to train a limited number of Sunni Arab volunteers in Iraq. It also created training centers in Jordan and Saudi Arabia in an effort to train some 5,000 moderate Syrian Arab rebel and Kurdish forces year – with a force goal of 15,000, and provided limited arms transfers to “moderate” Syrian Arab forces in the northeast of Syria and Syrian Kurds.

These U.S. efforts had some limited successes, particularly with the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, although each tactical success came at a strategic price. U.S. military aid to the Kurds did demonstrate the principle that outside powers can help those who are willing to help themselves. The U.S. effort to train, assist, and better arm the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds produced significant gains against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria – but at the price of serious complications.

In Iraq, Kurdish gains allowed the Iraq Kurds to take control of Kirkuk and its oilfields and expand the KRG area of control by some 30-40% -- literally laying the groundwork for a future struggle between Iraqi Kurds and Arabs. In Syria, the Syrian Kurds made similar along Syria’s northern border with Turkey – creating tensions with both Syria’s Arabs and a Turkey caught up in domestic political power struggles between Erdogan and his opposition that helped trigger a new round of fighting between Turkish forces and the PKK – the major Kurdish rebel group in Turkey.

Turkey did gradually come to perceive ISIS as being a serious threat, along with Assad. It did help shut down the flow of volunteers to ISIS long the Turkish border, and limited ISIS ability to use Turkey to earn income and as a source of imports, opened up Incirlik Air Base to U.S. combat aircraft, and had Turkey fly some strike sorties against ISIS. It continued, however, to press the U.S. to become actively involved in a military effort to remove Assad, and to support a “no fly zone” in Northern Syria – although it was never publically clear how Turkey intended to define such a zone, what it would do and how it would be funded, and just how broad the definition of “no fly” was intended to be.

More broadly, however, the incremental U.S. effort continued to have significant failures on both Iraq and Syria. In the case of Iraq, the Iraqi Army remained largely ineffective, and it was Iran that made the most gains in influence over Iraqi security forces. Iranian-
backed Iraqi Shi’ite militias, Lebanese Hezbollah forces, Iranian volunteers, and Iranian supported Iraqi government forces, were often more effective than the U.S. trained and advised Iraqi forces and Iraqi Shi’ite militias continued to present serious problems in terms of sectarian violence and a rise in Iranian influence.

The failure to deploy an effective number of U.S. advisors directly embedded in Iraq combat forces helped ensure that any progress in creating combat capable Iraqi forces was slow at best. The Iraqi government could not agree on a meaningful effort to create a Sunni National Guard and clashed politically with the Kurds.

Media reports indicate that the U.S. had to make further cut its goals for rebuilding the Iraqi Army in the fall of 2010. It also now had to deal with the fact that Iraq’s near-bankruptcy because of falling oil revenues had severely cut both the central government and KRG efforts to build up their land forces, as well as increased the central government’s problems in funding any Sunni forces.

In the case of Syria, the “moderate” Arab rebel groups the U.S. supported in Northern Syria were effectively destroyed by Al Nusra in late 2014 and early 2015. Moreover, a $500 million U.S. effort to train some 5,000 Arab volunteers a year, and create a “moderate” forces of some 15,000 to fight ISIS, slowly collapsed and the entire effort had to be cancelled by the fall of 2015.6

The Arab rebel groups that proved to be effective in Syria were the ones backed by other Arab states like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, but these had Islamist elements and focused on fighting the Assad forces rater than ISIS. As was the case in Iraq, it was the Syria Kurds that became the most effective U.S.-backed local ground forces, but this presented problems in dealing with a Turkey that initially tolerated ISIS out of its opposition to Assad and saw any form of Kurdish independence as at threat. U.S. action was never decisive or large enough to allow any element of allied ground forces other than the Kurds to gain the initiative, and many in the region found it far easier to blame the U.S. than take responsibility for their own actions.

This did not mean U.S. efforts completely failed. By November 2015, a combination of the U.S. train and assist efforts and airpower had helped Iraqi forces achieve a significant amount of containment in Iraq and to sustain an offensive in Ramadi. General Dunford was also quoted as saying during his October 2015 visit to Iraq that, “The number of Sunni that have been trained and armed is about 6,000 in Anbar province, and they want to grow to about 8,500. On the police side of the ledger, the government was looking for 16,000 Sunni to volunteer, and they are now at around 11,000 to 12,000” – although no details were made public.7 The U.S. had also helped Syrian Kurdish and Arab rebel forces make some gains against ISIS in Syria.

The fighting also had left an ISIS “caliphate” in place for close to two years, failed to create anything approaching a credible effort to build enough local ground forces to defeat ISIS, failed to create any clear unity of effort with U.S. allies in the region, and left many in the region that the U.S. was either ineffective or involved in some complex set of conspiracies to destabilize the region, expand its influence, and somehow turn against its Arab allies in a covert bargain with Iran.
The U.S. had also left a strategic vacuum in Syria that Russia began to exploit by deploying Russian air power, and faced growing opposition from the Erdogan government in Turkey over U.S. support of the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds. The P5+1 agreement with Iran had done nothing to reduce hardline Iranian efforts to exploit the situation in Iraq and Syria, and looking beyond the security dimension, the situation in Syria had turned into a humanitarian disaster involving more than half its population, and massive cuts in oil prices had brought the Iraqi economy to near collapse. This further contributed to the fact that the sectarian and ethnic divisions that divided them had not been reduced at any clear level, and the potential for future Arab and Kurdish tension and conflict seemed to have grown worse.

There was no clear set of forces in Syria that was easing the tensions between Alawite and Sunni, and the situation in Iraq at best showed some signs that Sunni tribal forces in the Anbar had accepted U.S. support – although there was little sign of any broader Sunni reconciliation with the Iraqi central government.

Much of this mix of challenges was driven by internal forces in Iraq and Syria, and other powers. Nevertheless, creeping U.S. incrementalism not only failed to address any given major aspect of the fighting on the ground, and its related strategic and political impact, it had done much to create new problems and make things worse. It is also far from clear that Chairman Dunford’s visit to Iraq in October 2015 will do more than added another inadequate level of incrementalism to past U.S. efforts – or even offset a review that proved to be even more critical of total Iraqi and Syrian forces that earlier assessments.

**Strategic Incrementalism in the Air**

The U.S. launched a far more active air combat effort, but its impact seems to have been as uncertain as the U.S. ground effort. The current debate over 50 more special forces largely ignores the reality that the U.S. has been using combat airpower for well over a year, just as it ignore press reports going back to early 2014 that CIA (and probably other Special Forces) occurred outside the formal train and assist compounds in northern and southern Syria, and the Kurdish, Iraqi government, and Sunni tribal areas in Iraq.

The U.S. has never publically reported any consistent data on the build-up of combat and other aircraft being used in the operation. Most official announcements – when they are made – are like the ones made at the same time as the announcement of 50 more Special Forces made on October 30, 2015: Add F-15s and A-10s without details – which Secretary Carter called a “thickening” of the U.S. air campaign. The U.S. has, however, has reported sortie numbers flown show that show the U.S. air combat effort became steadily more substantial after limited beginnings in August 2014.

**Limited Data with Uncertain Meaning**

The Department of Defense has generally provided daily reports on the number of strikes and sorties that have launched munitions by day, but has not publish data on the incremental rise in air sorties by month. The full sortie data for 2014 and 2015 are shown in Figure One, and they do show a sharp rise in sorties between 2014 and 2015, but the only monthly data are for number of air strikes where weapons were released. These rose from only 211 in
August 2014 to 760 in September, an average of over 1,500 in the rest of 2014, and then to levels reaching nearly 3,000 July 2015.

There evidently were no combat-driven, fixed wing air losses or casualties through early November 2015 for some 7,712 strike sorties – which only seem to include sorties in which munitions were released. At the same time, the figure of 7,712 strike sorties through October 15, 2015, only includes a fraction of even the strike sorties flown.

The data in Figure One only cover operations through September 30, but show that there already were 23,181 Close Air Support/Escort/Interdiction sorties. There were 9,293 more Intelligence Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (IS&R) sorties, 9,402 Airlift and Air Drop sorties, and 16,527 Tanker sorties for a total of 58,403 sorties. The airlift effort alone moved 72,555 short tons and 45,400 passengers. The problem with these data, however, is that they do no more to describe a strategy, set of strategic objective, possible timelines, and integrated effort for Iraq and Syria than the official data provided for ground forces. The air effort may involve significant combat activity, but there is no clear description of a tangible security strategy, much less a combined land-air effort that could create the conditions for some kind of lasting grand strategic outcome, and stable mix of stability and security in either Iraq or Syria.

They also do nothing to indicate the ability of airpower to strike effectively against highly disperse light military forces of the kind that ISIS and other non-state actors typically deploy, or to support operations to take urban areas where groups like ISIS can use civilians as human shield, exploit the reluctance of the attacker to inflict collateral damage, and combine the equivalent of house-to-house fighting with barriers of booby traps and IEDs.

The data in Figure One show that there were 6,981 strike (close air support/escort/interdiction) sorties in 2014, and that only 1,411 released a weapon: This is roughly 1 in 5 strike sorties that had an impact on the fighting. If the 2,164 IS&R flown to support the strike sorties are included, only in 1 of 6.5 a total of 9,145 sorties released a weapon.

The data for the first nine months of 2015 show that 5,560 strike sorties released a weapon out of a total of 16,200 flown, or 1 in 3. The ratio of IS&R to strike sorties increased, however, so that 5,560 of a total of 23,329 sorties released a weapon or only 1 in 4.2. Press reporting does indicate that U.S. strike aircraft have increased the percentage of strikes where they actually deliver munitions from 25% in October 2014 to 67% in October 2015, but these data are not yet reflected in Department of Defense and AFCENT data, may actually apply to July and/or August, and reflect a higher percentage of strikes on disperse targets outside populated areas.

It is also unclear that a significant number of these sorties had an impact on the fighting in populated built up areas, which are the core of ISIS power and control in its so-called “Caliphate.” Certainly, Iraqi government forces had major no major progress in liberating Ramadi, much less key parts of Ninewa, and the fact that the U.S. had to deploy A-10 and F-15 fighters to Turkey in the fall of 2015 to support Kurdish and Arab ground troops in fighting ISIS indicates that air power had only had a limited impact up to that time.

Coalition forces are helping, but the scale and effectiveness of this effort is unclear. There have not been any detailed data on the role of individual allied air forces over time, but reporting by the BBC and New York Times for DoD and USCENTOM sources indicates
that allied forces may have flown as much as 30% of 5,100 sorties in Syria between December 2014 and September 2015, although they seem to have flown less that 5% of 2,700 sorties in Syria – where France and Australia have been the key partners. There are no reliable public data on their targets and effectiveness, however, and the U.S. has also seen the Saudi, UAE, and Jordanian air forces shift away from flying sorties in Iraq since both countries became actively involved in the war in Yemen.\textsuperscript{10}

\underline{Damned for What Wasn’t Done, Rather than Praised for What Was Actually Accomplished}

It is also important to note that many in the region see the U.S. air effort as ineffective in spite of these numbers, and have no idea of the scale of U.S. efforts. They focus far more on what the US. did not do than on what it did., and on two areas where the U.S. did not use airpower.

One such area is the no fly zone mentioned earlier. Many Turks and Arabs who focus on regional security believe that if the U.S. had enforced the same kind of no fly zone in Syria that it did in Iraq, Assad could never have survived. They also believe that there would never have been anything like the nearly 8 million independently displaced civilians in Syria, and nearly 5 million refugees outside it, that existed in late 2015, or the number of civilian casualties, that it would have been far easier to create more moderate Arab rebel forces and negotiate a political solution, and that Russia would never have deployed air units in Syria.\textsuperscript{11}

This does not mean that such critics agree on any aspect of how a “no fly” zone should be defined, what it should do, how broad it should be, or the extent it should include the “no move” aspects of the zone in Libya. The often assume it would somehow provide a major capacity to absorb refugees and IDPs, and for effective rebel bases and training, but do so without any assessment of how support would come for Syrian civilians or why they would stay in such an area, or of what rebel elements would benefit and why they would not include extremist groups like Al Nusra if they did.

They tacitly assume that Assad would not launch a major air war in response, and they make no attempt to estimate the size and cost of the U.S. effort, or define the role that Turkey or local Arab states should play. They also have not addressed the probable Russian response. The fact remains, however, that far more regional critics seem to blame the U.S for not having created a no fly zone than understand or credit the U.S. for what it did.

The same is true of the second area of criticism goes back to the fact the U.S. halted strikes on the Assad regime when Assad agreed to give up chemical weapons. Many critics feel that if President Obama had acted on the red lines he set for Syrian use of chemical weapons on August 20, 2012 -- and launched a major cruise missile attack on the Assad regime after it clearly used chemical weapons in attacks on civilians in a rebel held area near Damascus in August 2013 – these strike would have had the same effect in bringing down the Assad regime. Once again, few can agree on how this would have happened, and some such critics are more than willing to blame the U.S. for acting in Iraq at the same time they criticize it for not acting in Syria.
Both sets of criticisms do, however, both highlight the limits of creeping incrementalism in the U.S. use of airpower, and the obvious fact it has not had any decisive impact on the land battle and broader security situation in either Iraq or Syria.12

Figure One: Operation Inherent Resolve: Airpower Statistics: 8.8.2014-30.9.2015

The Lack of Meaningful Data on the Effectiveness and Ineffectiveness of Strategic Incrementalism

The problems in assessing the U.S. incremental build up of both land and air capabilities are further complicated by the lack of any meaningful transparency in the reporting by the White House and department of Defense. The official data on the effectiveness of land and air efforts range from vague statistical rubbish in reporting on the air effort to dishonest reporting on the ground effort. Rather than serve to justify the U.S. military efforts, they seem almost designed to obscure their strategic impact.

Meaningless Air Data

The air strike data released by the Department of Defense issues on a daily basis say nothing about the overall impact of the air campaign or its strategy. The strike maps that
show the location and number of air strikes issued regularly by issued by the BBC -- which evidently has the support of the Department of Defense -- also do not reflect effectiveness and generally seem to reflect surges driven by immediate tactical priorities in supporting Arab and Kurdish forces, rather than an clear air strategy.\textsuperscript{13}

The summary data on Targets Damaged/Destroyed issued by the Department -- as of October 8, 2015 -- are shown in Figure Two and are little better.

**Figure Two: Targets Damaged/Destroyed by Air as of October 8, 2015**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targets Damaged/Destroyed</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tanks</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HMMWV's</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staging Areas</td>
<td>510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buildings</td>
<td>3,262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting Positions</td>
<td>2,577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil Infrastructure</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Targets</td>
<td>3,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>10,684</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers may fluctuate based on battle damage assessments; Current as of 7 August 2015*


The very title “damaged/destroyed” can mean anything. Some of the more specific data -- like that on tanks and oil infrastructure -- largely date back months and never show the percentage or impact of the losses. Most categories are so vague as to be meaningless: 520 “staging areas,” 3,262 “buildings,” 2,577 “fighting positions,” and 3,680 “other targets” mean exactly what? A total of 10,039 of 10,684 targets are described in terms that really can only be described as “statistical rubbish.”
Misleading to Dishonest Land Data

The official data on the strategic impact of the ground campaign are even worse. The U.S. has never publically tied its slow build up of train and assist personnel to any specifics as to what elements of Iraqi and Syria forces were becoming more effective or where and how they showed they were more effective in combat.

Worse, senior Administration officials have sometimes issued vague Vietnam style body count data for the number of rebels killed, but only for the U.S. air campaign, and these seem to be figures that conceal vast levels of uncertainty and provide point estimates that no one in either the U.S. intelligence community or the military privately seem willing to endorse.

They do not really relate at all to progress in the land war, and sometimes have been so high (“more than 10,000 to 20,000 ISIS rebels?”) as to seeming border on the absurd. This is particularly true when the same Pentagon sources that announced the 20,000 figure in October 2015 stated that, “The overall force, the first official said, remains about where it was when the bombing started: 20,000 to 30,000 fighters.”

The few tangible claims made about gains in the land war seem equally lacking in credibility. Ever since April 2015, the Department of Defense has shown what is at best a misleading map claiming that the, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’s (ISIL) frontlines in much of northern and central Iraq have been pushed back since August 2014. ISIL can no longer operate freely in roughly 25 to 30 percent of populated areas of Iraqi territory where it once could. These areas translate into approximately 13,000 to 17,000 square kilometers (or 5,000 to 6,500 square miles). However, because of the dynamic nature of the conflict in Iraq and Syria, this estimate could increase or decrease depending on daily fluctuations in the battle lines. ISIL’s area of influence in Syria remains largely unchanged, with its gains in As Suwayda’, Damascus Countryside, and Homs Provinces offset by losses in Halab and Al Hasakah Provinces.

This map is shown in Figure Three, and several things about it approach the theater of the absurd:

- It has not been updated since April 2015, and remained on the DoD web site as of November 3, 2015.
- It does not show the very real gains that the Syrian Kurds and elements of the Arab rebel forces have made in Northern Syria and along the border with Turkey.
- Large areas of the map are unpopulated. The map does not reflect real areas of control, and much of it covers empty desert.
- The map’s parameters are chosen as if the temporary advance of a few ISIS forces market real areas of control. In short, it exaggerates ISIS gains to exaggerate the scale of the area recovered from ISIS.
- It does not cover Western Syria where the most serious fighting between ISIS and the Arab rebel forces and Syrian Kurds has taken place.
- It does not highlight the lack of any progress to date by the key Arab rebel forces the U.S. has sponsored in Syria.
- It does not show that the zones of the fighting in Syria are divided into Assad regime, Arab rebel, Kurdish, and ISIS zones and implies a unified resistance to ISIS in a country torn apart by civil war and where the Assad regime has caused the vast majority of civilian casualties, refugees, internally displaced persons and damage to the economy and civilian facilities.
It does not show the similar differences between the zones of control of Iraqi Kurds, the Iraqi central government, Shi’ite militia, Sunni tribal, and ISIS forces. It does not reflect the full scale of Iraqi Kurdish gains, or the dismal lack of progress by the Iraqi central government, Shi’ite militia, Sunni tribal forces.

A wide range of far better work is available on the web sites of NGOs like the Institute for the Study of War, Long War Journal, New York Times, Washington Post, Reuters, BBC, IHS Conflict Monitor, etc. Some of this work – particularly by the New York Times – also highlights the most critical dimension of the war from the viewpoint of U.S. strategy: The lack of incremental progress in Iraq -- which the U.S. has given clear priority -- except for the Kurds. This is matched in part by the fact the most critical fighting in Syria has so far been between the Assad regime and the Arab rebel movements other than ISIS.

It is also important to point out that the lack of meaningful progress reporting on the land war by the U.S. government fails to address the Kurdish areas in Syria and Iraq where U.S. support has helped make major gains against ISIS, and the risk that Kurdish gains have made in terms of future tensions between Kurds and Arabs if ISIS is defeated.

It is these gains that U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor, Anthony J. Blinken described as following at the Manama Security Conference on October 31, 2015, 16

We have also joined with Arab states and dozens of other partners across the globe in a coalition to counter and ultimately defeat Daesh. Our military campaign is paired with comprehensive efforts to disrupt the flow of foreign fighters, counter Daesh’s narrative of nihilism, and curtail the flow of financing.

Fourteen months ago, this coalition didn’t exist. In the short time since, it has brought today 65 countries, launched more than 7,700 airstrikes, forced Daesh to change how it conducts its military operations, impeded its command and control, confronted its propaganda machine, and deprived it of 30% of the territory in Iraq that it held just a year ago.

From the critical border town of Kobani, Syria to Tikrit, Iraq, we have liberated many communities and enabled many to finally return home. In northern Syria, the coalition has secured 85 percent of the Turkish-Syrian border, and we’re enhancing our air campaign and efforts on the ground to help drive Daesh out of the remaining 70-mile stretch that it controls—and so closing off its most vital supply line for foreign fighters and materiel. We also stepping up support to moderate opposition fighters to help them consolidate the gains that they have made begin to put pressure on Al Raqqa—Daesh’s self-proclaimed capital.

Blinken’s remarks did not address the fact that almost all of these gains were Kurdish gains that took place at the expense of Arab control. Claiming even a temporary short term real gain may be better than mapping ones that never really happened, but it has serious limits. It also again highlights the most critical limit to the overall structure of US Strategy: The lack of any broader plan for bringing stability to either Syria or Iraq. It is all too possible that such gains may ultimately lead to serious new problems between the Kurds and the Arabs and Turkey.

**Figure Three: Iraq and Syria: ISIL’s Reduced Operating Areas as of April 2015**
The U.S. does seem to be linking its limited increase the Special Forces working with the Kurds and Arab rebels in Northern Syria with an increase in air strikes, and the use of attack aircraft like the A-10 from Incirlik and other bases in Turkey. It is striking, however, that its public narrative has never seriously addressed its actions in either Iraq or Syria in terms of joint warfare or attempted to provide any air-land measures of effectiveness.
This may be inevitable given the fact the U.S. has never publicly linked the incremental increases in train and assist personnel to actual advances in either Iraqi or Syrian combat performance, or provided any specifics on how it allocates air support and its overall strategy for air operations as distinguished from the vague target data in Figure Two. It does, however, raise still further questions about the effective of creeping incrementalism, particularly given the fact that newly deployed-10 pilots are publically complaining to media and on the Internet that their rules of engagement are so rigid that they are depriving them of the ability to actually execute combat missions and be effective.

**Creeping Incrementalism May Be Cheaper, But Is Anything But Cost-Effective**

The data on the cost of creeping incrementalism are no better than the data on its military effectiveness. The Department of Defense cost data for Operation Inherent Resolve are shown in Figure Four. The cost of kinetic operations – largely air – is scarcely cheap, but far less costly than when the U.S. was actively involved in inland combat. The Department reports that the total cost from the time when U.S. sorties began on August 8, 2014 to October 15, 2015 has been $4.75 billion or an average of $11 million a day for 434 days of combat operations.¹⁷

It is not clear, however, whether these cost data cover all “kinetic” or combat operations - - include any Special Forces and Agency operations -- or even whether they include all sorties. The difference could be sharp if the cost data do not include the full deployment cost of going to and from the U.S. to Iraq and Syria.

Moreover, $4.75 billion is only the past cost as of October 2015. A Department of Defense analysis of the budget for U.S. operations reflects far higher costs. The Quarterly Report of the Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations on Operation Inherent Resolve for the spring of 2015 notes that,

… On November 10, 2014, the President submitted to Congress a $5.6 billion OCO budget amendment request for FY 2015 to support the U.S. strategy to degrade and defeat ISIL, including military operations as part of OIR. This budget request included $5 billion for DoD and $520 million for DoS and Other International Programs (OIP), including funding for USAID… In December 2014, the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriation Act, 2015, provided $5.0 billion in OCO funds for DoD related to OIR…

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In December 2014, the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriation Act, 2015, provided $5.0 billion in OCO funds for DoD related to OIR. Nearly half supports the training and equipping of the Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish Pesh Merga forces in Iraq for the fight against ISIL. This includes $1.6 billion for a new Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF) and almost $800 million in Army Operations and Maintenance funds to support the ITEF mission.

The FY 2015 DoS appropriations bill did not specifically provide increased funding against the FY 2015 budget amendment, except for increases in humanitarian assistance and funds for the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). However, the bill did provide funding for regular, ongoing activities that are to support a full range of DoS and USAID activities, including those in
support of the counter-ISIL strategy or in response to the Syria crisis. DoS reported that, as of March 31, 2015, most appropriations made available in FY 2015 had yet to be released.

DoS has identified funding within its initial budget allocation to address many of the counter-ISIL LOEs, but it reports that the lack of additional DoS and USAID appropriations for these purposes will mean a more limited effort than was originally envisioned and offsets elsewhere globally.

Funding requested for FY 2016 totals $8.8 billion. DoD requested $5.3 billion, including $0.7 billion for the ITEF to continue support for Iraq’s military forces and $0.6 billion for the Syria Train and Equip Fund (STEF) to train and equip vetted Syrian opposition forces.

The budget request also includes $3.5 billion for DoS and USAID activities to strengthen regional partners, counter ISIL, provide humanitarian assistance, and strengthen Syria’s moderate opposition to advance the conditions for a negotiated political transition.

The President has named other funds central to countering ISIL, including the CTPF, which supports training and other capacity-building for partner countries on the front lines of countering shared terrorist threats. In FY 2015, this fund provided $1.3 billion for DoD, and nearly $2.5 billion has been requested for the CTPF in FY 2016, including $2.1 billion for DoD and $390 million for DoS. These data indicate that the real cost of incrementalism is likely to add up to more than $14 billion in FY2015 and FY2016, or what could prove to be as much as four times the $4.4 billion figure for spending to date over two fiscal years. They do, however, predate the opening up of bases in Turkey, added aircraft, and some additions in manpower.

They also do not include the cost of emergency aid to Syria. USAID reported that this totaled over $4.5 billion more between FY2012 and FY2015. The US was by far the largest donor to an emergency relief effort that at best brought a limited and temporary reduction in suffering, and that reached costs of over $1.2 billion in 2015 alone.

If such costs are taken into account – and they do nothing to address the longer-term problem of recovery in Syria the direct, short-term total cost of strategic incrementalism will be well over $22 billion by the end of 2016.

As for the cost in blood and casualties to date, the Department of Defense reports only very limited deaths to date. It is unclear whether any casualties in CIA and Special Forces missions are formally reported, but so far, the Pentagon reports that Operation Inherent Resolve had only resulted in 10 dead as of November 1, 2015, and only one of these deaths was killed in action. This is a remarkably low total for operations on the scale shown in Figure One and where the American’s in “safe” zones in Iraq and nearby states face a potential risk from hostile elements in rebel forces, Iraqi government forces, Shi’ite militias, etc. This lack of “green on blue” casualties is impressive.
The Need for a Broader Strategy for Defeating ISIS and Post-ISIS Security and Stability

It is more than four years since the start of upheavals in Syria and three years since the beginning of one of the world’s worst civil wars. It is nearly four years since U.S. forces left Iraq, and nearly two years since ISIS became a major military threat in both Syria and Iraq. So far, the Obama Administration’s efforts at creeping incrementalism have done little more than show that inadequate resource produce inadequate results.

It may be too late for the Obama Administration to change, but if does not at least make a major now beginning, its legacy may well be that the Administration could talk a fight but not execute one. Worse, it is all too likely that the security situation in Iraq, Syria, and the region will continue to steadily deteriorate through mid-2017 – the earliest a new Administration could hope to have a major impact. The last two years are all too clear a warning that the humanitarian cost of two more years of ineffective action will be all too high.

The Impact of Creeping Incrementalism

So far, a de facto U.S. strategy of creeping incrementalism has at best partially contained ISIS, has done nothing to reduce the growing internal divisions in either Syria or Iraq, has left Syria open to Russian intervention, and has failed to integrate US security efforts effectively with those of Turkey and U.S. Arab allies. It has proved to be so reactive that
events have consistently outpaced every new increment in U.S. military activity, and it at best address only part of the strategic challenge –leaving Iraqi and Syria politics and governance to fracture, and corruption, the economy, and the impact of population pressures and the youth “bulge” to grow worse in both states.

If there are merits to creeping incrementalism, they largely consist of negatives. Creeping incrementalism is no worse than the strategies and actions of any of Iraq and Syria’s neighbors, it is less threatening to Syria’s people than that of Russia and Iran, and has been limited more by the internal divisions in Iraq and Syria than by the shortfalls in U.S. efforts.

One can also argue that it is far cheaper in the short-term than the cost of major military and civil intervention in Iraq from 2003-2011, or the ongoing intervention in Afghanistan. However, reducing the short-term cost of failure is no guarantee regarding future costs, and a cheaper form of failure is scarcely a metric of success.

This does not mean that leaping from creeping incrementalism to massive intervention and “shock and awe” is likely to be any more successful. Throwing massive amounts of U.S. ground forces into deeply divided Arab states, in the face of Iranian hostility, and in the middle of a major struggle for the future of Islam is no more likely to be successful in the future than it was in Iraq. The last few years have also made it all too clear are no good short-term solutions to the broader problems in Iraq and Syria.

The Administration does not need to deploy major combat forces, but it does need to articulate a meaningful overall security strategy for air-land operations, for both Iraq and Syria, and for dealing with its allies in the region. It needs strategic communications to explain this strategy credibly and publically to the American people, the Congress, and our allies. It needs to establish a clear level of conditionality for its military and aid efforts, but also to treat Iraq and its regional allies as real partners. It needs to accept the fact that the most it can hope for in dealing with Russia and Iran is a troubled coexistence and confront them as necessary.

**Shaping a Security Strategy for Air-land Operations**

One step in making that new beginning would be to provide a clear picture of what the U.S. strategy to help defeat ISIS and bring security to Iraq and Syria really is. It is one thing to talk about transparency and quite another to provide it. Providing classified and unclassified monthly or quarterly reports to Congress that really address the security situation in net assessment terms, provided realistic picture of the size of the U.S. effort, provided realistic costs, and discussed U.S. and allied military progress in terms of realistic metrics would be a beginning. It would also show whether or not the U.S. really had a meaningful strategy and one that relied on proven experience rather than future hope.

The U.S also needs to use such reporting and its public statements to both reassure and pressure its allies: in Iraq, among Syrian rebels, and in neighboring states. Failing to openly address the problems in dealing with host country governments and factions, and in dealing with allies, may be “diplomatic” but it also deprives the U.S. of leverage and makes it the target of blame.

A failure to openly set conditions for U.S. support has so far has failed to put the necessary degree of pressure on the states and factions the U.S. is seeking to aid, and highlight the degree to which their failures to act are responsible for failure. Openly addressing the
negative roles of Iran and Russia is equally important. They are not going to drift into becoming strategic partners, they are going to continue to exploit every weakness the can find.

Creating A Meaningful Train and Assist Mission

More tangibly, the U.S. needs to size and structure a mix of train and assist efforts that have a chance of real success. The good news is that ISIS is not a particularly strong military force, and has only some 20,000 to 33,000 fighters – many with little training and only light weapons. The bad news is that its opposition remains so weak. Far too many Iraqi forces remain weak, divided along sectarian and ethnic lines, and need far better train and assist efforts at the combat unit level. Iraqi central government forces are making remarkably slow progress and are still largely Sunni. Iraqi Kurdish forces now face massive financing problems, occupy new disputed areas like Kirkuk that create a legacy of future tension with the Arabs, and cannot lead an effort to liberate Ninewa. Reports of 5,000 effective Sunni tribal forces in Anbar seem grossly exaggerated.

The U.S. efforts to create separate “moderate” Syrian Arab forces to only fight ISIS have imploded, and the other Arab rebel forces are deeply divided, include extremist elements as bad as ISIS, and focus on Assad. The coordination of U.S. efforts to build up Syrian Arab forces with the efforts of Turkey and Arab allies still seems poor and uncertain, and the U.S. is forced to rely on Syrian Kurds in ways that could leave another legacy of Arab-Kurdish tension or fighting.

While the details are unclear, the assessment of Iraq forces made for General Dunford during his October visit to Iraq seem to have cut the number of divisions the U.S. hoped to rebuild in the short to medium term, and raised even more question about the need for a more effective Iraqi command structure, better intelligence coordination, more timely and effective resupply and reinforcement, and eliminating Iraqi political and Iranian interference in the chain of command. These assessments also seem to have raised serious questions about the effectiveness and restraint of Iraqi Shi’ite militias when operating outside Shi’ite areas, the pace of the builds-up of credible Sunni tribal forces, and the ability to finance and sustain Pesh Merga forces in the face of massive funding problems and internal political struggles in the KRG. 21

Deploying a limited number of Special Forces forward in Syria is only a faltering start in making either set of forces effective against ISIS, and does nothing to address the sectarian and ethnic problems in both Iraq and Syria. If the U.S. is to have an effective train and assist mission, however, it must do more than risk 50 Special Forces. It must deploy train and assist teams forward with the combat elements in the Iraqi government forces, in the Sunni militias it is trying to create, with the Iraqi Pesh Merga, and with key Arab rebel elements in Syria as well as Syrian Kurds.

Creating effective combat units requires forward-deployed U.S. combat trainers and support with actual combat experience and that focus on creating effective fighting leaders and units, not simply generating forces. It means provide on the scene expertise that can evaluate who can and cannot lead, to provide meaningful intelligence on combat capability, to provide credible expertise in calling for and targeting air support, and making requests for resupply and reinforcement. The numbers of such advisors deployed with each major combat unit can be relatively small. The issue is quality and not quantity.
The U.S. will also need to decide which factions it can work with, make it clear that it is not choosing sides on a sectarian or ethnic basis, and put real pressure units Arab allies and Turkey as to how they fund, arm, and assist the various factions in Iraq and Syria. In the process, the U.S. will also have to be more to be realistic about such factions.

Most of key fighters and factions in both Syria and Iraq have been involved in civil power struggles or open civil warfare long enough to be polarized along sectarian and ethnic lines, have a questionable past or clear history of humanitarian abuses, and/or have ties to other states and movements that U.S. has good reason to dislike or distrust. By and large, the innocent are the ineffective. The problem is not to find a small minority that can be vetted and controlled, it is to make hard choices among those who can actually fight. This means the U.S. must often support the almost good, rather than the clearly bad.

The U.S. does not need to openly confront Iran, but it needs to make it clear that it will take action if Iran interferes, support the action of Iraq’s more extreme militias, or puts its advisors, volunteers, and Hezbollah forces where they further divide Iraq and Syria or interfere with U.S. military action. Quietly targeting is better than either noisy diplomatic objections or passive inaction.

**Using Air Power Effectively**

If the U.S. is to use combat air power effectively, it cannot be on the basis of waiting for Godot. The U.S. now seems to be waiting for the mysterious appearance of effective Iraq ground forces that can help create Iraqi unity as well as defeat ISIS to try to use air power decisively in Iraq, and it is simply unclear what the goal is in using U.S. airpower in Syria – particularly now that the U.S. faces a Russian effort that largely attacks every rebel element other than ISIS and backs Assad.

The U.S. needs to make several major changes in the way it uses airpower:

- Create an effective, precision strategic bombing campaign against ISIS and other extremist factions like the Al Nusra Front. Scale up the target numbers and mix to make it far more difficult for ISIS to survive and function.
- Provide a mix of forward air controllers, train and assist personnel, and IS&R assets, that allows the U.S. to fly major increases in the close air support and interdiction missions it flies in support of all the government, Sunni, and Kurdish elements Iraqi ground forces. Provide the same support to Syrian Arab and Kurdish rebels in ISIS-dominated areas where Assad forces are not present.
- Develop a clearly defined set of air tactics to attack urban and built-up areas that make better trade-offs between military effectiveness and the risk of civilian casualties and collateral damage, and allow better close air support to advancing Iraqi and Syria forces in attack built-up areas occupied by ISIS.
- Confront both the Assad regime and Russia by flying such missions in support of key “moderate” rebel factions in the areas where Assad forces are present. Provide them with a carefully forward-controlled number of short-range air defenses to fire at Syrian combat aircraft and helicopters, and low flying Russian aircraft.
- Consider setting a “red line” for Syrian helicopters and combat aircraft that attack civilian targets. Creating a threat to create a limited “no fly” zone like the threat to respond to Assad’s use of chemical weapons that will not be enforced if Assad stops air attacks on civilians.
- Create a joint air security area along the Turkish border that would strike at ISIS or other extremist movement across the border and create a “safe zone” on the Syrian side that would be used to attack incoming aircraft or drones before they reached Turkish territory.
• Fully reevaluate real world options for a broader “no fly” zone that does not rely somehow transforming a massively combat damaged area in a narrow band along Syria’s border with Turkey to somehow provide a secure area for rebels and/or refugees. Examines options for limiting all Syrian air activity to limited airspace over the areas directly under Assad regime control.

• As for Russia, incidents happen. Russian strikes on ISIS are acceptable. So is the loss of Russian aircraft flying against the Syrian rebels the U.S. supports.

In the process, the U.S. may need to change its present restrictions on targeting and explain to the world that war is war – although some reports indicate it may have sharply increased the ratio of strikes that actually deliver munitions in 2015. The U.S. cannot continue to put so many restrictions on actual strikes that it minimizes short-term civilian casualties in ways that sharply raise the number of civilians who die or suffer from a prolonged conflict over time.

The U.S. cannot let ISIS or any other faction use human shields to the point where effective strikes become difficult to impossible. These are some of the grimmest trade-offs imaginable. But, war is an inherently horrifying business. Constraining individual strikes to an unrealistic degree does not serve any broader humanitarian goal.

**Looking Beyond Security to Grand Strategy**

The U.S. must also do more address the issues in grand strategy raised at the start of this analysis. Defeating ISIS will do little to bring regional security and stability if it is not tied to efforts to deal with the broader sectarian and ethnic tensions in Iraq and Syria, and to efforts to help the leaders in both states make reforms in politics, governance, and economics that can bring recovery and broader development.

Many aspects of the he sectarian and ethnic tensions within Iraq and Syria have grown far worse during the course of the fighting in each country since 2011, and make any lasting form of stability and security even harder to achieve. If these issues are not addressed now, there is a serious risk that ISIS may only be the prelude to far worse problems.

In Iraq’s case, prolonged fighting may end in dividing Arab Sunnis and Shi’ites to the point where unity is impossible. It has already left a legacy of tension and conflicting territorial goals between Arab and Kurd that will divide Iraq along ethnic lines as well as sectarian ones. Sectarian segregation is a growing problem in Arab areas, and the country increasingly divided into separate economies: The Sunni, ISIS areas in the West, the Kurdish economy in the KRG, the mixed agricultural economy in the East and north of Baghdad, the mixed urban economy around Baghdad, and the largely Shi’ite petroleum economy in the Southeast.

Iraq needs far more than military assistance, anti-corruption measures, or some simplistic approach to federalism. It needs a central government that responds to its sectarian and ethnic divisions in a functional way, and whose leaders and legislators actually represent given constituencies rather than party lists. It needs to agree on a meaningful way of sharing the nation’s oil wealth, and to agree on reforms of its government, state-owned enterprise sectors, and agricultural sectors that will be paced at rates that encourage job creation and stability.

Only Iraqis can ultimately shape and agree on such plans, but they need help in forming them and they need it as soon as possible. Here, the U.S. has already shown it lacks core
competence within USAID to conduct such planning, just as the UN and UNAMA have failed in Afghanistan. The World Bank, however, does seem to have such capabilities and a major U.S. effort to support such an aid effort in support of Iraq could help Iraqi political leaders without imposing an uncertain U.S. effort.

In Syria’s case, the problem is vastly complicated by the fact more than half the population is either internally displaced persons or refugees and the massive levels of damage done by the civil war. It is also the sheer lack of any credible moderate political center or faction that is a credible source of effective governance and economic reconstruction and recovery. Syria is now so divided and so lacking in unity and effective leadership that its only options now seem to be a paralyzing form of ceasefire, negotiations that cannot produce a stable lasting outcome even if the principles agree, or a form of burn out that can only lead to a “peace” of the vanished and the dead. Defeating ISIS cannot do deal with these problems.

Real progress depends on a level of Syrian initiative, leadership, and cooperation from within – problems even more serious than in Iraq. It cannot take place under Assad, but it is unclear how Syria’s factions can agree or who in any faction has the political ability, capability for governance, and economic planning capability to propose a program that even offers real hope. Unlike Iraq, Syria has no real petroleum wealth to fall back upon, and this means it will need both more help in planning than Iraq and far more aid.

Once again, the U.S. cannot succeed in “nation building” or “nation rebuilding” when the leaders and peoples of a given state fail to unify around such goals. Moreover, Iraq and Syria’s Arab neighbors have as much – or more – responsibility to help both countries as the U.S.

So far, however, the Obama Administration has not even articulated a clear set of options for helping Iraq and Syria deal with their broader problems. It has not sought some effort to find solutions within the UN, IMF, World Bank, or other international institutions.

No one to date in the Obama Administration has shown that there is any overall U.S. strategy that ties the U.S. efforts to defeat ISIS to a credible plan to oust Assad, to bring some form of stability and unity/federalism to Syria and Iraq, rebuild them, and to move them towards development.

U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor, Anthony J. Blinken did note, however, in his address at the Manama Security Conference on October 31, 2015, that,

Ultimately, …lasting peace and stability for the region cannot be imposed from above, from the outside, or by force. They need to be built from within by governments that are inclusive, accountable to their citizens, and interconnected with the world. Security assistance alone cannot get governments there. It requires political accommodation to ensure the freedom, dignity, and security for all citizens.

…the civil war in Syria remains the region’s most immediate and complex challenge. The refugee catastrophe is an outgrowth of Assad’s vengeance against his own people, and the cost of the conflict rises every day—for the region, for Europe, but most of all, for Syrians. There is no end in sight unless we make one. And this is exactly what Secretary Kerry is working so hard to do, including in Vienna this week, where parties came together with a new sense of urgency. The discussions were constructive, and all participants agreed to a number of things, including to press for a nationwide ceasefire and pursue a political transition that ensures Syria’s unity, independence, territorial integrity, and secular character. As Secretary Kerry said, this is the beginning of a new diplomatic process, not the final chapter.
… we share many important interests with Russia in Syria. Defeating Daesh, which poses a threat to all of us. And preserving Syria as a unified, sovereign state, with a secular, inclusive and non-sectarian government, its institutions intact. We can and we should make common cause of these common objectives. That requires a political transition that leads to Assad’s departure, because none of those goals is achievable as long as he remains. As Secretary Kerry has said, Russia has a choice now about how to move forward—and we would welcome it making the right choice for our shared interests. We have to break the mindset—encouraged by both Assad and Daesh—that the only choice Syrians have is between the two of them. A different future not only is possible—it is imperative.

The practical question is whether the Obama Administration can even make a serious start in addressing these broader issues during its remaining time in office -- even if it only to create a UN or World Bank effort that could propose solution and reform and offer some tangible form of hope. Ultimately, there is no meaningful military strategy that is not tied to grand strategy in the civil-military terms. From this perspective, both ISIS and Assad are far more the symptoms than the disease.

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1 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anbar_campaign_%282013%E2%80%932014%29; and Sowell, Kirk H. (15 January 2014). "Maliki’s Anbar Blunder," Foreign Policy.
2 For examples of good reporting, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_Mobilization_Forces_%28Iraq%29; Robin Wright, "In War Against ISIS, Numbers Don’t Always Tell the Story," Wall Street Journal. March 13, 2015

Note that the OCHA ceased to be able to make meaningful estimates of these numbers in the spring of 2015, and they may well have risen about the totals quoted since that time. The same is true of UN and NGO estimates of 250,000 killed and one million injured.


