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## The Risks of Obama's New ISIS Plan

On Wednesday, the US House of Representatives [backed plans](#) proposed by President Obama to curtail the threat posed by ISIS (also known as ISIL or the "Islamic State"). This plan includes a [number of proposals](#), such as:

- Undertaking airstrikes not only to deter ISIS from advancing in Iraq, but to degrade their forces' capability to recapture territory
- Strike at ISIS strongholds, including those in Syria
- Improve military aid to Iraq
- Arm Syrian rebels to help them fight against ISIS
- Assemble a broad coalition to confront ISIS in the wider Middle East

While no doubt almost everyone welcomes a greater Western role in combating ISIS, a virulently sectarian and violent force responsible for [countless atrocities](#) in Syria and Iraq, there are nevertheless issues and problems with the proposed plan as it currently stands.

Foremost, Obama's plan is one that is familiar to observers of American intervention and military operations of recent years, that of an "[offshore balancer](#)", providing air support, arms, intelligence and logistical support while expecting local allies to use ground forces to bring about outcomes that are preferable to US policy and interests. This was the model for the NATO intervention in the Libyan Civil War in 2011 and, to a lesser extent, counter-terrorism operations by the USA in Pakistan and Yemen.

However, it is questionable to what extent US airstrikes would be effective against ISIS. While ISIS are not a pure guerrilla force, consisting as they do of territory and a military infrastructure, it is nevertheless the case that they are closer to an insurgent force than a state army, the pretensions of self-proclaimed 'Caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi aside. As such, outside of attacking forces currently in the field, air power will have little effect, [especially on the urban centres](#) ISIS currently controls and that will need to be taken from them as part of any overall recapture of Iraqi territory. It has even [been argued](#) that airstrikes would force ISIS to retrench in more civilian areas, and thus make the conflict even more intractable and bloody.

In addition to the questionable effectiveness of military strikes, there is also the question of how strikes may be perceived in the wider Middle East, especially with regard to civilian casualties. The United States and, to an extent, its allies, are very [unfavourably viewed](#) by many Middle Easterners, and the media-savvy ISIS are no doubt prepared to exploit this to their benefit, turning the conflict from that of a sectarian band of killers terrorising the population of Iraq and Syria into the narrative of "[Crusader imperialism](#)" – a narrative which conveniently allows ISIS to assume the role of valiant [defenders of Islam](#) against the infidels.

The Pentagon is not unaware of such problems, as [Gen. Dempsey's statements](#) before the Senate's Armed Services Committee on Tuesday showed. However, the White House has, for the moment, ruled out the use of US troops in frontline combat situations, as have other Western states intervening against ISIS. In lieu of Western forces, Obama's plan calls for

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the use of local proxies, namely a combination of the Kurdish Peshmerga, the Iraqi Army and the Syrian rebels.

The Peshmerga have had previous success in fighting ISIS. However, their ability to do so has been hampered considerably by a lack of [military supplies](#). This problem is [being corrected](#), as states are coming forward to arm the Kurdish forces, but it will take time for these weapons and ammunition to be redistributed to the front lines, and even then there is the issue of training Kurdish troops in their use. The difficulties faced by the Peshmerga have also led to [a greater role for the PKK](#) in the fight against ISIS, and while their assistance is no doubt welcome, it nevertheless presents a complicating factor, due to the long-standing conflict between the PKK and Turkey.

The Iraqi Army is a somewhat different story. While the US is deploying over 400 military trainers to help the army, it is significantly hampered by a number of factors. Most obviously, there is a clear crisis of morale in the face of the losses in the north of the country. The near complete capitulation of Iraqi army forces in Mosul can only be viewed as a total disaster. In the aftermath of ISIS advances in June, the Iraqi Army was described as being in a state of [“psychological collapse”](#). The collapse of the Iraqi Army also allowed ISIS to seize stores of [American-made military equipment](#), further weakening the Army’s ability to fight back.

In addition to this, the wide use of [Shiite militias](#) as auxiliaries raises questions about the suitability of their use as counterinsurgent forces. There are fears that such forces may act as “death squads” in Sunni towns, killing with impunity as they did during the [worst days of the insurgency](#) during the American occupation following the fall of Saddam. Furthermore, their presence exacerbates the [sectarian nature of the conflict](#) and threatens to undermine the credentials of the Iraqi government as one suited for all Iraqis regardless of religious affiliation.

Finally, there is the disposition of the Syrian rebels. While the White House has promised that Syrian rebels will be [“carefully vetted”](#) to avoid weapons falling into the hands of more extremist elements, it is notoriously difficult to keep track of weapons once they are in Syria, and there are allegations of more moderate groups [selling arms](#) to ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra before now. As the most powerful factions in Syria currently are among the most hard-line elements of the resistance, it is possible this scenario will repeat itself with American arms.

Furthermore, the main focus of the Syrian rebels is on defeating Assad and not ISIS. Indeed, that some Syrian groups are signing [“truce agreements”](#) with ISIS is a worrying indication of some rebel attitudes towards the group, despite the infighting over the past two years among anti-Assad forces.

As such, the existing American strategy does not inspire confidence. Even the White House may be tacitly admitting this, when it says that the aim is to reduce ISIS to a [“manageable problem”](#) rather than outright defeat it. However, ISIS has a well-documented history of coming back from a reduced condition, and managing them may be more difficult than the White House is willing to acknowledge.

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2<sup>nd</sup> October 2014

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Please cite this article as:

Simms, M. (2014). 'The Risks of Obama's New ISIS Plan' Human Security Centre, Defence and Security, Issue 4, No. 1.