

THE ISLAMIC STATE'S STRATEGY: LASTING AND EXPANDING

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The self-proclaimed Islamic State is a hybrid jihadist group with a declared goal of establishing a “lasting and expanding” caliphate. Its strategy for survival and growth blends military, political, social, and economic components. Yet the U.S.-led international intervention against it has largely been limited to air strikes. The gaps in the international coalition’s approach as well as deep sectarian divisions in Iraq and the shifting strategies of the Syrian regime and its allies are allowing the Islamic State to continue to exist and expand.

Understanding the Islamic State

- The Islamic State faces significant internal challenges, including grievances about its brutality and unpredictable ruling behavior, a limited governance capacity, and tensions between foreigners and locals within its ranks.
- The Islamic State’s military approach has evolved over time, from an emphasis on offensive warfare to more defensive operations and, more recently, to attempts to take advantage of its enemies’ political and military weaknesses, as it did in mid-2015 with advances in Palmyra in Syria and Ramadi in Iraq.
- On the socioeconomic and political levels, the Sunni extremist group is benefiting from two powerful dynamics: the continuation of the Syrian conflict and anger among Iraqi Sunnis at Baghdad’s systematic exclusion of them.

How Regional Actors and the West Can Combat the Islamic State

Exploit the Islamic State’s weaknesses. The West and its allies should take advantage of the internal challenges facing the jihadist group in order to weaken it from within.

Move beyond air strikes. Military engagement against the Islamic State must not be limited to the air. It should also encompass ground operations by Syrian and Iraqi military groups that coordinate with the international coalition.

Support the moderate opposition in Syria. The West and its allies must strengthen the operational and governance capacities of the Free Syrian Army’s Southern Front, the only moderate opposition coalition that is fighting both the Islamic State and the regime in Syria.

Establish an Iraqi national guard. A multisectarian, multiethnic force would help restore the Sunni community’s trust in state institutions and widen local engagement in the fight against the Islamic State.

Push Turkey to play a bigger role. Turkey should allow the international coalition’s aircraft to use Turkish bases, which would better enable them to reach targets inside Syria.

Find a solution to the Syrian conflict. The West and its allies should begin negotiations about a political settlement for Syria because the Islamic State cannot be eradicated without one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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