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## Opinions

# Can we defeat the Islamic State?



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Demonstrators at a rally supporting Kurdistan hold placards protesting against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Washington, D.C. (Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images)



By **Fareed Zakaria** Opinion writer September 11

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Here we go again. The United States has declared war on another terrorist group. [President Obama's speech Wednesday night](#) outlined a tough, measured strategy to confront the Islamic State — which is a threat to the region and beyond. But let's make sure in executing this strategy that we learn something from the 13 years since Sept. 11, 2001, and the war against al-Qaeda. Here are a few lessons to think about.

*Don't always take the bait.* In one of his videotaped speeches to his followers, [Osama bin Laden outlined his strategy](#). "All that we have to do is to send two

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mujahideen to the furthest point east to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al-Qaeda,” he said, “in order to make [American] generals race there.”

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The purpose of the gruesome execution videos was to provoke the United States.

And it worked. After all, nothing has changed about the self-proclaimed

Islamic State, and the dangers it poses, in the past month — other than the appearance of these videos. Yet they moved Washington to action. The

[scholar Fawaz Gerges writes](#) that a few

months ago Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi noted

that his organization was not ready to

attack the United States but “he wished the U.S. would deploy boots on the ground so that IS could directly engage the Americans — and kill them.”

We have to act against this terror group. But let’s do it at a time and manner of our choosing, rather than jumping when it wants us to jump.

*Don't overestimate the enemy.* The Islamic State, also known as ISIS or ISIL, is a formidable foe, but the counterforces to it have only just begun. And if these forces — the Iraqi army, the Kurdish pesh merga, U.S. air power — work in a coordinated fashion, it will start losing ground. Also, keep in mind that it does not actually hold as much ground as the many maps flashed on television keep showing. Large parts of those “territories” are vacant desert. The cities in Iraq and Syria are clustered along rivers.

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While the Islamic State is much more sophisticated than al-Qaeda in its operations and technology, it has one major, inherent weakness. Al-Qaeda was an organization that was pan-Islamic, trying to appeal to all Muslims. This group is a distinctly sectarian organization. It is a successor to al-Qaeda in Iraq, which was set up by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi with an explicitly anti-Shiite mission. In fact, this is why al-Qaeda broke with Zarqawi, imploring him not to make fellow Muslims the enemy. The Islamic State is anti-Shiite as well as deeply hostile to Kurds, Christians and many other inhabitants of the Middle East. This means that it has large numbers of foes in the region who will fight against it, not because the United States wants them to but in their own interests.

*Remember the politics.* Military action must be coupled with smart political strategy. The Islamic State is a direct outgrowth of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the ruinous political decisions to disband the Iraqi army and “de-Baathify” its bureaucracy. The result was a disempowered, enraged (and armed) Sunni population that started an insurgency. Vice media’s recent documentary on the group interviewed some Iraqi Sunnis who said that, for all the chaos, they were happier under the Islamic State than under the “Shiite army,” which is how they referred to the Iraqi government.

The Obama administration has mapped out a smart strategy in Iraq, pressing the Baghdad government to include more Sunnis. But that has yet to happen — the Shiite parties have dragged their feet over any major concessions to Sunnis. The Iraqi army has not been

reconstituted to make it less partisan and sectarian and more inclusive and effective. This is a crucial issue because if the United States is seen as defending two non-Sunni regimes — Iraq and Syria — against a Sunni uprising, it will not win. And it will be hard to recruit local allies. While a minority in Iraq, Sunnis make up the vast majority of the Middle East’s Muslims.

The Syrian aspect of the president’s strategy is its weak link. It is impossible to battle the Islamic State and not, in effect, strengthen the Bashar al-Assad regime. We can say we don’t intend to do that, but it doesn’t change the reality on the ground. The Free Syrian Army remains weak and divided among many local militias.

Obama promised to “degrade” the Islamic State. Good. He also promised to “ultimately destroy” it. We have not been able to get rid of al-Qaeda. And destroying a group such as this requires defusing the sectarian dynamics that fuel it. That’s not for Washington to do, but it can help make it happen by pressing the Iraqis and enlisting the Saudis and other regional powers.

Obama’s military intervention in the region will work only if there is an equivalent, perhaps even more intense, political intervention.

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# Full speech: announces f plan to combat Islamic State (14:05)

President Obama said the U.S. will work with a "broad coalition" of foreign partners to combat the Islamic State in his public address on Wednesday, Sept. 10, 2014. (The Associated Press)

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