CONSTRUCTIVE RESPONSES TO THE ISLAMIC STATE

The U.S. has spent over $8.8 billion conducting 10,000 military strikes in Syria and Iraq over the past 20 months, but the threat from IS in the region remains formidable. The prolonged war in Iraq and its role in destabilizing the region, allowing for the rise of IS, teaches us that there is no military solution to the IS crisis. Instead of pursuing military solutions, the U.S. and allies should prioritize political solutions.

1. U.S. Military Presence and Escalation in the Middle East Fuels IS Recruitment

Al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) recruit using the premise that the United States, and other Western powers, will not allow the Muslim world to exist in peace and that only violent insurgency can stop us. Asked if more people joined Al Qaeda after attacks that killed civilians, Awad Ahmed Mohsen from Majallah, a southern village hit by a drone strike that killed dozens in 2009, said: “Definitely. And even those who don’t join, now sympathize with Al Qaeda because of these strikes, these violations. Any American they see, they exact revenge, even if it’s a civilian.”

2. Military Escalation Inflames Violent Insurgent Social Movements

Army General David Petraeus and Marine General James Amos state in the Counter-insurgency field manual that, “an operation that kills five insurgents is counterproductive if collateral damage leads to the recruitment of fifty more insurgents.” External violence, bombs, and occupying forces are historically incapable of doing anything but inflaming violent insurgent social movements. The Pentagon’s own Counter-Insurgency doctrine suggests that military force on a level capable of countering the growth of ISIS is well out of reach for the United States.

3. Short Term, Immediate Steps the U.S. Can Take to Address IS are Political, Promote Long-Term Security and Peace

We do not need expensive and counter-productive military action to address IS. In the short-term we can: stop the bombings which kill large numbers of civilians and fuel IS recruitment; cut off the flow of arms and funds to anti-Assad militias that we know are ending up in IS hands; work with the UN and regional partners to stop the flow of black market oil and antiquities from the region; address the humanitarian and refugee crises and protect the flow of humanitarian aid.

4. Military Involvement in the Middle East is Not an Affordable, or Effective Long-Term Solution to the Islamic State

According to General Petraeus, a full counter-insurgency operation against IS would cost $10 trillion and take 10 years. But, more importantly, war and violence do not lead to peace and stability. We must allow Iraq and Syria to practice self-determination and develop institutions to protect human rights, so they can raise their families in peace. In the long-term, we can support this if we: impose a regional arms embargo against all armed actors in Iraq and Syria; pressure regional states to quell the flow of foreign fighters; work with the UN to bring armed actors to the negotiating table as soon as possible; and support civil society & non-violent internal resistance.