

Iraq and Syria: Considering military intervention

1. Summary

Islamic State (IS)¹ forces hold large swathes of northern Iraq and Syria. Having captured oil installations in Syria they control substantial assets as well as military hardware. They have demonstrated the ability to hold on to towns and villages under their command and to set up local administrations capable of resourcing and delivering services. Left alone they will grow in strength, potentially exporting their violent intolerance. This paper examines:

- i) some wider objectives beyond the aim of defeating IS that deserve consideration,
- ii) whether military intervention is necessary to defeat IS, and
- iii) how we might begin to assess the ethical considerations around military intervention in this context.

The essential backdrop to this paper is the work that Baptists, Methodist and United Reformed Churches have undertaken in recent years to examine a Christian response to crises involving sectarian violence, extremism and terrorism.² It concludes that the case for military intervention is finely balanced but should only gain support as one part of a broad political and economic strategy which must have the support of countries in the region. It is not certain that the most crucial elements of that strategy are in place.

2. The necessary conditions for any viable military intervention in Iraq and Syria – a view from the White House

While some media commentary would disagree, President Obama's stated approach to intervention in Iraq could hardly be more different than that of the United States' approach of 2003. The Bush administration judged that US military superiority would overcome the Ba'athist-led Iraqi military without difficulty, that a new Iraqi government would enjoy excellent relations with the US and that, while neighbours in the region may resent a US-led intervention, they could be persuaded not to object too loudly.

In his West Point speech in May 2014,³ in stark contrast and with the benefit of hindsight, President Obama laid out his approach to intervention in situations that do not pose a direct threat to the US. In such situations "the threshold for military action must be higher. In such circumstances, we should not go it alone. We must broaden our tools to include diplomacy and development;

¹ Originally known as ISIS and then ISIL. They now refer to themselves as Islamic State (IS) since announcing the establishment of a Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. President Obama and others have been at pains to point out that they are neither Islamic (having been disowned by many Muslim Imams) nor a State.

² See in particular *Peacemaking: A Christian Vocation* (Methodist Church and United Reformed Church: 2006) and *Drones: Ethical dilemmas in the application of military force* www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Drones-Military-Force.pdf

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-27606537>

sanctions and isolation; appeals to international law and - if just, necessary, and effective⁴ - multilateral military action.”

On 28 August 2014, Barack Obama attracted criticism after he stated very clearly that the components of a successful strategy for defeating IS were not yet in place. It would appear from White House statements that the US administration considers that the necessary military, political and economic components of any successful strategy must include: -

- A new Iraqi Cabinet that could attract co-operation from all sections of the Iraqi community.
- Substantial strengthening of the Iraqi Army.
- The arming and training of moderate militias including the Free Syrian Army and the Kurdish Peshmerga fighters.
- Protection of borders in order to isolate IS and in particular ensuring the Turkey cracks down on the export of IS oil.
- Support from Gulf States on military intervention and other measures required to defeat IS.⁵
- Campaigns across the Middle-East to counter the ideology of IS and discourage people in countries beyond Syria and Iraq from joining it.

Clearly the most crucial element is a functioning representative government in Baghdad that has the support of the major Iraqi groups. On 8 September the Iraqi Parliament approved Haider al-Abadi's cross-party cabinet although the two crucial posts of Minister of Interior and Minister of Defence remain unfilled. Consequently President Obama appears to have gained confidence that the necessary components for a strategy are now in place or could be developed. On 10 September President Obama announced airstrikes against IS in order to degrade and ultimately destroy the organisation. The approach is to arm the various local forces to defeat IS with the US providing air support but **not**, either now or at any future point, committing combat troops on the ground.

The US commitment that President Obama announced on 10 September is for: -

- US airstrikes in both Iraq and Syria
- Placement of US military personnel on the ground in Syria in combat roles including training, intelligence and technical support roles
- Support for the Iraqi Government's proposal to support a Sunni National Guard to enable Sunnis to free themselves from IS control
- Training and equipping of Free Syrian Army militias

⁴ Considerations that echo Just War Theory

⁵ Saudi Arabia and Qatar have supported or turned a blind eye to support of IS. These states now recognize that it is their interest to cut off channels for funding IS. However if IS is to be defeated comprehensively these states must go further and cease/prevent funding of all violent Sunni extremism in the region.

- Humanitarian assistance to support those displaced including assistance to enable those who wish to return to their ancient homelands

This was followed by the announcement on 23 September that a coalition of the United States, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar carried out air strikes against IS and Jabhat al-Nusra⁶ in Syria.

3. Are the necessary political, economic and military components for defeating IS in place?

Defeating IS in Iraq

Further substantial progress will need to be made on most of the above military and non-military components of a strategy for defeating IS. The new Iraqi Government cabinet retains many of the former ministers yet it must employ a very different approach to the al-Maliki cabinet if it is to address Sunni political grievances. To overcome the alienation felt by Sunni political leaders the Iraqi central government will need to offer greater regional autonomy. It is generally considered that overcoming the marginalisation of Sunni leadership will be essential to enlisting Sunni support for defeating IS.

Defeating IS in Syria

The situation in Syria is further complicated by Russian support for the Assad Government that has hampered effective engagement of the Security Council. It is very difficult to see how IS can be defeated in Syria without a more comprehensive plan to bring the Syrian conflict to an end. US air strikes on IS in Syria are highly controversial as it is reasonably argued that they are contrary to international law without either Syrian Government agreement or a Security Council resolution under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.

A coalition of human rights organisations (using the title *WithSyria*⁷) and faith groups is calling for the UN Security Council to employ non-military measures to address war crimes by all parties in Syria. Possible measures could include an arms embargo imposed on the Government of Syria and the establishment of a war crimes investigation under the auspices of the International Criminal Court. All parties to the Syrian conflict would be subject to scrutiny by any such investigation. Such measures represent a surer path to marginalising those who are committed to indiscriminate violence. Air strikes and other action in Syria risk further dividing the UN Security Council making broad multilateral initiatives more difficult to achieve.

4. The risks associated with military intervention in Iraq

Throughout central and northern Iraq there are disagreements over territory and the means of defending territory. There exist many potential and actual conflicts in Iraq unrelated to IS which have the scope to become more violent.

⁶ Jabhat al-Nusra (or the al-Nusra Front) was the most significant Jihadi group fighting in Syria prior to the rise of IS. There has since been fighting between Jabhat al-Nusra and IS. Jabhat al-Nusra were targeted along with IS in US and Gulf States air strikes of 23 September 2014.

⁷ www.withsyria.com/

Shia militias are also responsible for indiscriminate attacks on civilians and for terrorism. Like IS some of these militia have captured (or been given) US military hardware that was provided to the Iraqi Army.⁸

While mechanisms for mediating and resolving disagreements are so poor, further militarisation of Iraq is difficult to justify. There are huge risks involved in supplying more arms to Kurdish forces, Sunni militia and the Shi'ite dominated Iraqi Army when an overall political strategy for the country is still far off.

5. Some key questions

- How can the Iraqi Parliament be assisted in resolving fundamental issues that are fuelling conflict including demarcation and protection of regions, the sharing of national resources and oil revenues and devolution of powers to regions? Might there be a role for a UN High Level Group or Commission to support a national dialogue in some of these areas?
- What mechanisms are required to monitor gross human rights violations and to call to account those who are responsible for atrocities?
- How compatible is the arming of various groups in Iraq and Syria with our domestic and EU regulations on arms transfer and our obligations under the Arms Trade Treaty?
- What would be the wider ramifications of securing an agreement with the Assad Government (negotiated with Russian support) for US air strikes against IS in Syria?
- What is the future for the majority of the Christians currently sheltering in Kurdish areas of Iraq? Will they be successful in securing the means for physical protection that would provide confidence in a return to Qaraqosh and other locations in the Nineveh Plain or must they resign themselves to resettlement elsewhere?

6. Some conclusions

In 2013 Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed Churches cautioned against intervention in Syria to prevent further use of chemical weapons by the Syrian Government. We did so even after the UK Government expressed his openness to support of military intervention.

Some might feel that arguments around the proposed military intervention to defeat IS in Iraq are more finely balanced. Just War Theory can struggle to provide guidance in the context of asymmetric warfare and response to conflict involving terrorism. Consequently our churches urge a recovery of the Just War tradition in its fullest expression dating back to the thinking of Thomas Aquinas in the 3rd Century. We do not deny that there are circumstances in which our nation may be called upon to support military intervention to bring about justice and security. *Peacemaking: A Christian Vocation*⁹ provided a reflection on these issues after the 2003 Iraq intervention. With possible relevance to our response to the current crisis in Iraq, it is argued that authority to pursue war cannot be reduced to an assertion of a nation's right to self-defence.

⁸ www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/09/18/all_the_ayatollahs_men_shiite_militias_iran_iraq_islamic_state
⁹ www.jointpublicissues.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Peacemaking-a-christian-vocation-summary.pdf

IS is responsible for mass executions not only of soldiers but also of civilians. Their war crimes place on the international community the burden of a responsibility to protect. We have noted a range of non-military measures that could be employed against IS. But we must appreciate that IS is well-funded, seeming well-organised, has proven military capabilities and is already well-embedded in communities. We can have very little confidence that non-military measures on their own will even degrade, let alone defeat, IS. A case for military intervention could be made if it is employed as one component of a comprehensive political, judicial and economic strategy.

However without guarantees of regional support for a comprehensive strategy in both countries, there is a high likelihood that military intervention now, including the provision of arms to militia forces, will add to the increasing cycle of violence that has been a notable feature of the past few years.

Our churches and their members might usefully: -

- Stress the importance of UN sponsored human rights monitoring in Iraq and Syria including investigations under the auspices of the International Criminal Court
- Urge that refugees and displaced are adequately protected. Welcome the UK Government's generous support of displaced communities in the region and recommend that the UK Government offer the opportunity for resettlement of Christian families and others who feel unable to return to towns and villages in Iraq
- Be vocal concerning the threat to historic Christian communities across the Middle East and seek further alliances with Muslim partners to counter intolerance and extremism.

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