CNAS Press Note: Five Experts Weigh In on ISIS, Airstrikes and Syria

Contact: Neal Urwitz
202-457-9409
nurwitz@cnas.org

Washington, September 23 – With the U.S. and a broader coalition launching airstrikes against ISIS within Syria’s borders overnight, five experts from the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) have provided short commentaries on the mission, its value, and its potential outcome. The experts are:

- Richard Fontaine, CNAS President
- Shawn Brimley, CNAS Executive Vice President and Director of Studies
- Jerry Hendrix, CNAS Senior Fellow and Director of the Defense Strategy and Forces Program
- Dr. Dafna Rand, CNAS Leon E. Panetta Chair and Deputy Director of Studies
- Elbridge Colby, CNAS Robert M. Gates Fellow

All five experts are available for interviews. To arrange an interview, please contact Neal Urwitz at 202-457-9409 or nurwitz@cnas.org.

Please find the commentaries below:

Richard Fontaine: Syria Strikes Mark Start of a New Era for U.S. in the Middle East

After years of studiously avoiding direct intervention in the Syrian civil war, President Obama has reversed course in dramatic fashion. In so doing, the administration has correctly judged that the risks of inaction outweigh those of acting. By striking ISIS and Khorasan targets, the United States has become a prime mover in the conflict that has engulfed Syria and large parts of Iraq. This marks a new era for America’s role in a region from which many hoped to pivot away.

Not every operation can simultaneously aim to achieve American interests in homeland security, regional stability, and preventing humanitarian catastrophe, but this one does. ISIS poses an eventual threat to the United States and a current one to the stability of Iraq and neighboring countries. Its gains portend even greater human destruction among the populations of Iraq and Syria, and the U.S. is right to reverse its advances.

Airstrikes in Syria, however, represent merely the opening salvo of what must be a more comprehensive approach to that country. The current plan appears to turn not on the participation of any American or allied ground units, but eventually on some 5,000 moderate Syrian rebels who will be trained over the next year. This contingent, presumably backed by American air power, will be expected to combat up to 30,000 ISIS
fighters while evading Bashar Assad’s air force. How this coheres – and why these rebels would agree first to fight ISIS rather than pursue their longstanding goal of toppling Assad – remain very open questions. Sooner or later, it is highly likely that some limited foreign ground units will be required, whether American or from allied countries.

There are clear risks to military engagement, just as there are to disengagement – as we have seen recently in Libya and Iraq. The United States has turned a page in the Middle East over the past 24 hours, and it is actively shaping the security and the politics of both Iraq and Syria. It will take more than airstrikes to be successful in that endeavor.

**Shawn Brimley: Send in U.S. Combat Advisors**

The Obama administration is correctly taking a leading role in building a coalition to disrupt and destroy ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. History will judge whether the United States erred by not reacting sooner, but President Obama deserves credit for committing U.S. military forces to action.

However, if the intervention is to have any chance of succeeding, a critical component will be the presence of U.S. advisors on the ground, embedded with combat units from the Iraqi military, the Kurdish Peshmerga, or possibly Syrian rebel forces in the future.

The President is right to be wary of deploying large combat units back into Iraq, but there is utility in deploying small numbers of combat advisors. Recent history shows that the right kind of forces—with access to a formidable network of intelligence and precision munitions—can be operationally decisive.

ISIS potentially poses a greater operational challenge than Al Qaeda in late 2001. ISIS is bigger, enjoys access to lucrative black market oil revenue, and faces a much less cohesive opposition than Al Qaeda faced in Afghanistan. But it is worth recalling that the initial intervention in Afghanistan involved only several hundred U.S. special forces and intelligence personnel that embedded into Northern Alliance and other opposition forces and called in devastating air strikes that roiled the Taliban, leading to their initial retreat and the fall of Kabul.

U.S. combat advisors are needed on the ground now in Iraq. The American people are smart enough to distinguish between sending in the 101st Airborne Division, and the use of several hundred “quiet professionals” who could help our partners in Iraq and Syria take the fight to ISIS and win.

**Jerry Hendrix: Syria, Iraq and Avoiding Trivia**

General George Marshall gave George Kennan a clear instruction in establishing the State
Department’s Policy Planning Office, “Avoid Trivia”. In the past year political leaders from both sides of the aisle have struggled with the question of the ongoing civil war in Syria. Is it the trivia that Marshall warned about or is it something far larger? Both parties have been divided internally between their centers and their wings, with the center favoring the Wilsonian impulse to promote stability and both wings favoring a pull back.

ISIS’s surge out of Syria into Iraq has been accomplished with a rapidity not seen since American forces swept through the country eleven years ago, and they now control vast oil reserves and the wealth that goes with them. Factor in a couple of gruesome beheadings and we find ourselves launching Tomahawk missiles, and dropping bombs. Leaders both in the Congress and the Pentagon have asked that the 2011 Budget Control Act sequester provisions be set aside, defense spending be increased, and Army manpower cuts be reversed. A genuine clash of civilizations, it seems, is once again in the offing. Or is it?

ISIS is a threat. Led by charismatic leaders who espouse a virulent form of radical Islam and have access to oil wealth, it has the potential to undermine local and global stability. But is it a major threat, minor threat or something in between? No one seems to be talking about introducing a heavy armor division back into Iraq to combat ISIS. Not only does the nation not have an appetite for it, but there is no strategic need.

This is a problem to be solved by bombs, bankers and bullets. Bombs, such as the ones dropped last evening, are needed to break up ISIS’s cohesion and disperse their force while attriting the terrorist’s fleet of ubiquitous white pick-up trucks. Bankers are needed to seize funds flowing from radical Islamic donors to ISIS and prohibit profits from accruing from the sale of petroleum. We formulated this tactic against Saddam, polished it against Putin, and now can bring it to bear against ISIS. Lastly we need bullets. Not lots of them from massed infantry formations, but single bullets originating from discreet rifles directed against discreet targets. When being the leader of a radical terrorist group become synonymous with a Darwinian impulse toward extinction, the quality of leadership quickly declines. To do this appropriately, the President should reverse his stand of the introduction of ground forces and allow special operations teams to embed with local resistance, identify ISIS leaders and eliminate them.

So is ISIS trivia? No, but it is also not a major threat and shouldn’t be used to justify a major operation in the Middle East. This should be avoided.
Dafna Rand: Let’s Talk About the Syrian End Game

The Obama administration deserves credit for building a strong coalition of Arab countries as it expands its airstrikes against ISIS into Syria. It is no small feat for the United States to fight alongside both Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and to extract from a range of Arab allies actual military commitments and actions, in addition to political, diplomatic and rhetorical support. This coalition speaks to a general regional consensus: ISIS – with its apocalyptic bastardization of Islam – poses a direct, urgent threat to the citizens of the Middle East and beyond.

This U.S.- Arab coalition must do more than work together conducting airstrikes, however. The American public rightly expects its decision-makers to spend as much time planning how this mess in Syria ends as they are executing the military intervention against ISIS. Doing so will require diplomatic discussions with Arab coalition allies and key regional players such as Turkey on how to de-escalate the conflict, de-centralize power away from the regime, and diffuse the sectarianism that is fueling the fighting. As part of this diplomacy, the U.S. and its Arab and Turkish allies should agree on which “moderate” Syrian opposition they want to fill the vacuum, seizing control of the Syrian territory now ruled by ISIS.

There is no perfect end state in Syria that will guarantee the United States and its allies’ interests. That said, there are livable solutions. Therefore, the new Coalition’s military efforts against ISIS must be step one of a larger strategy that forces the Assad regime back to the negotiating table. He must be chastened enough to recognize that there is no military solution to the civil conflict. This will allow the regime and a more unified Syrian opposition to agree on a sequenced transition based on principles of power-sharing and de-centralization.

Elbridge Colby: Keep Perspective on the ISIS Campaign

There are few more justified recent uses of American military force than the current campaign against the ISIS/ISIL army. ISIS/ISIL and jihadi groups like Khorasan represent a real and visceral threat to the United States. As we learned on 9/11, it is best to strike at and wound these groups before they develop the reach and power to do great damage. Accordingly, the United States and its coalition partners should prepare for a tough and enduring campaign against these groups.

At the same time, however, it is crucial that the United States not lose perspective. The point of such efforts should not be to resolve the bloody civil war in Syria or stabilize Iraq’s fractious politics, let alone turn the region into an exemplar of tolerance and democracy. Nor can such a campaign be expected to “destroy” violent radical Islam or rid the world of terrorism.
Instead, the United States needs to scope its objectives in this campaign rightly. That means focusing on degrading and, where possible, decisively crippling elements of the radical Islamic groups that could realistically threaten the United States or our allies. This means hitting hard (particularly with air power, special operations forces, and the like) when the threat rises and toning it down when the danger recedes, knowing that the problem is very unlikely to be “solved” exclusively or even primarily by our military action. This won’t be satisfying, but it will help us avoid the opposing dangers of, on the one hand, embroiling ourselves in costly, frustrating, and probably counterproductive major ground campaigns and, on the other, inviting attack and instability in the region by trying to walk away from its most fearsome problems.

At the same time, we need to maintain a larger perspective on the geopolitical implications of this campaign. Fighting transnational terrorists will likely be an enduring requirement for the U.S. military and the nation’s intelligence services – and for the nation’s strategy – for as far as the eye can see. But there are tectonic shifts in world power relationships, military balances, technology, and economic might that are more profound in their implications than the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Thus, even as the country continues to go after transnational terrorists, the nation needs to keep its aim fixed on staying ahead with respect to these profound shifts – by maintaining our military-technological superiority over other great powers like China and Russia, by maintaining our network of alliances and partnerships, and by restoring our economic vitality to shore up our international position. Our ongoing campaign against violent Islamic terrorists should not unduly hamper or detract from our ability to achieve these goals.

To arrange an interview, please contact Neal Urwitz at nurwitz@cnas.org, or call 202-457-9409.