

## Furthering a Failed Strategy, Obama to Send More Ground Troops to Iraq

Critics say that everything the administration is doing in Middle East is making things worse, not better.

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Image: U.S. President Barack Obama speaks during a media conference at the conclusion of the G-7 summit on Monday, June 8, 2015. (Photo: Markus Schreiber/AP)

*In a move anti-war critics and foreign policy experts are certain to call simply an extension of a policy that has proved a failure, the New York Times reports the Obama administration is planning to build a new military base in the western part of Iraq and send additional ground troops in an attempt to turn the tide against Islamic State (ISIS) forces who have continued to take and hold ground on sides of the Syrian border in recent weeks.*

*After recent advances by ISIS that allowed them to capture the city of Ramadi in Iraq's Anbar Province, the Pentagon is talking openly about sending what it calls "additional trainers" to bolster the Iraqi army in the Sunni-dominated region that skirts Syria.*

As the *Times* [reports](#):

In a major shift of focus in the battle against the Islamic State, the Obama administration is planning to establish a new military base in Anbar Province, Iraq, and to send 400 more American military trainers to help Iraqi forces retake the city of Ramadi. [...]

The additional American troops will arrive as early as this summer, a United States official said, and will focus on training Sunni fighters with the Iraqi Army. The official called the coming announcement "an adjustment to try to get the right training to the right folks."

Though there are already approximately 3,000 U.S. soldiers on the ground in Iraq, President Obama [made headlines](#) on Monday when he spoke from the G7 summit in Germany and admitted that the U.S. did not yet have a "complete strategy" for dealing with ISIS.

However, as Jason Ditz [writes](#) at *Anti-War.com*, the idea to send additional U.S. troops to Iraq was not entirely unexpected,

as President Obama had previously indicated this his [primary](#) goal at this point was to speed up the training of Iraqi troops. The new troops are being labeled "trainers," but are likely to be among those that Pentagon officials are openly talking about "embedding" on the front lines, meaning they'd be sent into direct combat.

As losses have mounted in Iraq and Syria, with ISIS taking more and more cities, the Pentagon has repeatedly rejected the idea that the strategy was at all flawed, and has tried to blame Iraqi troops for not winning more. The US appears to be doubling down on this narrative by adding troops.

But according to critics of Obama's foreign policy and war strategy in Syria and Iraq, everything the administration is doing "right now is making the situation worse" - not better.

That is the sentiment of Phyllis Bennis, senior fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, who in a [recent interview](#) with the *Real News Network* said the Pentagon's plan to send more weapons and troops (whether you call them "trainers" or "advisers" or something else) will only prolong the violence in the region. Describing the situation as "whack-a-mole," Bennis said the outcomes over the last year have been terrible and that a continuation of the strategy would predictably create more chaos and death for the people of Iraq and Syria.

"We suddenly have the challenge of dealing with ISIS in Ramadi in Iraq," she explained,

"so we're going to send a huge amount of resources, soldiers and new weapons and whatever, to Ramadi, where in the meantime whether it's in Syria, whether it's in Iraq, there are other crisis zones that are being created, even as we speak. And the more weapons that get sent, the more weapons end up in the hands of ISIS. That's true in Iraq, it's true in Syria."

She continued:

As long as we keep saying we have to do the military stuff better, we have to do more weapons, we have to do more training, we have to change the training, we have to train this group rather than that group, it's not going to work. It hasn't worked yet. And it simply isn't going to work, because every one of those military actions ends up creating more anger, more opposition, even in those rare occasions when the U.S. gets the person they're actually aiming at rather than 15 innocent civilians who happen to be surrounding them. Even in those situations, those people have families and friends and villages and tribes and religious groups that they're part of who are outraged at the U.S. military assaults. And every bit of that outrage over time, as it gets worse and worse, and deeper and deeper, it turns into greater support for the most extremist terrorist elements. So this is a failed strategy.

Meanwhile, in a [lengthy article](#) published in *The Nation*, Sherle R. Schwenninger, director of the Economic Growth Program at the New America Foundation and a senior fellow at the World Policy Institute, [argues](#) that the disaster fostered by the U.S. in Iraq and Syria proves without question the overall failure of Obama's foreign policy mindset. Though he acknowledges that the prevailing criticism in Washington, D.C.—from liberal interventionists and the neoconservatives that drove and supported the failed policies of President George W. Bush—is that Obama has been too timid in his handling of the war in Syria and Iraq, Schwenninger says the reality, in fact, is that "the administration has been too quick on the draw." If Obama had not worked to funnel supplies of weapons into the region or "done more to restrain our allies from supporting foreign jihadi fighters in both Syria and Iraq," says Schwenninger, it is possible that "ISIS would not be on the march to the degree that it is today."

However, he continued,

“by helping to open the floodgates for both weapons and fighters, the administration is now looking at an endless new war that will only bleed us morally as well as financially. If Obama had actually acted with the restraint that his critics accuse him of, can anyone seriously say we would be worse off?”

Importantly, Schwenninger points out that among those saying that Obama’s policy is not aggressive enough when it comes to Iraq and Syria, are the same people—including Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham and other prominent war hawks—“who cheered us into the war in Iraq.” The credentials of these critics, he argues, should have thoroughly discredited them, “but over the last several years, they have had a disproportionate influence in shaping a narrative of US foreign policy that is almost as misguided as the one they spun in the lead-up to the Iraq War.”

And while the fighting continues and the war expands with the sending of more foreign weapons and troops, who benefits?

According to Bennis, it’s certainly not the Iraqi or Syrian people.

“The people who benefit,” she told the *RNN*, “are the CEOs and the shareholders of these giant corporations who make the planes and the bombs and the bullets and the teargas, and all of the weapons that are being sold to all the different sides. They are the ones who are a huge stumbling block.”

But if more weapons and an expanded military footprint by the U.S. are not the answer, what is? Bennis says the answer to that question has always been the same: a call for both a cease fire and a regional arms embargo, followed by serious diplomatic efforts. Explaining what that might look like, she said:

Well, I think you start from the vantage point that if you’re serious about diplomacy, everybody has to be at the table. You don’t exclude anyone because you think they’re a terrorist, or you think they might not abide by the agreements. Because if you exclude people, you’re giving them the excuse to violate any agreement that’s reached. This was the lesson that former senator George Mitchell brought back after helping to negotiate the Good Friday accords in Northern Ireland. He said if you’re serious about diplomacy, everybody has to be at the table.

So if we start from that vantage point, if we’re talking about talks to end the Syrian civil war, Iran has to be at the table. Part of the reason the talks failed the last two times was that the U.S. took the position that Iran is prohibited. Iran can’t come, because they’re part of the problem. Well, they are part of the problem. So is the U.S. But the problem is if you ignore the people who are part of the problem, they’re not ever going to become part of the solution. So yes, Iran has to be at the table. Russia has to be at the table. The Syrian regime has to be at the table. All of the Syrian opposition forces have to be at the table.

The U.S. allies in the region that are arming and paying all of those opposition forces, some of whom are extremist Muslims, the Nusra Front. Some are more secular forces. But the strongest ones, the ones with the biggest presence and the strongest presence on the ground, are all Islamist. They need to be at the table. Those governments that are arming them, the Saudis, the Kuwaitis, the

UAE, Qatar, Jordan, Turkey, all those governments have to be at the table.

This is going to be big, regional, and indeed global negotiations that should be under the auspices of the United Nations. People say, well, how can you talk about negotiating, you can't talk to ISIS. They're crazy. I'm not necessarily saying that you start with direct talks with ISIS. That may or may not be possible at a later point. But at the initial point, you must talk to those who are enabling ISIS. That means talking to the governments that are responsible for arming, that are providing the arms that ISIS is stealing, and that are directly supporting ISIS and ISIS-linked forces, like in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf. That also means you have to support the presence at the table not only of the government of Syria, for example, the government of Bashar al-Assad. But you also have to have at the table those who are arming and paying that regime. So that means that Russia and Iran have a major role to play.

In the end, Bennis concluded, an arms embargo may be the hardest part to imagine, because "that's where people are making money off of these wars."

Watch the full interview:

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