

The world's determination to defeat Isil is a myth

By Richard Spencer

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There can never have been a policy that more governments are committed to achieving without actually trying to achieve it than the world's so-called determination to "defeat Isil".

Everyone is now at it - fighting Isil, that is: the Syrian and Iraqi governments, obviously, parts of whose territory Isil controls; within those failed states, a smorgasbord of local and foreign Shia militias, Iran's Revolutionary Guard, two major Kurdish fighting forces and in Syria non-Isil anti-Assad rebels, including al-Qaeda.

Then there's the [Western allies](#) - the air forces of the United States, Britain, [France](#), Australia, who are bombing Isil in one country or both, with help from other European armed forces in various ways. [Russia](#), of course, has joined in, proudly suggesting that in some way it is the only nation really serious about "defeated terrorism". Finally, there are other Middle Eastern states with a vested interest in preventing Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant's caliphate getting out of control - Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey are all active or notional parts of the coalition.

Isil are either miraculous fighters or - and this is the truth - the attempt to defeat them is a myth.

It is not of course a myth that all these actors are fighting Isil: the bombs the RAF is dropping are real enough, as are the massacres of Iraqi, Syrian and other troops whose battles have ended in surrender.

It is just that none of these actors has a plan to take Isil's territory and capture or kill all its fighters, the conventional notion of defeating an enemy. Other priorities get in the way.

- The Americans - and the British at least among their allies - want Isil to go but think it will take a properly trained ground force to get rid of it and are not prepared to commit troops, for domestic political reasons. President Obama, additionally, believes that there is no point defeating Isil while the conditions that led to its rise are in place, such as localised sectarian conflict, though he has no real notion of how to get rid of those conditions.

- Some elements in the Iraqi government may genuinely want to see the country reunited at all costs but others realise that if the Sunnis in Iraq return to the national fold the Shia majority will have to share power with them. Currently, Shia supremacist parties hold sway. These Shia parties are linked to the Shia militias that are fighting Isil on the ground - but signally failing to attack them in Sunni Arab strongholds like Fallujah and Mosul.

- The Assad regime's strategy presumably sees it eventually taking on Isil, but over most of the civil war its main enemy has been non-Isil rebels, who pose a more direct threat to regime heartlands. Having Isil fight them simultaneously has not been a bad thing.

- The Iranians don't want Isil to gain ground but having a Sunni bogeyman, for whose existence they can blame their Sunni foes in the Gulf, has a certain use. The existence of Isil also prevents Sunni Arab states

presenting a united face against their own ambitions.

- The Gulf states want to keep Isil down but they also see Isil as a lesser enemy than Iran, and certainly aren't going to waste forces attacking fellow Sunnis that they could be using to fight Shia proxies in Yemen.
- Russia has ruled out sending ground troops, and has mostly targeted non-Isil rebels with its bombing campaign, since it believes the priority is to preserve the Assad regime. As these rebels are also fighting Isil, this has had the unfortunate effect of actually helping Isil advance in some areas, even as it cedes ground to Russian-backed regime forces in others.
- Turkey has made clear its main enemy is the Kurdish PKK, rather than Isil.
- The Kurds have a track record of success against Isil in both Iraq and Syria - thanks in part to their alliance with the US and other western air forces. But they have little interest in pushing beyond Kurdish territory. In Iraq, the Peshmerga took Sinjar last week, not Mosul.



Some people, understandably, say that when they see all the different forces at war in the region it must simply be just too complicated to beat a well-organised, highly ideological enemy. But in fact, it's all very simple: no-one, including Britain, is quite threatened enough to take the risk of injecting overwhelming force.

In May, when the provincial capital of Iraq's Sunni-dominated Anbar province, Ramadi, fell to Isil, both the Iraqi government and the Americans talked of attacking and retaking it within days.

Periodically, reports have been issued about an imminent assault; it has never happened.

The explanation given is that the Iraqi troops are not strong enough to do so, and will not be so until they have been "trained" by the Americans - something the Americans have already spent a decade trying to do.

The real explanation is that Iraqi ground forces are dominated by Shia militias whose priority is to guard the

strategic approaches to the Shia-majority areas of Iraq rather than retake Anbar.

Why should we fight against Isil if the Sunnis aren't prepared to do it for themselves, Hadi al-Ameri, the Iranian-backed Shia militia leader in Iraq, said to me at the time. He outright derided the suggestion of a full-frontal assault on Ramadi.

A properly mounted, properly manned, and properly equipped western army probably could dispatch Isil's caliphate reasonably quickly, if it were prepared to inflict and sustain the casualties normal in traditional warfare.

But if France has that in mind, the evidence suggests it will be on its own.

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