

Additional U.S. Ground Troops to Counter the Islamic State? Five Questions

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Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR)—the military campaign to counter the [Islamic State \(IS\)](#)—has three primary components: coordinated air strikes, training and equipping local security forces, and targeted special operations based out of northern Iraq. Perceived setbacks in OIR have led some observers to maintain that inserting significant numbers of additional U.S. and/or coalition ground forces is becoming necessary. Proposals include, but are not limited to, the introduction of additional ground forces to secure territory once it has been taken back from the Islamic State, and the introduction of additional trainers for local security forces. However, there are no clear-cut answers to determining the suitability, size, and mission profile of the ground elements of any military campaign; determining the disposition of military forces is in many ways as much an art as it is a science. As it evaluates proposals to introduce more ground forces for OIR, Congress may therefore ponder five questions:

What Are We Trying To Accomplish?

The first step in deciding the profile of a military campaign is determining the precise goals that armed forces are expected to accomplish. According to the White House, the core goal of the U.S. strategy to [counter the Islamic State](#) is to "degrade and ultimately destroy IS." United States Central Command was subsequently authorized to conduct a campaign to work with local partners in order to "[degrade and defeat](#)" the Islamic State. Yet [according to U.S. Army doctrine](#), there are subtle yet important differences between these stated goals and military missions that, ultimately, have implications for the disposition of forces on the ground. "Defeating" an enemy to the point where it no longer has the political will or physical capability to fight is generally believed to require more intensive combat—and a more significant ground presence—than "destroying" its ability to be effective in combat. "Degrading" is not clearly defined in Army doctrine. This interchanging of terms is not unique to this campaign, although it may make it more challenging to assess whether, from a military oversight perspective, existing forces allocated to countering the Islamic State are adequate to the task.

What Roles Can Ground Forces Play?

Given the U.S. focus on countering the Islamic State, policymakers may debate the most effective way of utilizing military force to achieve that goal. For example, if the instability created by the civil conflict in Syria is assessed to be a

key element allowing IS to flourish, then U.S. forces might be employed toward helping bring about a cessation of hostilities between the Syrian government and opposition forces. On the other hand, if policymakers judge that IS can be eradicated without resolving the broader regional conflict, they may, in turn, assess that targeted counterterrorism operations may be more appropriate. Presently, the campaign appears to more resemble the latter, although both courses of action present risks; prioritizing one over the other may not necessarily eliminate the threat that the region poses to the United States and its allies. Building the capacity of local forces would likely be common to both approaches, although historically, [the results of such BPC programs are mixed](#). Some [observers](#) maintain that deploying ground forces in significant additional numbers would be counterproductive, as it might exacerbate the existing conflict and make U.S. forces a target.

Who Else Might Participate?

Many experts agree a significant long-term commitment of local—and possibly regional—forces and resources are required to counter the Islamic State and, once defeated, prevent its reemergence. Yet generating the forces needed for implementing this may prove problematic due to shortfalls in either political will or military capability or differing strategic aims amongst possible contributors. Indeed, Secretary Carter has already expressed frustration that [coalition partners are not shouldering enough of the military burden](#) of countering the Islamic State. Fitting various national contributions of differing size and quality into a [coherent coalition campaign](#) is another challenge. Complicating matters, the introduction of Russian troops—which are not part of the U.S.-led coalition—arguably led to restrictions in the coalition's freedom of movement across Syria as well as setbacks; Moscow initially appears to have [targeted rebels that reportedly received U.S. training](#) as it undertook its operations.

How Many U.S. Troops Will be Required?

This process is referred to by military planners as "determining troops to task." While a somewhat complex process, the two most important factors are (1) mission and (2) the enemy. Is the mission to destroy the Islamic State militarily on the battlefield or does it also include establishing and perhaps sustaining stability locally or regionally (the latter requiring more troops than the former)? In terms of the enemy, military planners take into consideration how large and how capable the enemy force is, as well as how it is arrayed on the battlefield and how it operates—do they stand and fight or disperse into the civilian population when engaged? Absent detailed guidance on mission and information on the enemy, military planners tend to allocate higher numbers of troops to an operation to mitigate risk.

How Long Will Ground Operations Last?

There is no straightforward answer to determining the likely duration of a ground campaign. This is because the time it will take to succeed depends on a number of factors: the overall objective of the campaign, the number and capabilities of troops allocated to the mission, the adversary's tenacity, and so on. Still, a possible analogy can be drawn from counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns, which have lasted an average of between [11.4](#) and [14 years](#). Yet some consider the analogy imperfect: COIN requires the existence of capable on-the-ground partners in sufficient numbers. While the United States supports the government in Baghdad as it works to roll back the Islamic State in Iraq, the United States has found it difficult to identify a broad range of partners it can support in Syria.