

Hic Sunt Dracones!

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The US and a coalition of allies are once again intervening in the Middle East. This time it is in response to the rapid military advancement of Daesh, the acronym Arabic speakers use for the Arabic name of ISIS, Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham. Some ten weeks into the start of military operations a common view is that the coalition's aerial campaign has only had limited success at best. On the plus side, coalition air power coupled with local forces on the ground were able to save a great many Iraqi Yazidis who were being threatened by Daesh, but equally a great many of this sectarian minority were massacred and, in the case of women and girls, raped or sold into sexual slavery. The Kurds subsequent to the initial retreat of their much vaunted Peshmerga forces have been able to stabilize their fighting lines against Daesh and regain control of the important Mosul dam. This particular success is in part due to the Kurds themselves and in part due to the support of coalition air strikes and delivery of supplies, but it also appears to be due in part to Daesh turning its focus to Anbar and northern Syria. On the negative side, Daesh not only continues to hold Mosul, among many other Iraqi cities and towns, but it has also expanded its control of territory in Anbar province from where it now poses a potential threat to Baghdad and areas in and around the Iraqi capital city. Daesh also made significant advances in northern Syria where it threatened to overrun the Kurdish city of Kobane on the Syria-Turkey border, creating the looming prospect of the massacre of the fighters and civilians still there. Over the past few days the intensification of coalition air strikes in and around this city appears to have halted and at least partially pushed back the Daesh assault, but the city

and its inhabitants are far from being safe as it could still fall in the days and weeks to come.

That the US-led coalition's aerial campaign has so far only had mixed success at the tactical level should not really be a surprise. The military operation, recently named *Operation Inherent Resolve*, can be characterized so far as an 'economy of force' operation, with the coalition only committing limited aerial capabilities to the campaign. The coalition, in short, only has so much to go around, and so has needed to prioritize where it focuses its efforts. An example of this phenomenon is that the recent increase in ground attacks in support of the Kurds in Kobane has been accompanied by a reduction of air strike in central Iraq. The amount of air power the US-led coalition will be able to bring to bear will grow as various allies in the coalition commit more military capabilities to the fight, but the limited amount of military assets that these allies, including European countries such as France and the United Kingdom, are delivering are not significant enough to be represent a decisive increase. Moreover, many of the allies are only willing to contribute directly to the air campaign in Iraq but not in Syria. The coalition campaign is also hampered by a lack of sufficient intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities which are required to locate and identify ground targets in a manner timely enough for strike aircraft to hit often fleeting targets. The bulk of the coalition ISR capabilities have to come mostly from the US, as was the case in the NATO-led aerial campaign in Libya in 2011. Yet the US has many other ongoing military commitments, not least the seemingly forgotten war in Afghanistan, which constrains how much of its ISR capabilities it will be able to furnish. Adding to the difficulty faced by the coalition is that Daesh ground forces very quickly, and unsurprisingly, learned not to gather or move in large groups, to stay as much as possible amongst civil populations and to utilize deception and camouflage to hide. A dilemma for the coalition is that the air campaign is likely to devolve into striking occasional fleeting, small Daesh targets, which will only contribute in a limited fashion to the aim of defeating and destroying Daesh. And should the campaign devolve into 'plinking' it will be confronted with growing pressure to commit special operation personnel to serve as forward air controllers and/or full combat battle groups to attack Daesh directly.

The coalition lacks effective ground forces to do the real dirty work of warfare. The absence of effective ground combat power makes very problematic US President Barack Obama's stated strategic aim not just to degrade Daesh but to defeat and destroy it. The best military option for the US, as General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff publically admitted, was to commit both American air and ground forces to the fight. The issue of whether the US should commit ground forces raises two dilemmas. One dilemma is the question, which seems largely elided in the broader public debate, of whether committing US combat forces would actually prove to be decisively successful. American military experiences over the past 13 years in Afghanistan and Iraq would strongly suggest that not only might the commitment of US ground forces not be decisive but it might very well result in the US being militarily bogged down yet again in a long and largely indecisive unconventional ground war. The second dilemma facing US policy makers is that doing what is militarily best runs counter to what is politically possible. Polls suggest that while the American people generally support the idea that Daesh must be stopped, they do not support American boots on the ground, meaning that selling domestically a US ground campaign would be exceptionally hard. Equally, it is very doubtful that any of America's current allies in the campaign, including the usually faithful UK, would be able or willing to commit ground forces due to their own domestic constraints. It further is far from evident that American and allied ground forces would be widely welcomed in Iraq. The virulent anti-American sentiments of many of the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias which have joined the fight against Daesh makes very plausible some recent claims that they would turn their guns on any American ground forces, as might well the small number of Iranian forces that are reportedly fighting in Iraq. American, European, Iraqi and regional Middle Eastern memories of the eight year US intervention in Iraq are so recent and vivid that committing a substantial American ground combat force into that country would be a political disaster in the making. In the face of these two dilemmas, it is little wonder that the Obama administration is extremely reluctant to interject once more US ground forces into the Middle East.

The US nonetheless recognizes that ground force is needed if the coalition is to succeed in the aim of defeating Daesh. A key part of the US plan is to rely on local forces to provide the ground combat power needed to pursue effectively the stated

aims. The intent to depend on local forces is not unreasonable, not only because of strong domestic restraints and questions about the effectiveness of committing American ground forces, but also because Daesh poses an immediate and existential threat to Iraq and a serious threat to neighbouring regional actors. The problem with this approach is that the Iraqi military was effectively routed and the Kurdish Peshmerga knocked back by fast moving Daesh assaults. The US and a number of its allies are deploying a not insignificant number of military advisors to train Iraqi military and Kurdish Peshmerga forces as well as to furnish a degree of coordination between the coalition air forces and the local ground forces. The process of training Iraqi military and Kurdish forces to improve their combat capability, however, is a long term process and whether this will be successful is open to question. The US spent upwards of US\$20 billion to train Iraqi forces when the American military was still firmly ensconced in that country, and yet the Iraqi military still essentially folded under the pressure of the Daesh assault. Replacing the Iraqi military leaders who were political appointees may help instill a greater will to fight, but a member of the US team which initially went to Iraq to evaluate what was required indicated that only about half of Iraqi military units were suitable for American-provided training and support. Rebuilding even a part of the Iraqi military will take time, yet Iraq's need for an effective combat force is now. A problem facing the US and coalition partners is the question of whether Iraqi forces can hold if Daesh continues to press its assaults in Anbar and in and around Baghdad. It is likely that Daesh will find Baghdad a difficult target to take and hold. Yet Daesh over the past months has clearly demonstrated that it is tactically and operationally astute, and it may be aiming, as has been suggested by some commentators, to surround the capital city and take its airport to effectively cut it off from support and reinforcement. If this is Daesh's aim and it is successful in achieving it, this could confront the US and its coalition allies with the dilemma of either committing ground forces, even if ostensibly temporarily, to prevent a strategic loss and prevent a potentially very major humanitarian disaster, or doing nothing and being seen by the Middle East and the world to do nothing, to forestall a strategic blow to American and allied credibility and alleviate a major humanitarian disaster.

The Obama administration has further committed to furnish training and material support to selected groups fighting against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, in the hope that the group or groups it supports will be willing to take on Daesh.

The stated intent is to equip and train some 5000 fighters. This goal is fraught with difficulties, not least of which is that it too is a long term process. As was the case several years ago when the US backed away from supporting Syrian opposition groups, one dilemma the Obama administration faces is which group or groups to train and support? Some estimates are that there are over a hundred different opposition groups active within Syria today. The liberal and moderate Syrians that started the peaceful protests against the al-Assad regime in 2011 are pretty much long gone, having been jailed by the regime, fled the country, been marginalized by the groups which have resorted to violence, or killed by either the regime or some opposition group. The largest and most combat effective opposition groups tend to be the radical or extremist Islamic groups, such as Daesh and al Nusra, and these hold the widest swathes of territory in Syria. The opposition groups that the US is most likely to find relatively ideationally compatible are mostly small, hard pressed groups which currently are only able to hold limited ground and have a limited battlefield reach. And even should the US identify opposition groups with political views and goals it can support, the broken up and chaotic character of the battlefield that is Syria means that opposition groups often and even regularly work with other opposition groups with radical, even virulently anti-American, views. Such cooperation between opposition groups with different political goals stem in part from a shared desire to oust the al-Assad regime but for smaller groups it is also in part a matter of necessity if they are to survive. With the US-led coalition attacking radical extremist groups in Syria, which so far seems to be benefiting the al-Assad regime, finding a viable opposition group to support will not be easy, and if and when they do find such a group there is no guarantee that the group will emphasize fighting Daesh instead of continuing their fight against the detested ruling regime.

Another dilemma the US faces, or perhaps rather a number of dilemmas it faces, lies with the make-up of the coalition it ostensibly leads. The coalition of Middle Eastern, European and North American states is bound only by a general agreement that Daesh, and its savage employment of massacres, beheadings, ethnic cleansing and declared genocidal intent, and rape and sexual slavery of women and girls, poses an unacceptable threat. Yet while there may be a broad consensus within the coalition that Daesh poses a threat, precisely what is threatened varies across the multinational

coalition, as does the priority of this particular threat with respect to other perceived national interests. For some states, most particularly Iraq, the threat is to its core security interests, national survival; to others, such as the US, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, the threat posed is to their regional interests; while yet for others, such as European and North American states, the immediate threat is to their values while more distantly it is the perceived threat of terrorism at home. An inherent problem is that different coalition members have different interests involved and hence what they perceive as an optimal outcome differs, in some cases quite dramatically. It may be a 'coalition of the willing' but it is also a 'coalition of the problematic'.

The overarching dilemma is the lack of unity in and amongst the coalition members. Iraq clearly has the most at risk from the threat posed by Daesh, and is the main ally of the US in the coalition. Iraq, however, is far from unified. The Iraqi political class removed Nouri al-Maliki as prime minister at the insistence of the US, but the new prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, has struggled to form a unified government due to the jockeying amongst Shi'a, Sunni and Kurdish parties for positions. al-Abadi was only able to appoint new ministers of the interior and security that were acceptable to the Iraqi parliament on 18 October, but there are concerns about the new minister of the interior, who is a member of the Badr Organization which operated notorious Shi'a death squads during the Iraqi sectarian civil war. The new Iraqi government reportedly has agreed to devolve more autonomy to Sunni dominated areas, such as Anbar, and to the Kurds, but whether this will be sufficient to assuage these groups' concerns about a Shi'a dominated central government remains to be seen. Daesh was able to capture of Mosul as rapidly as it did in no small part due to Sunnis perceiving that its rule, however savage, was preferable to the oppression they suffered under al-Maliki's partisan Shi'a government. Reportedly many Sunni tribes in Anbar province and northwestern Iraq are rethinking this decision and may be willing to fight against Daesh, but they will remain distrustful of any promises made to them by a Shi-a dominated central government. The Kurds, for their part, acted quickly in the wake of the Daesh capture of Mosul and environs to seize control of Kirkuk and followed this with an open declaration that their aim was independence. Kurdish leaders have retreated from the issue of independence, but are very unlikely to give up control of Kirkuk or their desire for independence. The internecine political in-fighting amongst the various Shi'a parties and organizations for position and power may ultimately

constrain the central government from being able to offer political and power concessions to the Sunni and Kurds sufficient to allay their concerns and ambitions. The political infighting within Iraq also raises questions about the country's ability to wage a successful war against Daesh that has occupied significant parts of its territory. In the aftermath of a successful campaign against Daesh it is almost certain that Iraq will not be the Iraq of today, and it may not even remain whole. A dilemma for the US and allies in dealing with Iraq will be managing the trade-offs between obtaining effective military capabilities while not falling afoul of its complex internal political dynamics.

Turkey represents another type of problematic ally within the coalition. Ankara's response to the fierce Daesh assault on Kobane has made evident that while it is concerned about Daesh, it perceives the toppling of the al-Assad regime and the internal concern with its Kurdish population as being higher priorities. In the face of pressure from Washington to act to save Kobane and allow coalition aircraft to fly from Turkish bases, Ankara's proposal has been that it would be willing to commit ground forces to create a safe zone in northern Syria and contribute militarily more broadly if and only if other coalition members - meaning the US - also commit ground forces and establish a no-fly zone over this area. For Washington to agree to the Turkish proposal would result in American ground combat forces in Syria, place the US directly against the al-Assad government (and hence likely entail a military commitment to ensure it falls) and make the US complicit in a Turkish desire to quell Kurdish groups on the Syrian side of its southern border. Turkey's potential military contribution is militarily very desirable but the political costs of obtaining this help are too high.

The problems and tensions within the coalition are certainly not confined to Iraq and Turkey; these two allies merely furnish egregious examples of the sorts of problems and tensions which exist within the coalition. Several of the US's Middle Eastern coalition partners are willing to contribute militarily to the air campaign against Daesh, but at the same time have been funnelling money and weapons to Syria opposition groups, including radical Islamic opposition groups. These coalition partners can be expected to continue to pursue their own aims in Syria. Iran, though not an official member of the coalition, has some forces in Iraq fighting against Daesh to protect its particular interests in that country, and Tehran and Riyadh dislike each other and are engaged in a wider struggle for power and influence in the Middle East and in Syria in

particular. The European and Canadian members of the coalition generally share America's interests and concerns, and therefore are unlikely to create any significant tensions within the coalition. These allies, however, are subject to internal concerns, and as the campaign drags, as it surely will, they are very likely to start to face domestic pressure to withdraw. The military campaign against Daesh in both Iraq and Syria will take many years, and a core dilemma facing the US, and indeed its coalition partners, is whether the coalition can hold together given its fissiparous character. And if the coalition in time starts to fracture and Daesh remains, even if degraded, what then?

The US and its partners need to balance military effectiveness and political practicality. Efforts to improve military effectiveness will likely come at the expense of the political side of the equation, and vice versa. The US, along with its Canadian, European and Middle East allies, have embarked on a course of action that is difficult and problematic, and which is filled with great uncertainty as to its course and ultimate outcome. Regional and local powers, including coalition members, can be expected to respond to and manipulate the actions of the US-led coalition in order to achieve their particular interests in both Iraq and Syria, and their efforts will affect whatever is the end state that results as a consequence of this intervention. Medieval European map makers sometimes drew dragons, sea serpents and other mythological creatures at the edges of their maps to mark the beginning of the uncharted areas of which they had no knowledge. The written phrase 'here are dragons' at the edges of the charted world has popularly come to denote a warning that explorers heading past the edge of their maps were entering unexplored and dangerous territory. What will be the result of the US-led campaign is unknowable for the coalition has already entered uncharted political and military waters where the warning *hic sunt dracones* definitely applies.