

# COMMENTARY

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## **Defeating the Islamic State: A War mired in contradictions**

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**U**S President Donald J. Trump's vow to defeat what he terms radical Islamic terrorism forces the United States to manoeuvre the Middle East and North Africa's murky world of ever shifting alliances and labyrinth of power struggles within power struggles.

The pitfalls are complex and multiple. They range from differences within the 68-member, anti-Islamic State (IS) alliance over what constitutes terrorism to diverging political priorities to varying degrees of willingness to tacitly employ jihadists to pursue geopolitical goals. The pitfalls are most evident in Yemen and Syria and involve two long-standing US allies, NATO ally Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

US Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson travels to Turkey this week as US and Russian troops create separate buffers in Syria to prevent a Turkish assault on the northern town of Manbij. Manbij, located 40 kilometres from the Turkish border, is controlled by Kurdish forces, viewed by the US as a key ground force in the fight with the Islamic State.

Until a series of devastating IS suicide bombings in Turkish cities, Turkish forces appeared to concentrate on weakening the Kurds rather than the jihadists in Syria. Stepped-up Turkish action against IS has not weakened Turkey's resolve to prevent Kurds from emerging as one of the victors in the Syrian conflict.

At the heart of US-Turkish differences over the Kurds is the age-old-adage that one man's terrorist is another man's liberation fighter. The US has a long history of empathy towards Kurdish cultural and national rights and enabled the emergence of a Kurdish state in waiting in

northern Iraq. The differences also go to an equally large elephant in the room: the question whether Syria, Yemen and Iraq will survive as nation states in a post-war era.

That may be the real issue at the core of US-Turkish differences. Many Turks hark back in their suspicion that foreign powers are bent on breaking up the Turkish state to the 1920 Treaty of Sevres that called for a referendum in which Kurds would determine their future.

Visionary Mustafa Kemal Atatürk carved modern Turkey out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire. He mandated a unified Turkish identity that superseded identities of a nation whose population was to a large degree made up of refugees from far flung parts of the former empire and ethnic and religious minorities.

Turkey charges that Syrian Kurdish fighters are aligned with the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), a Turkish Kurdish group that has been fighting for Kurdish rights for more than three decades and has been designated terrorist by Turkey, the United States and Europe.

US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Joseph Dunford, Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov and Turkey's Chief of the General Staff Hulusi Akar met in the southern Turkish city of Antalya in advance of Tillerson's visit to lower tensions that threaten planned efforts to capture Raqqa, the Islamic State's capital.

In many ways, the pitfalls are similar in Yemen, where Trump has stepped up support for Saudi Arabia's devastating intervention that this month entered its third year and has increased attacks on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) viewed as one of Al Qaeda's most dangerous affiliates.

It took Al Qaeda attacks inside the kingdom in 2003-4 and jihadist operations since as well as growing international suggestions of an ideological affinity between Saudi Arabia's Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism and jihadism for the kingdom to view Islamic militants on par with Iran, which Saudis see as an existential threat.

Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia, despite a litany of denials, has seen militant Islamists as useful tools in its proxy wars with Iran in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Sunni ultra-conservatives are frequently at the forefront of Saudi-led efforts to dislodge the Yemeni Houthis from their strongholds.

Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen has in fact given AQAP a new lease on life. Prior to the war, AQAP had been driven to near irrelevance by the rise of IS and security crackdowns. In a report in February, the International Crisis Group (ICG) concluded that AQAP was "stronger than it has ever been."

The group "appears ever more embedded in the fabric of opposition to the Houthi/Saleh alliance ...that is fighting the internationally recognised, Saudi-backed interim government of President

Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi,” the report said. It was referring to Iranian-backed Houthi rebels who are aligned with former Yemeni leader Ali Abdullah Saleh.

AQAP’s resurgence is as much a result of Saudi Arabia’s single-minded focus on the Iranian threat posed in the kingdom’s perception by the Houthis as it is potentially related to a murky web of indirect or tacit relationships with the group.

“In prosecuting the war, the Saudi-led coalition has relegated confronting AQAP and IS to a second-tier priority... Saudi-led coalition statements that fighting the group is a top priority and announcements of military victories against AQAP in the south are belied by events,” the ICG said.

The kingdom’s willingness to cooperate with Islamists such as Yemen’s Islah party, a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, and unclear attitude towards AQAP has sparked strains within the anti-Houthi coalition, particularly with the staunchly anti-Islamist UAE.

AQAP has been able to rearm itself through the indirect acquisition of weapons from the Saudi-led coalition as well as raids on Yemeni military camps. AQAP is believed to have received advance notice and to have coordinated with the Saudis its withdrawal from the crucial port of Mukalla before an assault by UAE and Yemeni forces, according to the ICG.

Saudi Arabia was conspicuously low key when in January a US Navy Seal died in a raid on AQAP in which the US military seized information that this month prompted the Trump administration and Britain to ban carry-on electronics aboard U.S. and London-bound flights from select airports in North Africa and the Middle East, including two in Saudi Arabia.

Arab News, Saudi Arabia’s leading English-language newspaper, this week quoted Saudi officials as saying that AQAP, widely believed to be well advanced in its ability to target aircraft with explosives smuggled on board, had lost its capability to operate overseas.

The officials said that Saudi Arabia, which has cozied up to the Trump administration and endorsed the president’s ban on travel to the US from six Muslim majority countries, was concerned about IS and Shiite militants rather than AQAP. “They (AQAP) don’t have the power to export their activities,” Arab news quoted Abdullah Al-Shehri, a senior Saudi interior ministry official, as saying.

The ministry’s spokesman, Mansour Al-Turki, noted that “‘Qaeda actually has not been involved in any real kind of terrorism-related incident in Saudi Arabia for three years. Most of the incidents came from Daesh (the Arab acronym for IS) or militant groups related to Shiites in the eastern province.’”

The United States and some of its key allies, including Turkey and Saudi Arabia, may be able to paper over differences that allow for short-term advances against IS. But in the longer term, it could be the failure to address those differences head on that will create new breeding grounds for militancy. It's the kind of trade-off that in the past has produced short-term results only to create even greater problems down the road.

**Note:** This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2017/03/defeating-islamic-state-war-mired-in.html>

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