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## The dilemma of anti-ISIL military strategy

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How to defeat the Islamic State without bolstering Bashar Al-Assad's regime is a conundrum at the centre of the US-led anti-ISIL coalition, with Saudi Arabia less concerned about ISIL than getting rid of Al-Assad for good

The United States is at war against the Islamic State (Daesh in Arabic, and formerly known as ISIL, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), the jihadist group that recently conquered almost a third of Syria and Iraq and declared an Islamic caliphate in the territories under its control. To win its war against the terrorist group, which is inspired by Al-Qaeda, Washington rallied an international coalition of Western and Arab states.

The United States gathered on 11 September in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia a dozen Arab countries involved in the fight against religious extremism, which should contribute in varying degrees to the battle against ISIL. This war concerns primarily the six oil monarchies of the Gulf: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman, as well as Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon. All are concerned about the rise of Islamic extremism represented by ISIL, which had already shown a willingness to expand its influence in the region, beyond Iraq and Syria.

The majority of the Arab states that joined Washington, despite the existence of differences in

interpretation between them, were seeking international intervention against ISIL and called for a global strategy to fight against religious extremism. They believe that regional commitment is not enough and that Western intervention would be needed to overcome the rise of radical jihadist groups that have mushroomed in the region thanks to the popular uprisings in several Arab countries since 2011.

The new strategy of the United States, which excludes any ground intervention, involves the extension of air strikes against ISIL in Iraq and the launching of similar strikes against the jihadist group in Syria. This last point is an important change in US policy towards the Syrian conflict. Since the end of the withdrawal of its army from Iraq in 2010, Washington, under Barack Obama, sought to avoid any direct military intervention in the Arab world and the Middle East in general.

Last year, Obama recanted at the last moment to launch air strikes against the regime of Bashar Al-Assad, after the latter's agreement to destroy its arsenal of chemical weapons. He was also very reluctant to provide weapons to the moderate armed rebellion against the Syrian regime, partly out of fear that these weapons could fall into the hands of religious extremists, who are at the forefront of the fight against Al-Assad. This reluctance was a major source of friction with Saudi Arabia, one of whose priorities is providing financial and military support to the anti-Bashar opposition. Riyadh wants to do battle with the Syrian regime because of its alliance with the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is the main rival of the Wahhabi kingdom. This Saudi-American dispute should end since the United States, as part of its new strategy, will arm the moderate opposition in Syria, while Saudi Arabia will open its training camps to some 10,000 "moderate" fighters.

The objectives of the Arab-Western coalition are multiple: contain ISIL's military advance in Iraq and Syria; break its image of unbeatable military force; and deal it a moral and psychological blow that would reduce its appeal and its mobilising force. The recent and rapid military successes of ISIL in Iraq and Syria have increased its ranks and thus its ability to conquer new territories. According to American intelligence (CIA) estimates, the number of fighters of the ISIL in Syria and Iraq increased from 10,000 to between 20,000 and 31,500, including 15,000 foreigners.

The weakening scenario of ISIL, however, poses a major dilemma: how to reduce ISIL militarily while avoiding that the vacuum left by its foreseeable withdrawal is filled by the army of the Syrian regime? In other words, how to prevent the military weakening of ISIL only benefitting the troops of Bashar Al-Assad? To deal with this possibility, the Arab-Western coalition has sought, as mentioned, to strengthen the camp of the moderate opposition, because air strikes alone will be unable to defeat ISIL. Ground forces must take advantage of these keystrokes to gain ground at the expense of ISIL. However, the moderate opposition is the weakest component of the anti-Assad forces and is unable at this time to score any progress on the ground. The most powerful armed opposition consists of a variety of radical Islamist groups, the largest of which is Al-Nusra Front. Inspired by Al-Qaeda, it is classified a terrorist organisation by Saudi Arabia and the United States. These Islamist groups, the regular Syrian army, or both, are likely, given the current state of circumstances, to fill the vacuum that would be created by the retreat of ISIL.

Saudi Arabia, the leader of the Gulf countries, sees — or wants to see — things from a different angle. It believes that the change in US strategy, which consist for the first time in a direct intervention in the Syrian conflict (air strikes, military support to the rebels), creates a new dynamic that will eventually weaken the Syrian regime and cause the departure of Al-Assad from power. That the United States has crossed the Rubicon to launch air strikes against targets in Syria might encourage it to seek to "finish the job" by striking also targets belonging to the regime, in order to help the opposition. Some see the speech of President Obama on 17 September, where he announced the new American strategy, an allusion to that effect, even if the current priority of Washington is the annihilation of ISIL.

Riyadh, that was furious against what it considers American inaction in Syria, would condition the continuation of its assistance to the Americans to the development of their strategy to achieve ultimately the departure of Al-Assad. The Saudis certainly do not seek a solution similar to that which has been applied in Iraq by the US, but rather to provoke, through American and Western intervention, mounting pressure on the Syrian president to agree to step down. This scenario does not, however, resolve the problem of Islamist groups opposed to Al-Assad, who remain the most powerful on the ground.