



## WAR ROOM

# Six Strategies Obama Could Use to Fight the Islamic State

The president says he doesn't have a plan yet. So we asked defense bigwigs for some ideas.

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**A**fter a summer in which Islamic State militants have rampaged through Iraq and Syria, declared an Islamic caliphate, recruited extremists from abroad and claimed credit for decapitating American journalist James Foley, President Obama [vowed](#) earlier this week that “justice will be done” to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, known as ISIL or simply the Islamic State—a group that Secretary Chuck Hagel and Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Martin Dempsey have called an “[imminent threat](#)” to the United States with an “[apocalyptic, end-of-days strategic vision](#).”

But the president has long resisted getting “dragged back into another ground war in Iraq,” as he recently reiterated, and in a White House [press conference](#) on Thursday, he made clear he has not yet made up his mind about how exactly to

counter the terrorist group, aside from dispatching Secretary of State John Kerry to talk with other countries in the region and tasking Hagel and Dempsey to “prepare a range of options.” Asked whether he would get approval from Congress before potentially going into Syria, Obama said it would depend what kind of intervention, if any, the United States pursues: “We don’t have a strategy yet,” he admitted.

While the president deliberates, we at POLITICO MAGAZINE decided to ask for some suggestions, and so went to some of the country’s top defense thinkers—hailing from the military brass to the Pentagon to Congress. Here’s what they think Obama’s strategy should look like.

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## **Root Out Extremist Ideology**

*By Douglas Feith*

The ISIL threat is pushing President Obama into military action. But the U.S. strategy should be more than force.

The most salient characteristic of the Islamic State is that it’s ideological. These aren’t people engaged in ordinary interest politics. They are religious extremists who, with extraordinary brutality, are trying to remake the world according to what they believe are the dictates of Islam. And if we’re going to stop them, to deal with them as an enemy and a “cancer,” as the president has said we have to do, we should try to understand what they believe—what ideas motivate them. To defeat them, we have to counter their ability to replenish and grow their force, to recruit and indoctrinate new members. In other words, we have to counter the appeal of their ideology.

The U.S. government is not good at understanding, much less battling against, the ideology of Islamist extremists. This was a problem even before the Obama administration, but it is certainly still a problem now. Soon after President Obama came into office, his counterterrorism adviser, John Brennan, and now CIA director, gave a [speech](#) in which he explained how President Obama’s approach to fighting terrorists was different from President Bush’s:

Portraying this as a “global” war risks reinforcing the very image that al Qaeda seeks to project of itself—that it is a highly organized, global entity capable of replacing sovereign nations with a global caliphate. And nothing could be further from the truth. ... Nor does President Obama see this challenge as a fight against “jihadists.” Describing terrorists in this way—using a legitimate term, “jihad,” meaning to purify oneself or to wage a holy struggle for a moral goal—risks giving these murderers the religious legitimacy they desperately seek but in no way deserve. Worse, it risks reinforcing the idea that the United States is somehow at war with Islam itself.

First of all, it’s bizarre for a U.S. official to opine on the legitimacy of a religious term like “jihad”—let alone to define it as a “holy struggle for moral good.” What Brennan was really doing was bending over backwards to say that our fight with these people is not ideological. Brennan insisted that “violent extremists” (not “jihadists”) are extreme not because of their beliefs but because they suffer from certain conditions—lack of political outlets and of jobs. Those conditions may make some people more receptive to terrorist recruitment, but the essence of the problem is the ideology. Outside the world of Islam, many millions of people are unfree and unemployed, but the problem of terrorist violence is nowhere near the magnitude of the problem in Muslim communities. President Obama has come around to calling ISIL “jihadists,” but he still relies on a CIA director—the man who runs the institution responsible for informing the government about what our enemies believe—who insists on dancing around the problem.

ISIL isn’t murdering the Yazidis or brutalizing Iraqi Christians because of some policy dispute with the United States. The things they do that appall us as inhumane are things that ISIL fighters believe are religious requirements for them. Their extremism is not rooted in frustration about a lack of democratic politics. The ISIL murderer who decapitated the journalist James Foley apparently came from Britain, after all. Nor is Islamist extremism necessarily rooted in poverty; remember that the captain of the Sept. 11 hijackers was an engineer. Ignoring ISIL’s Islamist ideology is like trying to understand the Cold War without reference to communism or World War II without reference to Nazism.

How does the U.S. government counter this ideology? Part of the answer is systematically supporting people within the Muslim community who will tell ISIL, “You claim to speak for Islam, but you don’t speak for me.” The U.S. government isn’t and shouldn’t be anti-Islam, but it should oppose the Islamist ideology that ISIL promotes in the name of Islam. ISIL is setting up a caliphate that it says is universal—it claims to speak for Islam. It’s important that Muslims say that that’s not true. Some have done so, but they’re not anywhere near as vocal as the extremists. If ISIL is not challenged persistently and effectively by other Muslims, then ISIL will be credible when it says it represents Islam. Muslims who oppose the Islamism of ISIL, whether in Iraq or Indonesia or Britain, need microphones, as it were. They need platforms and resources. And they need security.

Defeating ISIL on the battlefield can help discredit its ideology, just as defeating Germany in World War II hurt the prestige of Nazi ideology. But ISIL is working hard to attract new young men and women into their ranks. So as the United States is fighting ISIL militarily, U.S. officials should be implementing a strategy to counter the Islamists ideologically—to prevent people from becoming committed extremists and dangerous enemies to begin with.

*Douglas J. Feith, who served as under secretary of defense for policy from 2001 to 2005, is director of the Center for National Security Strategies at Hudson Institute.*

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