



## BGS Advisory Board Member, Michael Vickers, Discusses In Politico The Need For A Change In U.S. Strategy Against ISIS

Former Obama Terrorism Adviser: Change Your Strategy, Mr. President

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By Michael Vickers

One of the duties of a senior policy adviser is to tell the president when his strategy isn't working. By any measure, our strategy in Iraq and Syria is not succeeding, or is not succeeding fast enough. We are playing a long game, when a more rapid and disruptive strategy is required. In my role as a senior counterterrorism adviser to both Presidents Bush and Obama, I played a major role in our counterterrorism campaigns against Al Qaeda, and in the Osama bin Laden raid; earlier, I was the principal strategist for the covert war in Afghanistan against the Soviets. Were I still in government, this is some of what I would say.

First, time is not on our side. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant is not just a regional insurgent army. It is a terrorist group with global reach and the leader of global jihad. We cannot rely on intelligence to disrupt all plots, and ISIL cannot be contained any more than Al Qaeda could prior to the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. The flow of Western passport holders in and out of Syria and the sanctuary ISIL enjoys there to train operatives and plan attacks is a clear and present danger. ISIL must be disrupted, dismantled and defeated. Whatever we would do if ISIL made good on its threat to attack Washington, D.C. and New York, we should instead do now, before the attack occurs.

Second, we need a “Syria-first” strategy to replace the Iraq-first strategy we’ve been pursuing. So far, two-thirds of coalition airstrikes have been in Iraq, as have the bulk of our capacity building efforts. But it’s now clear that the threat in Iraq is local, while in Syria, it’s global. It’s Syria where ISIL has its principal sanctuary, and that’s where the battle for the future of the Middle East is now taking place.

Third, we need a strategy that draws its inspiration from President Bush’s 2001 Afghanistan campaign and President Reagan’s Afghanistan strategy in the 1980s. ISIL, as its name implies, is a de facto state. It holds territory, controls population, and funds its operations from resources that it exploits on territory it controls. If there’s one thing the American military knows how to do it is defeating an opposing force trying to hold ground.

It took us two months in late 2001 to overthrow the Taliban/Al Qaeda regime in Afghanistan. The reasons for our success in 2001 and our lack of success in 2014-15 are twofold: a far more intense air campaign and an indigenous ground force, led by Special Operations and CIA advisers, that could rapidly exploit the effects of air power. We conducted as many airstrikes in two months in Afghanistan in 2001 as we have in 16 months in Iraq and Syria. We should increase our strike tempo and weight of attacks significantly to bring both mass and precision to bear on ISIL’s stronghold.

Airstrikes are not enough, however. We must leverage the moderate Syrian opposition—and they do exist in the tens of thousands—to dislodge ISIL and Al Qaeda’s Syrian affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra, from their territory. As we did in Afghanistan, we must support the moderate opposition with overwhelming air power, substantially increase the flow of arms to the moderate opposition, and place special operations and intelligence advisers with them. With American assistance, a much smaller insurgent force defeated the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. With our many Sunni partners, we can do the same in Syria.

Dislodging ISIL and Al Qaeda from Syria does not mean, moreover, that U.S. forces have to occupy and try to pacify the country afterward. As we should have learned, that does not play to our strengths. There are a lot of operational options between what we did in Iraq and what we didn't do in Libya.

Fourth, we must not succumb to the false hope that ending the Syrian civil war is the key to defeating ISIL, and that we should join forces with Russia (and Bashar Assad) to do it. The only winners in that case will be Assad, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iran Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The war will not end, and we will further alienate our Sunni allies and risk greater instability in the Middle East.

Assad must go for the conflict to end. He is a greater magnet for global jihad than U.S. forces were in Iraq at the height of the insurgency. To effect a political transition in Syrian, we must keep the pressure on Assad, much as Reagan did in Afghanistan in the 1980s while he was negotiating with Russia's Mikhail Gorbachev on a range of important issues. Abandoning our counter-Assad strategy would fatally undermine our Syria effort, and would have repercussions far beyond Syria.

Russia intervened only because Assad was in trouble. We are on offense and the Russians, Iranians and the Syrian regime are on defense. Why we would bail out the Russians and Iranians from their Syrian misadventure is beyond me. Putin will certainly extract a price for any cooperation. We should not forget his invasion of Ukraine and his desire to overthrow the European order. Russian air power, moreover, adds very little to what the U.S. can bring to bear. Russia is a marginal force in Syria. We defeated a far more powerful Russian army in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and we can defeat their effort now to keep Assad in power.

Fifth, a more intense application of air power and combat advisers will go a long way in Iraq as well. Our Iraq problem is fundamentally political, but whatever Iraq's political future, ISIL cannot be allowed to maintain sanctuaries there. The Sunni tribes will not revolt without decisive U.S. engagement, and severing the main lines of communication between Syria

and Iraq will isolate ISIL's forces in Iraq.

Finally, we must take the fight to ISIL's affiliates, particularly in Libya, Egypt and Nigeria. And we must not let up on Al Qaeda. The world's most dangerous bomb-maker is still plotting in Yemen, and Al Qaeda is strengthening its position in Afghanistan.

An Afghanistan-style campaign in Syria won't bring our conflict with ISIL to an end, but it will deprive the group of its state and its key sanctuary. And it will buy us time and improved homeland security.