Stop the ISIS War Before It Gets Worse!

Earth Institute director Jeffrey Sachs and the Quakers’ Michael Shank call on Obama to stop the airstrikes—and stop supporting anti-Assad rebels.

Too many times in recent history the United States has responded militarily to provocations and threats in ways that have resulted in spiraling war and violence at great long-term cost to the American people. We believe that the latest escalation of U.S. attacks on ISIL (also known as Islamic State or ISIS) threatens such an open-ended, costly and ultimately unsuccessful path. We do not doubt the dangers of ISIL in the region, but we believe that U.S.-led bombing is most likely to create further instability, spiraling violence, and new recruits for radical military groups.

The right strategy, we believe, is for regional powers including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and others to lead the response to ISIL under the umbrella of the U.N. Security Council. In this way, the U.S. would avoid the trap of being viewed, once again, as the leader of an anti-Islamic crusade. Anti-American hate, and hence the vulnerability of U.S. individuals and property to terrorist attacks, is
already running very high. A U.S. escalation of bombing in Iraq and Syria would send it soaring.

We note that ISIL is vastly outnumbered by the regional powers. ISIL’s advances reflect political disarray, the Syrian civil war, and pockets of local support in Sunni regions. They do not reflect any intrinsic or insurmountable military advantage.

The problems are much deeper than military. They are fundamentally social, political, and economic. Moreover, the spiraling wars in the region, including the recent U.S. bombing, take us farther from real solutions, not closer. We believe that the U.S. backing for the anti-Assad insurgency in Syria has greatly and unnecessarily contributed to the current disarray, weakening the Assad regime and thereby opening up the space for ISIL to insert itself on the ground. We strongly urge the U.S. to stop its efforts to overthrow the Assad regime and rather to seek a political solution in the U.N. Security Council context that does not count on Assad’s removal as a precondition (hence bringing Russia and China on board in a cooperative UNSC mandate).

Going forward, we call on Congress and the Obama administration to halt the U.S. bombing and instead to call on the Middle East regional powers, under the auspices of the United Nations Security Council, to forge the necessary regional cooperation to halt ISIL and to return the region to long-term peace. In the meantime, the U.S. should refrain from further actions to support the armed insurgency to overthrow the Syrian government and refrain from undertaking operations outside of U.N. Security Council approval. The spiral of war risks the spark that ignites World War III, which is why the Security Council should take urgent steps to starve the conflict zones of any further arms inflows.
As the Middle East addresses and leads the solutions to its own problems, with its own political leadership and with international support in the context of the U.N. Charter, the U.S. should stand ready to promote humanitarian actions for peace, public health, expanded education, safe water, and other vital actions for sustainable development in the Middle East. Such interventions, though often of little interest in Washington, are far less expensive than military approaches, and far more reliable and durable in promoting U.S. interests.