

US General John Allen Discusses “Coalition Plans for Defeating ISIS”

Interview

By [Global Research News](#)

Global Research, November 02, 2014

[Asharq Al-Awsat](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

GR Editor's note

We are reproducing below an interview with US General John Allen published by Asharq Al-Awsat.

General Allen was appointed to coordinate America's military campaign against the Islamic State.

This interview is brought to the attention of our readers with the understanding, based on numerous studies and reports, that the US and its allies including Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are the unspoken architects of the Islamic State which has been financed and supported covertly by the Western military alliance since the outset of the Syria insurgency in March 2011. The hidden agenda is not to defeat the ISIS but to destroy and destabilize Iraq and Syria as nation states.

Michel Chossudovsky, November 2, 2014

When the American Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Gen. John Allen, arrives in Saudi Arabia today, his priorities will be to discuss the 'long-term' strategy to fight the group, in addition to maintaining the current air campaign against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria.

From Saudi Arabia, Gen. Allen is starting a regional tour that will include discussing preparations for the training and equipping of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) units that the coalition hopes can fight ISIS on the ground. In his first interview with an Arab language news outlet, General Allen explained to Asharq Al-Awsat that these FSA forces would not be expected to fight Syrian government forces, or to "liberate Damascus."

Gen. Allen has followed developments in the region closely, especially in Iraq, where he was stationed from 2007 to 2008, playing a major role in the emergence of the Awakening or Sahawa movement in Al-Anbar province. Gen. Allen explained to Asharq Al-Awsat the thinking behind, and preparation for, the National Guard in Iraq to act as a 'middle ground' between the police and military. However, Gen. Allen, a retired US Marine four star General, was keen to highlight that the strategy to fight ISIS cannot be simply a military one, stressing the US policy of different 'lines of effort' in combating ISIS beyond the battlefield.

Mina Al-Oraibi

Asharq Al-Awsat: Many officials are saying that this battle against ISIS will take years while people in the region are asking why it is being set up to last for so long. Doesn't this give ISIS a propaganda coup in that

it is able to fight the strongest army in the world—the US Army—with a whole host of other countries behind it?

John Allen: It is not just the military dimension of dealing with ISIS. ISIS exists in a variety of spheres, if you will. In the physical sphere, what we call the battle space; it exists in the sphere of financial revenue development; and it exists in the information sphere.

In the physical sphere, as we deal with ISIS, and as that organization is dealt with in a military sense, our sense is that it will take months—potentially over a year—to drive them out of Iraq; it will take some period of time beyond that in Syria. However the long-term direction of ISIS that we will have to deal with—beyond the choking off of its revenues, which diminishes its capacity, its operational flexibility and discretion—is its brand and idea. And so in a broader sense, this is not just about ISIS, ISIS is the most recent manifestation of a long-term blight on the region which is extremism and the radicalization of the youth. Many countries around the world have suffered enormously as a result of the emergence of extremism.

But over the long-term—and this is the key point—it is going to take a while to deal with the idea of ISIS and deal with the underlying social, political, and economic challenges that create an environment where extremism can emerge and where the radicalization of youth can take the form of an organization like this. We should all recognize that and we should all work together, because it isn't just ISIS in the battle space in Iraq today. There are [also] issues of illicit finance that create the opportunities for organizations like ISIS; there is the foreign fighter flow which can be a challenge for many years after an organization like ISIS has ceased to exist as a coherent entity. Those who participated with ISIS over time become the foreign fighters that return home and create difficulties within their home societies. So, we need to be conscious of the entirety of the effect, and it is not just ISIS in Iraq or Syria, it is the effect of ISIS and the underlying causes that we will have to deal with over a period of years.

Q: There are specific issues in individual countries that feed into ISIS and other extremist groups taking advantage of those experiences. However, there are also coalitions of different groups that come under the umbrella of ISIS. How do you break up those coalitions and win over some of these groups? If we look at Iraq for example, are you working at fragmenting the coalition of groups including former Ba'athists or army members who now exist under the umbrella of ISIS?

That would be a normal course of the operation. What we would typically do and what we have done in the past when we have been confronted with organizations like this is to map the organization in great detail to understand, if you will, the nervous system, and what organizations have come together. In many cases, they are arrangements or alliances of convenience; they are alliances for short-term benefit or advantage and then they will break apart. As we seek to understand the coherence of ISIS—as it is by no means a monolith—there are tribal dimensions to it; there are insurgent dimensions to it; liberation forces component to it; and there are Saddamist regime elements that we know are inside it. As we understand that better, what we will seek to do is to break that organization apart along those fracture lines. Some of that can be done through the use of information, some of that can be done through the application of military capabilities—kinetics—and some of that can be done through squeezing finances. There is a whole variety and means which we would seek to combine to begin to fracture ISIS along those lines—but also fracture ISIS in terms of its coherence as well. So we need to understand that, and we are taking this

organization very seriously in that kind of an analysis.

Q: How far are you along in this 'mapping' stage?

We are well into it.

Q: There is a lot of skepticism in the region about this. People question how could it be possible that the US and its allies were unaware of what was happening on the ground, especially in Iraq. There are questions as to why ISIS was left to become so strong and to fester without any real effort to stop it. From your experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, how can you explain how strong ISIS was able to become before any action was taken?

Well, I think there are a variety of answers. For one thing, our collection [of intelligence] on that particular area was focused on others places around the world. But we also saw that in some cases, the organizations that came together [to form ISIS] were not organizations that we would have expected to create the kind of alliance that they ultimately did create. And they had a very sound plan for what they intended to do, but that plan was difficult to detect initially. As that plan began to unfold and we saw them begin to turn on the Yazidi and Christian populations and they stampeded the elements of the Iraqi security force in and around Mosul and seemed to turn to the west and to the north towards the Kurdistan Region, it became very clear that this was a much more coherent organization than we had initially anticipated. That created the emergency which you now see is being addressed by a coalition of nations from around the world, not just the region.

Q: You visited Iraq last week and had extensive talks, then Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi came out and said that Baghdad will not accept foreign troops in Iraq. However, there are US military advisers in Iraq with a possible expanding European presence. Are you on the same page with the Iraqi government on the actual presence of foreign military advisers and troops on Iraqi territory?

We are very much on the same page. The intent is that foreign forces do not return for long periods of time, as we were [present] for many years in Iraq. He [Abadi] is very much interested in the support that we can provide to Iraq to re-establish territorial integrity. He is very much in support of the kinds of measures that can be taken, not just in military terms, but in other terms as well that can provide for all the citizens of Iraq, not just the Sunni elements, but for all citizens. So when he says 'foreign forces' he is talking about a long-term presence. That is not any part of our consideration either, we don't intend ultimately to re-garrison American forces or to create the conditions where we would see other foreign forces being re-garrisoned in Iraq. I was very clear with Prime Minister Al-Abadi and with other Iraqi leaders from across the political and religious spectrum that this is a temporary measure that we are taking. We are coming to the assistance of Iraq because Iraq asked for that assistance—and when I say we, I don't just mean the United States, I mean the coalition. We are going to help however we can but we all recognize that this is a temporary measure and once this emergency has been addressed and once we have accomplished the mission, in agreement with Iraq, then it will be time to go home. We are very clear on that.

Q: When US forces 'go home,' that would be based on an assumption that there is an Iraqi force that can provide safety for all of Iraq's people, which is part of the reason for the push for the National Guard. However, there is a concern that the National Guard means the provinces will be armed and when problems emerge between various provinces, then this

armed National Guard could mean provinces fighting each other. How do you intend to stop that from happening?

Visualize the National Guard as being the middle ground, the echelon between the police which will provide for the local stability and law enforcement that is part of the organic population. This is an important piece of the restoration of stability for many of the citizens of Iraq—having a police force that can return them to a stable social environment and bring them back into the environment of law and order. Then you have the national army, the Iraqi security forces which will ultimately be responsible down the road for the territorial integrity and defense of Iraq. And that is a national army that can go anywhere within Iraq—a professional army that represents all the citizens of Iraq where the Iraqis will seek to do the recruiting across the entire population so we have fully integrated units within the national army, not a sectarian-based army.

The middle ground is one that we will see grow over time. On the provincial level, there will probably be a brigade size force—maybe 5,000 or so at the provincial level—and that organization will be raised locally and it will look like the population of that province. For now, we are looking at three [brigades] in the north and three [brigades] in the south and there will probably be more later. Some provinces probably won't need one, but many of the provinces will. And this National Guard element is a term that the Americans use because it looks like an American National Guard unit. It is raised from the population so it looks like the population from which it is raised. So if there is a Yazidi or Christian or Sunni or Shi'ite within that province, they would conceivably be represented equally within that organization. The mechanism by which individuals will be recruited—and again this is still conceptual and so being fleshed out—would be a committee of individuals who represent the tribes, the minorities, the provincial government and represent the Ministry of Defense. They will individually consider the recruit being offered and the recruit will be vouched for by tribal and civil and religious leaders—then they will be accepted and trained.

The National Guard unit then sits in between the National Army and the police, and should there be an emergency in the province, like an emergency disaster, or if the police are met with a threat that exceeds their capacity, then the governor—who has first right of leadership—would vector the National Guard to that point within the province to solve the problem. They will be light infantry, they will move with armored protection, so they won't have tanks and armored personnel carriers, but they will have armored protection and some light weapons—again this is conceptual and we are working on the idea. However, it will be responsible to the governor—and the people of the brigade will look like the people of the province. They will not be recruited *en masse*, in other words. A militia will not be recruited; individuals will be recruited and this is really important. They will be paid and equipped through the Ministry of Defense; they answer to the minister.

However, when there is an emergency that exceeds the abilities of the national army, the prime minister, working with the governors, can nationalize those brigades and then they become part of the Iraqi national security force, writ large. So the idea is to ultimately have a smaller Iraqi army, augmented by National Guard units in the moment of an emergency. We are thinking this through in really important ways so that it doesn't become a really big, armed militia. The National Guard will be a very important point of creating consensus locally and [creating] a greater sense of local populations caring for themselves by tying it to central government through the Ministry of Defense; by tying the selection to a cross-section functional committee that look at the individuals, and by ensuring they are well trained and well led.

Q: However, all of this will take quite some time . . .

Of course, they don't exist today, and in the meantime some significant amount of our effort is in just getting the Iraqi army that exists back online and back into the fight.

Q: What are your priorities for this visit to the Gulf? How important will the issues of cutting financing and dealing with long-term combat of the 'idea of ISIS' be during this visit?

It is going to be very important. We have had really extensive conversations with partners in the Gulf—Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the many partners we have there. And from the first night of airstrikes, they have been flying and being important contributors to the air mission. Saudi Arabia, for example, has offered to host one of the training sites for the equipping of FSA while other states in the region—Jordan and Turkey—have offered sites as well. The military dimension is an ongoing conversation and states, based on their capabilities and desires, are contributing to the military piece. But those other pieces are very important as well. So what I will seek to do with the leadership of the various countries is to talk about the strategy, talk about how we see it unfolding over time and talk about the centrality of the Gulf states and the region to the success of the strategy. The power of the voices of the religious leaders, tribal leaders, royalty, clerics, the power of those voices being raised in support of the strategy . . . is helping us to strangle the finance of ISIS over time. All of that is central to the success of this strategy and they are valued and essential partners in this process. So I intend to meet with the leadership of those countries to explain the strategy and to explain my role and to request their support in these other lines of effort and to make it very clear to them that their role is very important to the success of the strategy.

Q: There are those in the Gulf and Turkey who are saying that the focus should not just be on ISIS and that dealing with the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad requires equal attention and effort. How can you convince them that the US is still serious about wanting to deal with this issue?

Well, it is important to explain that much of what we are talking about here is a strategy about ISIS and ISIS in a larger context—but that is not the only strategy at work here. There are broader regional issues at work—the humanitarian rescue of the Syrian population is a very important part of it. However, the outcome that we seek in Syria is akin to the ISIS strategy that fits into a much larger regional strategy and that outcome is a political outcome that does not include Assad. We have to talk about the emergency of ISIS. We have to hold Iraq together; we have got to give the FSA and moderate Syrian opposition the capacity to deal with ISIS. In the context of that conversation, if we see or are able to achieve what we hope to with regard to the moderate Syrian opposition at the political level and the FSA at a military level—namely the creation of a unitary capacity which is not just capable of dealing with ISIS but becomes so pre-eminent in its political voice and its military credibility that it is a prominent voice ultimately in the political outcome of Syria as well. The countries [of the coalition] seek a political outcome with Assad not a part of it. And so we do have to talk about the ISIS strategy but we want to make clear that we seek a political outcome in Syria without Assad being the ultimate outcome.

Q: But you don't see the FSA units that are being trained to fight ISIS as being those who will later fight the regime's armed forces?

No. What we would like to see is for the FSA and the forces that we will ultimately generate,

train and equip to become the credible force that the Assad government ultimately has to acknowledge and recognize. There is not going to be a military solution here [in Syria]. We have to create so much credibility within the moderate Syrian opposition at a political level . . . that they earn their spot at the table when the time comes for the political solution. Now, there could be FSA elements that ultimately clash with the regime, that may well be the case, as they seek to defend themselves and those areas that they dominate and as they seek to defend their families and their ways of life . . . it could be an outcome. But the intent is not to create a field force to liberate Damascus—that is not the intent. The intent is that in the political outcome, they [the moderate Syrian opposition] must be a prominent—perhaps the preeminent voice—at the table to ultimately contribute to the political outcome that we seek.

Q: The United States informed the Syrian regime before carrying out airstrikes on ISIS positions in Syria while Damascus said there was coordination . . .

It wasn't coordination, it was notification.

Q: Are you still notifying them, or was it just a notification of the start of airstrikes?

We are not coordinating anything we are doing with the Assad regime and we are going after ISIS in Syria because he [Assad] was either unwilling or unable to do so.

Q: What about coordination with Iran on confronting ISIS in Iraq and Syria?

No, we haven't invited Iran into the coalition but we have welcomed Iran's constructive role in Iraq and, of course, Iran is very attentive in terms of what we are doing and saying in terms of Syria as well. So it is important, once again, to be very clear that we seek a political outcome where there will be many voices that contribute to that political outcome [in Syria]. That political outcome will not include Assad and I don't want to get into the details of interim governments and all of those measures that are on the table. However we recognize that Iran is a key influence in Iraq, in Syria and in the region. As we continue to move forward we are going to continue to listen very carefully to the things they [Iran] have to say and we will see where that goes.

Q: ISIS can grow in areas with a lack of security or governance. There are elements pledging allegiance to it in Lebanon, with some fearing it can even reach Yemen. How can you preempt the spread of ISIS or its affiliates?

Many of those groups had already existed for some period of time and they were already a problem for those governments. ISIS is manifestation of a group that has taken advantage of many of the underlying causes that has created the opportunity for Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula or for Abu Sayyaf or other groups to emerge. These groups have emerged because of the underlying conditions. This is perhaps an absence of government, an absence of law and order, or difficulties associated with the social order or opportunities for the youth or the absence of education. All of these are underlying factors. What we are hearing is that some of these organizations are pledging their support to ISIS. In this case, it is because of ISIS's brand. It is because of ISIS's pre-eminence in the media and its ability to manipulate information. This, of course, is one of our lines of effort. We want to seek to delegitimize ISIS's brand, we want to attack the nature of its idea. And to do that, we need the many voices in these countries that often suffer from these groups and social conditions to raise their voices with us in this matter.

Q: This effort also comes with a huge financial cost. Who is covering the costs?

Many countries are. Saudi Arabia, for example, has contributed the most in humanitarian assistance right now—500 million US dollars which is an enormous investment in a very important area to improve the quality of life and rescue of individuals who have suffered from ISIS and conditions in the region. Other Gulf states, other states in the region, have also contributed significantly. This also includes the training and equipping [of the FSA] and the bases for that. These are all ways in which countries in the region can contribute to the strategy

Q: And each country covers its own financial costs for the military involvement?

That is right.

Q: There has been some ambiguity on where Turkey stands on the fight against ISIS. You have had extensive talks with the Turks . . .

I have . . .

Q: Why is there this ambiguity then? Are you satisfied that they are with you in this fight against ISIS?

First of all, Turkey is an old friend. We have had long-standing and excellent bilateral relations with Ankara. They are a NATO ally as well and Turkey is, in fact, participating in the coalition. [Ankara] has made some important contributions in Turkey in terms of letting us have some access to one of the airbases for the purpose of aerial reconnaissance; it has [also] granted us access where we will do training and equipping. But there are other areas where Turkey can participate and it is appropriate for us to be in political consultation with them for that purpose. We will have that conversation and as a result we will probably see Turkey making other decisions with how it will participate in the coalition. But it is a front-line state, it is a country that is beleaguered right now by well over a million refugees that have come as a direct result of the Syrian civil war, but in particular of late because of the onslaught of ISIS. Turkey deserves our respect for what it has done to provide humanitarian safe haven and care for these people, but it also deserves the kind of political consultation as a friend and ally, for them to understand exactly what role they can play in the coalition. And that conversation is ongoing right now.

Q: Would you possibly accept Turkey imposing a buffer zone with Syria?

That will be part of the conversation.

This is the full version of an interview originally conducted in English.

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