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The Islamic State will probably be defeated, but it's not thanks to President Obama



By **John Mueller** September 16 at 10:29 AM

John Mueller is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and a political scientist at Ohio State University. Among his books are *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats*.

President Obama addresses the nation from the Cross Hall in the White House on Wednesday night. The president said he would authorize U.S. airstrikes inside Syria for the first time. (Saul Loeb/Pool via AP)

The Islamic State has succeeded in terrifying the world with its vicious and very public strategy in Iraq and Syria. Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) [insists that](#) “the threat ISIS poses cannot be overstated,” while Sen. James M. Inhofe (R-Okla.), born before World

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War II, [has extravagantly claimed](#) that ISIS is “rapidly developing a method of blowing up a major U.S. city” leaving us “in the most dangerous position we’ve ever been in.”

But despite the hype, President Obama’s limited quest (no boots on the ground and all that) to “degrade and ultimately destroy” this new monster stands a considerable chance of being successful — or, at least, of appearing to be so. In result, he’ll look pretty good.

That would not be because the quest needs necessarily to be brilliantly executed. It’s because the monster, while ugly, scarcely presents anything like the threat now commonly imagined.

A [report](#) in the New York Times finds that American and foreign intelligence think the Islamic State “poses no immediate threat to the United States.” Some told the paper that they believe “the actual danger posed by ISIS has been distorted in hours of television punditry and alarmist statements by politicians.”

Daniel Benjamin, a top counter-terrorism adviser during Obama’s first term, characterizes the public discussion about the the Islamic State as a “farce,” with “members of the Cabinet and top military officers all over the place describing the threat in lurid terms that are not justified.”

In a recent Washington Post [column](#), Middle East specialist Ramzy Mardini argues that the Islamic

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State's "fundamentals are weak," that its "extreme ideology, spirit of subjugation and acts of barbarism prevent it from becoming a political venue for the masses," and that it's "completely isolated, encircled by enemies." Already, he notes, the group has begun to fragment "over power, prestige and resources."

In an upcoming Brookings Institution report, Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro suggest it's unlikely that the Islamic State will send fighters to the United States to wreak havoc here. They point out that European and American fighters attracted to insurgencies abroad tend to either be killed there (they are among the first picks for suicide missions), or to become [disillusioned](#) by infighting in the ranks and [other](#) unanticipated miseries. They're also at risk of arrest by authorities who find them fairly easy to track. The Islamic State also risks penetration by foreign intelligence operatives.

Because, unlike the more wary al-Qaeda, the Islamic State welcomes fighters from abroad, it also risks penetration by foreign intelligence operatives.

In short, the Islamic State is set for a fair amount of "degradation" whatever the United States does. The U.S.-trained Iraqi army has not, overall, acquitted itself well. But since it outnumbers ISIS forces by 100 to one, there is something to work with. Moreover, minds may become concentrated and spines steeled by the fact that ISIS has foolishly developed a reputation for massacring people who surrender to it.

If the Islamic State becomes constrained and contained — perhaps relegated to what seems to be a fringe role in the distant and incomprehensible Syrian civil war — concern in the United States will likely wane, and the president will be able to take credit for having “degraded” the monster while leaving others to imagine what its “defeat” would look like.

This would aid Obama by taking this damaging issue off the political table. But it is otherwise unlikely to be helpful either to him or to his party. Even when the public believed that George W. Bush’s Iraq war was going comparatively well, his approval ratings as president and war leader did not rise as a result. His father’s victory in the Gulf War of 1991 did not prevent his reelection defeat a year later, and Bill Clinton’s success in Bosnia in 1995 scarcely even came up in the 1996 election.