

Obama seeks a Sunni coalition to defeat the Islamic State

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The last thing the United States wants to see as a result of President Obama's plan to defeat the Islamic State is a spreading suspicion that the U.S. is in a fight with Sunni Islam.

So a critical component of the administration's game plan is to enlist Sunni Arab countries as a key part of the international—though so far largely Western—coalition that will aim to roll back and ultimately destroy the extremist Sunni-Islamist militant group in control of a broad swath of Syria and Iraq.

The effort to recruit Sunni Arabs to the cause is already under way, with Secretary of State John Kerry in Jordan and Saudi Arabia this week—in part to see what roles the Sunni Arab powers in the region can play, but also to press harder for the spigots of financial support to the militant group to be turned off.

Obama is set to roll out his strategy for defeating IS, also known by the acronyms ISIS or ISIL, in a prime-time address to the nation Wednesday evening (9 p.m. EDT). The president is expected to lay out a plan with a first phase aimed at pushing IS militants out of the territory in northern Iraq—much of it Sunni-dominated—that the group has seized since surging across the border from war-ravaged Syria in June.

Obama is expected to speak about the need to win back the trust and support of the Sunni tribes that span the region and that either tacitly or overtly lent their support to the advancing IS forces—in Syria because IS was the most successful foe to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and in Iraq because the divisive and Shi'ite-dominated government of former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki gave Sunni tribal leaders an incentive to welcome a powerful Sunni force.

The Sunni element of Obama's strategy resembles to a degree the U.S. effort in Iraq in the mid-2000s to wean the Sunni population off of the Sunni insurgency (part of which was al-Qaeda in Iraq). A major difference, however, is that while Iraqi Sunnis

were recruited to join in the fight with the insurgency, the Sunni powers joining the anti-IS battle aren't expected to play an important military role.

Secretary Kerry was likely to face little resistance to his recruitment drive in Jordan, where he was stopping Tuesday. Islamic State fighters control territory just across Jordan's northern border in Syria, and radical Islamists have reportedly been building an underground presence in Jordan.

The Jordanians have already stepped up intelligence sharing with the U.S. on IS actions and developments across the border in Syria, and Jordan accepted on its soil a CIA-run training program for moderate Syrian rebels.

In Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on Wednesday, Kerry is to meet with the foreign ministers of six Gulf countries plus those from Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. Kerry is expected to push the Gulf states in particular to do even more to stem the flow of funds and fighters to IS, while all will be pressed to join in the effort to dry up IS funding from illicit oil sales from the oil fields and facilities it has seized in Syria and northern Iraq.

Kerry's interlocutors in Jeddah, all opponents of Assad, are also likely to want to know how the U.S. plans to take on IS without reinforcing the Assad regime. The answer, some regional analysts and former administration officials say, will be in the administration's plans to step up support and training for Syria's moderate rebel forces.

The former U.S. ambassador to Syria, Robert Ford, has been calling for months for the U.S. to do more to train and equip an opposition force that can fight and hold territory won from both IS and the Assad regime.

That perspective has won more open support from the Obama administration in the run up to Obama's address Wednesday, with officials saying that ending the IS threat will ultimately take Syrian "boots on the ground" to fill the vacuum left by IS's defeat and removal from the Syrian territory it now holds.