

The Islamic State in Iraq & Syria (ISIS)

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Introduction

The Islamic State (IS), essentially formerly of Iraq, Syria, and/or the Levant, is a current transnational terrorist organization and was a self-declared, unrecognized Sunni Islamic caliphate. Coming out of Jordan in the late 1990s, they quickly attached themselves to Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan before establishing themselves as the infamous terrorist's organization main branch in Iraq (AQI) shortly before the invasion of the nation by the United States-led coalition to topple Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. During the Second Persian Gulf War from 2003-2011, AQI led and committed the majority of the insurgency against the coalition and fledgling Iraqi republican government. During this near decade-long conflict, the organization continued to develop a vision for an all-Sunni global caliphate achieved through territorial conquest, and due to the power, wealth, and territory accumulated in the war, AQI outgrew its parent organization and formally split from Al-Qaeda and reorganized into the Islamic State in Iraq in early 2006. This allowed the organization to pursue its theocratic mission, which mainstream Al-Qaeda did not share. Following the end of the Second Gulf War, it quickly expanded in a period of approximately three years to control a large portion of northern and central Iraq and Eastern Syria, declaring the caliphate in 2014. The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, however, is in a current state of significant decline due to the precision warfare of the United States and its allies, the intervention of the Russian military on the Syrian front, and the U.S. support of the Iraqi military. This directly foiled their territorial goals, the relationship with the nations in which they were occupying, and their organizational structure. The continuation of these methods and their adaptation will effectively eradicate the organization.

Literature Review

The formation, vision, mission, and strategy of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria certainly factored into the demise of the organization and specifically the territory of the so-called caliphate. The degree and contribution of this factor needs to be determined, and the most effective method to do this is a complete profile of their formation, vision, mission, and strategy. Charles Lister completed just this profile analysis for the Brookings Doha Center in November 2014. The timing of this profile is important to keep in consideration. Lister submitted this report in late 2014, shortly after the declaration of the worldwide caliphate and at the peak of the Islamic State's territorial control. This also means, however, that Lister cannot include any valuable information from the near decade-long, somewhat ongoing conflict to eliminate their control in the region. The game plan and policy recommendations that Lister described, so far, on the other hand, seem to be accurate. His five-point plan states that in order for the fall of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq to occur, their leadership needs to be eliminated, they need to be separated from their revenue sources and restrict their ability to effectively control their territory. Two sustaining factors of ISIS were their social media presence and residence in relatively weak nations, which Lister combats with his final two policy recommendations. Eliminating the social media presence deprives the Islamic State of its primary tool of recruitment and visibility globally. Stabilizing and strengthening the host nations of Iraq and Syria are the metaphorical final nail in the coffin. The primary reason for the existence of the unrecognized caliphate is the weakness of these nations to control their borders, a pure example of state-enabled terrorism, and the inability of the governments to provide basic services and opportunities. The other methods, Lister suggests, have to follow and accompany these, and the elimination of leadership may

prove most effective of them due to the authoritarian-style government structure the organization has established.

A trend emerging in U.S. foreign policy is the protection of American interests abroad without the use of direct American military manpower. The main tool to complete this change in military philosophy is the use of the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) or drone. This extremely advanced and expensive piece of equipment has to the ability eliminate targets and conduct localized reconnaissance from a high altitude while not endangering American lives. Obviously, the United States and its allies began deploying them to Iraq and Syria to reduce Islamic State territory, resources, and manpower and eliminate leadership. Christina Rinehart's *Drones and targeted killing in the Middle East and Africa*, reviews and evaluates this practice against targets of the War on Terror across the theatre, dedicating a chapter to the specific conflict with ISIS. Particularly, Rinehart presents key figures of the exact targets of drone strikes in Iraq and Syria through the year 2016. As of that year, the United States and its allies conducted approximately 11,000 against the Islamic State. While drone strikes are not effective at mass casualty attacks, they are extremely productive at precise targets such as equipment, resources, transportation lanes, and leadership. In a period of about eighteen months, the coalition destroyed a total of 22,779 targets, encompassing major sources of revenue such as oil refineries and infrastructure, training, storage, housing, fortified areas, and armored vehicles. This cost the Islamic State at least \$650 million in equipment damages alone, and it is unknown what the final cost of losing the oil revenue and infrastructure ended up being. In terms of leadership and specialist, drones have eliminated a total of seven targets as of March 2016. Despite all of this, Rinehart concludes that if ISIS is to be eliminated, precision warfare alone is insufficient. The organization is extremely mobile and unprecedentedly stable following the deaths of leadership. Rinehart proposes

that stabilization and support of Iraq and Syria to fight ISIS themselves while continuing air support is the correct approach moving forward.

Finally, a comprehensive account that is as accurate as possible, given the recency of the conflict, is required to examine the deployment and effectiveness of policy and strategy so far. Mason Watson's *The Conflict with ISIS: Operation Inherent Resolve* from the Center for Military History describes the actions of the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF), Syria, and, to a lesser extent, Russia against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, alongside several other local militias. The Iraqi theatre, labeled Operation Eagle Strike, focused obviously on the territorial reduction of the caliphate but primarily on the liberation of the city of Mosul. The extremely urban environment of the capital of the Islamic State in Iraq proved difficult against air and drone strikes due to a high civilian population, which was successful in the rural areas surrounding the city. As a result, Iraqi and Kurdish ground forces were fostered and supported by the CJTF, eventually liberating Mosul in July 2017. This success allowed Iraqi forces to have increased confidence in their own tactics and a less hands-on approach by the United States in terms of tactics, leading to all ISIS-held territory in Iraq being liberated by the end of that year. Syria proved to be an extremely different theatre, and, to a certain extent, the conflict is still ongoing. The Islamic State held wide swaths of sparsely populated territory, so they mainly controlled transportation lanes surrounding the city of Ar Raqqa in northern Syria. This city has a similar environment to Mosul, but the approach could not be. Due to the Russian military's involvement in the concurrent Syrian Civil War, the skies above became increasingly crowded and tensions between the coalition and Russia grew. This prevented the coalition from providing effective air support to the Syrian forces. After Russia's role in the Civil War concluded, however, they turn their attention toward ISIS-controlled areas in late 2016. No longer

competing for space, significant progress was made in Syria, and by both Russian and CJTF forces in the air and a tenuous coalition of the Syrian regime and militia forces on the ground, IS territory collapsed quickly by early 2018.

From this collection of evidence, it can be concluded that supporting official Iraqi and Syrian forces along with the tenuous cooperation of local militias proved extremely effective, along with U.S.-led air strikes accompanying them. Most importantly, Operation Inherent Resolve was a success while limiting casualties and financial costs, unlike the previous Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Discussion

As established, the Islamic State, especially in Iraq and Syria, is in a current state of significant decline due to the precision warfare of the United States and its allies in the Combined Joint Task Force, the intervention of the Russian military on the Syrian front, and the U.S. support of the Iraqi military. In order to continue this decline in Iraq, Syria, and in several other nations, these methods must be maintained in their current form, adapted to new theatres and circumstances, or a combination of both. These are important to maintain the collective collaboration of typically tenuous groups and governments, while limiting the casualties and cost in increasingly distant, foreign wars.

Precision warfare on the part of the United States and the Combined Joint Task Force is a crucial element in this conflict. In the past and present, this type of warfare typically takes the form of high-altitude air strikes, from directly human-controlled aircraft, and unmanned aerial vehicle (drone) strikes. More infrequently, this can be the deployment of small, highly skilled tactical forces for extremely important, high-value targets. The evidence of the success of this

strategy is becoming more abundant if it is interpreted in the correct context. The use of this strategy is primarily effective in the elimination of leadership and specialist, equipment, specific infrastructure, and compounds.¹ This strategy, however, is not effective by itself because if it was this conflict would already be over, as the CJTF has launched over eleven thousand precision strikes against ISIS to extremely varied and highly publicized results, while the organization still continued to operate both locally and abroad.² The greatest contribution that precision warfare has to the overall conflict is supplementing the local ground forces both physically and mentally. This strategy significantly prepares future battlegrounds for formal ground operations through surveillance, reconnaissance, and defortification. Most importantly in this context, it instills confidence in local forces' own battle tactics, if the CJTF remains in its role, enabling them to increasingly conduct operations with decreasing levels of oversight.³ While the tangible results of precision warfare alone are debatable, the intangibles in concert with traditional forces have proven to be successful.

The Russian military's involvement on the Syrian front of the conflict with the Islamic State and its relationship with the current Syrian regime clearly had a significant impact on the liberation of the caliphate's territory, despite the tensions and unwillingness of recognition between the CJTF and the Russo-Syrian forces. Depending on the perspective and timing, the IS was either a belligerent or an adjacent threat in the multi-front Syrian Civil War, but either way, the organization did not take top priority.⁴ After it became so, the Syrian regime forces and the Russian military effectively reduced the territory of the Islamic State in Syria so that those two

¹ Rinehart, 139-141.

² Rinehart, 142.

³ Watson, 62-63.

⁴ Watson, 39-40.

forces could resume the still ongoing civil war. This required, however, collaboration between tradition and current enemies, or at the very least avoidance while they eliminated a common enemy. This primarily manifested with the already CTJF-allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a belligerent in the Syrian Civil War opposite the Russo-Syrian alliance.⁵ While these two forces did not intermingle, they both played crucial roles in the majority defeat of the Islamic State. More importantly, this instance establishes a precedent for future unlikely collaborators to eliminate common enemies.

The overall effectiveness of Operation Inherent Resolve, especially in Iraq, demonstrated the ultimate game plan from a policy and military strategy standpoint. The Combined Joint Task Force, dominated by Western powers, successfully supported official Iraqi and Syrian forces and several local independent militias, who were previously enemies, in a comprehensive collaboration. These obviously include opposing nationalities, ethnicities, religions, and many more distinctions and disparities with extreme variations in fanaticism and motivations. This unfortunately is not unique to Iraq and Syria and is prevalent in many regions across the globe. Fortunately, the Islamic State's transnational reach permeates many areas where this diverse conflict is prevalent; therefore, the groundwork established in Iraq and Syria can be applied to these other theatres. The cooperation between these previously opposing forces introduces stability, for at least a time, so that the common enemy can be neutralized. This stability directly thwarts the foundation on which the Islamic State is built. The organization recruits, protects, and takes advantage of those who are victims of the instability of the nations in which they reside.⁶ As to the military strategy aspect, as previously established, the CJTF air and drone

⁵ Watson, 70-71.

⁶ Lister, 39.

strikes exclusively were only effective to a limited extent. Only in concert with traditional ground forces, the majority of which was composed of an emboldened native coalition, did the precision strikes prove to be extremely effective. This spawns multiple positive results for all actors. For the native coalition, they gain vital experience collaborating and coexisting in a previously divisive and hostile space as well as confidence in their originally conceived tactics and strategies. For the foreign coalition, they complete a vital mission with the least amount of financial and human cost.⁷

Conclusion

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria was a foreign group that expanded in a region defined by violent division and oppression by recruiting, employing, and protecting its victims, eventually declaring a caliphate stretching this region. Nearly ironically, but not without an underlying derivative motivation, a foreign group recruited, employed, and supported local groups to defeat their new oppressors. The Combined Joint Task Force, the new foreign group along with Russia, provided a coalition of local forces with precision warfare to prepare the path to liberation. The strategies and policies of precision warfare, the maintenance of temporary tenuous unlikely alliances and cooperations, and the enabling and emboldening of a coalition of local forces defeated a mobile, versatile, and multifaceted organization that still persists in other theatres today. By using this game plan, the remaining tendrils of the organization can be defeated without further costing the Western nations, the United States especially, casualties and financially in a shifting global political arena. Speaking of which, elements of this game plan have begun to appear in the War in Ukraine, adapted to fit the circumstances and actors.

⁷Watson, 81-83.

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