

Global Security Briefing – October 2014

THE ISLAMIC STATE AND ITS POTENTIAL

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Summary

This briefing is concerned with the aims and intentions of the Islamic State (IS) and whether the approach being adopted by the international coalition will have the intended effect: the destruction of the group. While this is just one part of a complex international conflict in the region, it is central to any analysis of why the movement has apparently developed so rapidly and whether it is amenable to control primarily by the application of external air power. It will consider, in particular, IS's paramilitary competence, the level of external support for IS across the region and beyond, and the vexed question of whether it actually wants western states to go to war with it.

Developments during September

On 8 August, following the rapid expansion of IS across north-west Iraq, especially the surprise overrun of Mosul two months earlier, the United States commenced a series of airstrikes designed initially to limit the threat to displaced persons, especially the Yazidi, and also to hinder attempted IS advances towards the Kurdish administrative capital of Irbil. The air attacks were small-scale but had some impact, not least in allowing the rather disunited Peshmerga Kurdish military units to regroup and rearm.

During the latter part of August and early September the United States extended its air operations to aid Iraq Army and Shi'a militia groups in hindering IS militias from taking control of two strategic dams, the Haditha Dam on the Euphrates and the Mosul Dam on the Tigris. Both operations appeared to have worked, at least in the short-term, but elsewhere in Iraq IS continued to gain control of territory. Right at the end of September it began an attempt to take control of towns between Fallujah, a long-term centre of power, and Baghdad itself.

At the political level, Haider al-Abadi was installed as Prime Minister of Iraq in place of Nouri al-Maliki, raising hopes that a more inclusive government could be formed. It was hoped that this would help convince Sunni clans to end their support for IS, thus undercutting an important element of the Islamic State's power. At the wider level, relations between the United States and Iran continued to improve, causing some unease in western Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, but also allowing US operations in Iraq to continue even as Iran supplied copious advice and specialist military help to the Iraqi armed forces. To an extent, the two states were working in parallel if not in cooperation.

During September, the Obama Administration took the decision to take the war directly to the IS heartland in northern Syria, having established a coalition of supporting states in the region. A number of these were involved, some directly, in the first substantial use of air power on 23 September, the most significant being Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Their actions were secondary to those of the United States which dominated the air operations, using a combination of sea-launched cruise missiles, F-22, F-15E, F-16 and F/A18 strike aircraft, B1B strategic bombers and drones. Shortly after this extended air war commenced, the United Kingdom committed Tornado aircraft to direct attacks in Iraq instead of just

surveillance flights, and Belgian, Danish, Dutch and Australian governments began sending forces to the region, joining French strike aircraft that had already begun air attacks in Iraq but not Syria.

By the end of the month the United States had close to 2,000 military personnel in Iraq, although this may not include the total number of Special Forces. In an indication of a likely expansion of ground-based operations, a Brigade Headquarters was due to move to the country in early October, although the United States and all other western states repeatedly stated that this would not be a “boots on the ground” war, either in Iraq or Syria. President Obama made it clear in his address on 10 September that the intention was to degrade and ultimately destroy the Islamic State.

Origins and evolution of the Islamic State

The term Islamic State has come into common use following the speech of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in Mosul on 5 July, declaring himself the Caliph of the new “Islamic State”, the formation of which had been announced on 29 June. This was in direct opposition to the aims of the al-Qaida movement, even though IS has its origins in an offshoot of al-Qaida - al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI, or, more literally, al-Qaida in Mesopotamia) - that formed in Iraq following the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime in April 2003.

While IS (then known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant: ISIL) appeared to be concentrated in Syria in 2012-13, a key part of its evolution before then was the development and fate of AQI in Iraq in the period from 2003 to 2006. The most prominent leader of AQI was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and AQI was the most significant of extreme Sunni paramilitary groups active against US and other coalition forces and also against Shi'a militias. AQI was a source of huge concern to US military commanders by early 2004, primarily because of the high level of casualties it inflicted.

Under General Stanley McChrystal, the US Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) developed a network-centric model which used four highly trained and well-armed Special Forces groups to seek out and destroy elements of AQI and related groups across central and north-western Iraq. Commonly known as Task Force 145, the four Task Force groups each had a regional focus, with the personnel drawn from three US formations - SEAL Team 6, a Delta Squadron and a Ranger battalion - and an SAS squadron from the UK.

These Task Forces had access to a wide range of intelligence but operated with considerable independence, undertaking up to 300 raids a month to kill or capture suspected insurgents, the latter frequently subject to intense physical interrogation in order to gain information leading to further raids. Zarqawi himself was killed in October 2006 and over a three-year period to late 2007 some thousands of suspected insurgents were killed and tens of thousands detained, 20,000 of them in Camp Bucca near Basra. Detainees were mostly held without trial, some for several years, but most were ultimately released by the time the US withdrew its combat forces in 2011. Hundreds more were freed in a concentrated campaign of attacks on Iraqi prisons in 2012-13.

The view from the Pentagon was that JSOC operations and the establishment of Sunni militias opposed to Zarqawi's brutal activities, coupled with a surge of US forces in 2007, were the core factors that led to an easing of the war by 2008. That may have been the case, but what

is now clear is that the core military leadership of IS is heavily dependent on Iraqi paramilitary survivors from that period.

The Islamic State Core

While the dominant orientation within IS is of an extreme “pure” Islamist outlook stemming from the Wahhabi orientation within Islam and seeking the establishment of a new and “pure” extreme Caliphate, at the core of the movement are many Iraqi paramilitaries who gained extensive combat experience against US and UK Special Forces in Iraq. They survived a singularly brutal war, especially Operation Arcadia in 2006, they have high levels of paramilitary competence and much experience in surviving air strikes.

A radical view of Islam, and the need to purify the Sunni majority, may not be at the forefront of these experienced paramilitaries’ thinking but they exhibit bitterness towards the United States and its allies, including those in the region, and also to the Shi’a-dominated Iraqi government and its close links with Tehran. This should not obscure the fact that the leadership of IS, and many of those close to the leadership, have an extreme religious outlook that is deeply eschatological, looking beyond earthly life in seeking to establish a new Caliphate spreading out from Iraq/Syria - a process to be measured in many decades, if not centuries.

A second factor in IS organisation is the skill level that relates to new social media. Put bluntly, IS has remarkable abilities in this direction and is able to utilise internal coverage of events, including the horrifying execution of hostages, for considerable propaganda effect. The use of a paramilitary with a British accent not only serves to stir up inter-communal animosity in the UK but also generates unease in the United States when that individual appears involved in the killing of American hostages.

Perhaps the most significant element in the IS outlook is that it shows signs of welcoming western military intervention. It positively wants a war, with this being shown especially by the barbaric killings of hostages in clear provocation of western audiences. Such killings cause considerable anger and upset amongst the great majority of Muslims but will strike a chord with a small minority, primarily in the Middle East but also in diaspora communities. This group is the main target of IS propaganda, but it also reinforces regional sources of financial support, not least when it highlights the continually close connection between the United States and Israel, especially during and after the recent Gaza War.

The process of hostage taking and execution is part of a long term strategy and the recent horrific events should be seen as a deliberate and continuing provocation that is phased precisely to incite an increasingly robust western military response.

Responses

It is fully understandable that the beheading of innocent hostages should arouse outrage in western states and increases public and political support for strong military action. However, if the IS leadership is actually seeking such action in order to portray itself as a vanguard in the defence of Islam, this may not be wise, especially as it is likely to evolve into ground operations, a transition that IS will no doubt welcome with the prospect of capturing western military personnel.

Deciding not to give the Islamic State what it wants may be very difficult for western political and military leaderships but may be necessary, even at this late stage. Instead, a far greater emphasis on undermining support for IS, especially through more inclusive governance in Iraq, region-wide efforts to counter its financial support base and the encouragement of more prominent opposition from Muslim jurists may ultimately have a greater impact.

This is not easy to argue, given the strong preference in western states for an aggressive response to IS atrocities, but it is broadly similar to arguments put forward in the early years of the war on terror, especially late 2001 and early 2003, that were highly dubious about the prospect of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. With benefit of hindsight, those arguments look all too reasonable, and that may turn out to be the case as the war against IS intensifies in the coming months.

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