

# The Military Power of the Islamic State

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Of the various video clips that the Islamic State regularly uploads on the internet, two in particular provide insights about its force buildup while demonstrating the two major components of the training it seeks to instill in its fighters. The first shows children undergoing endurance training as their instructors beat them with various items. In one segment of this video, the group is shown learning how to charge while coming under fire.<sup>1</sup> The second video shows a group of children dressed in camouflage battle fatigues being indoctrinated as jihadi fighters at the Farouk Institute training camp in the city of al-Raqqah.<sup>2</sup> An analysis of a document issued by the Islamic State's education bureau in September 2014<sup>3</sup> makes clear the depth of the entity's penetration in schools, where it has radically changed the curricula to focus on motivation, fighting spirit, and zeal for self-sacrifice.

It is difficult to assess the Islamic State's military strength without first understanding the impact of its indoctrination and propaganda, and as a result, the power of the fighting spirit among its combatants. Moreover, it seems that it deems military training of secondary importance as compared to the effort that it puts into cultivating the combatants' desire to fight. This essay presents the military and operational capabilities of the Islamic State while examining the components of its force buildup: doctrine, armaments, manpower, organization, command and control, and training.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, it is important to consider soft force components – motivation and fighting spirit – which, though difficult to quantify, could have a decisive effect on the organization's military strength.

## Doctrine

In the absence of authentic documents that lay out the Islamic State's doctrine on military operations, analysis of the group's operational approach is possible by observing the operational methods of its forces. This may also offer secondary evidence of the Islamic State's comprehensive strategy. Operational actions are designed on the basis of the Islamic State's so-called shock doctrine,<sup>5</sup> which consists of three stages described in *The Management of Savagery*, the formative strategic manual of jihadist movements.<sup>6</sup> The first stage focuses on the establishment of an area of savagery: the organization conquers an area with ruthless viciousness, thus inflicting shock and fear among the population. During the second stage, the organization manages to provide the region and terrorized population with a certain measure of security. In the third stage, the organization places the conquered area under a full governing authority, following the Salafist interpretation of Islamic law (*sharia*).

In accordance with this manual, the Islamic State's operational approach is grounded in three principles. First is the use of unyielding cruelty toward the enemy, so as to set an example for future opponents. Second is extensive psychological warfare implemented through a variety of tools available to it, especially the internet, rumors, and fifth columns amid enemy populations; these lead to the terrorization of civilians and defense forces, which fundamentally affects their resilience. The third principle stresses the mobility and flexibility of its actions, which allow for the rapid, as-needed mobilization of forces and reinforcements. The Islamic State operates through small battle groups moving around in commercial vehicles that enjoy easy mobility and are armed with machine guns, as well as anti-tank and anti-aircraft weapons.

When attacking and conquering nearby targets, the Islamic State uses mortar bomb fire backed by snipers and machine guns in advance of the fighters' entry.<sup>7</sup> When targets are further away, it makes extensive use of suicide attacks to demoralize the opposition and thus prepare the ground for the advance of its forces. In defensive battles over urban areas, the Islamic State uses fortifications to steer the enemy into crowded spaces, where it feels that it enjoys an advantage. By contrast, its fighters seem to have a hard time coping with forces that rely on long distance snipers.<sup>8</sup>

In the case of organized attacks on densely populated areas or large cities, the Islamic State also uses special units to penetrate frontline defenses before the main force arrives and thereby cast terror over the region through

suicide attacks, IEDs, snipers, and so on. These forces are selected from within cadres of highly motivated and thus highly effective extremists, who are ready to sacrifice their lives.<sup>9</sup>

### **Armaments**

The Islamic State uses whatever weapons it can obtain. There are many sources of weapons, but most arms are loot seized from the Iraqi and Syrian armies, with some coming from rebel organizations in Syria.<sup>10</sup> A study carried out by a London research institute<sup>11</sup> indicates that the Islamic State also uses American weapons and ammunition, apparently included in a Saudi Arabian arms assistance package. It possesses a large variety of rockets, mortar bombs, anti-tank weapons – including the advanced Kornet – and sophisticated anti-aircraft weapons capable of damaging the helicopters and low flying aircraft of the coalition forces in areas of fighting.<sup>12</sup>

The Islamic State also has heavier weapons, such as armored vehicles, several dozen Russian T55 tanks seized as loot, and even a few Scud missiles and MiG 21s, though it is not clear whether the latter are in operational condition. It uses more advanced weapons as well; videos reveal that it relies on UAVs to gather intelligence.<sup>13</sup> One of the most worrisome issues, however, is its desire to seize strategic weapons, such as chemical weapons; based on several reports, it has already employed chemical weapons in combat.<sup>14</sup>

The Islamic State is also active in cyberspace. So far, its activity in this domain has been focused on two objectives: an extensive use of social media to engage in psychological warfare and to recruit manpower and resources. Lately, there is ever more evidence of the entity's effort to carry out cyber attacks, including on national infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> Although this activity is still in its infancy, once the required resources have been recruited, the Islamic State will presumably not hesitate to act extensively against its enemies in this domain as well.

### **Manpower**

Reports on the number of Islamic State's combatants vary. According to US intelligence sources, in February 2015 they amounted to approximately 20,000; in Syria alone, there are some 3,400 fighters from the West.<sup>16</sup> In late 2014, one CIA source set the number at 31,000 – 10,000 more than the previous count.<sup>17</sup> Estimates of the increase in the Islamic State's ranks run parallel to the estimated number of casualties in the organization, which

claims that over 10,000 Islamic State fighters have been killed<sup>18</sup> since the onset of coalition attacks.<sup>19</sup> Experience suggests that many of those killed were not fighters but civilians, some of whom were almost certainly not involved in the fighting.

Fighters are recruited from many places, with most coming from the local population in Syria and Iraq. The total number of foreigners is estimated at 12,000, most of whom hail from various European nations, North America, Australia, North Africa, and the Arab Middle East.<sup>20</sup> Foreign fighters represent a significant portion of the Islamic State's potential suicide attackers – so much so that many of them believe that they are enlisting in order to die.<sup>21</sup> Other fighters are recruited on the basis of their knowledge and fields of expertise, therefore not only for their ability to fight, but also for their intelligence and ability to engage in psychological warfare and offer logistical and technological assistance. However, it is very difficult to assess the reliability of these numbers and determine precisely who is a fighter. The Islamic State is not monolithic, which makes it difficult to discover the contractual obligation of those assigned to fighting units, which could offer evidence of its military ORBAT.

### **Organization and Command and Control**

The Islamic State is organized along district lines. Each district is relatively autonomous, as are the military forces within it. The forces are organized in a way that grants them maximal flexibility, with a notable absence of rigid, fixed frameworks. This looseness allows them to realize their doctrine, which requires mobility and rapid reinforcement. Most of the Islamic State's manpower lies in urban areas and along transportation routes, allowing it to move rapidly in integrated battle groups – infantry, tanks, rapid deployment, anti-tank, anti-aircraft, ordnance, and logistics – wherever needed. As coalition attacks have increased in number, the Islamic State has dispersed its larger bases, and now makes use of small, mobile battle groups. In the absence of designated communication means, it also makes use of social platforms such as Twitter and WhatsApp.<sup>22</sup>

The command and control structures are similarly decentralized to enable the same flexibility and mobility. Commanders thus take local initiatives with no need for a multilayered, complex command hierarchy.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the Islamic State has inverted the entire structure of command and control so that it operates from the bottom up. A hierarchical division of command

and control dependent on strategic, systemic, and tactical commanders no longer exists; instead, the decision making process has been flattened to allow junior commanders greater freedom of action so that they can swiftly respond to operational opportunities.<sup>24</sup>

## **Training**

A significant portion of fighters were trained in military frameworks prior to joining the Islamic State; in many cases – and ironically – this training was funded by the United States.<sup>25</sup> As for the rookies, their training takes place in special camps through programs lasting several weeks. One source that interviewed Islamic State fighters disclosed that the camps offer different types of training that last from two to four weeks. Most of these programs, however, incorporate the Islamic State's ideology, i.e., indoctrination for the sake of expanding the Islamic faith along with basic military training.<sup>26</sup> Although the fighters seem to be of average ability, the training they receive is extremely strenuous and has a lasting impact on their operational capabilities. The Islamic State places great emphasis on military training for local youth, both through its influence on schools and their curricula, which it fashions to its own ends, and through training camps for school-aged children.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the damage inflicted by the coalition, the Islamic State continues to gather strength in terms of both manpower and weaponry. One source of its growing power is its decentralized command structure, which is crucial to enhancing its operational capabilities, tenacity, and survivability. Nonetheless, Islamic State forces have been defeated in certain local incidents after encountering organized, determined enemies. Such was the case in a conflict with the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq, a group that also relies on decentralized fighting methods.<sup>27</sup> On that occasion, the Islamic State troops were exposed as being average to below average in terms of operational capability.

The Islamic State's success at expanding its ranks despite the heavy losses it has suffered at the hands of the coalition reveals the extent to which attacks carried out with no clear strategy make it difficult to attain real results. The Islamic State has a highly efficient military structure that is inflicting damage on the Iraqi and Syrian armies. Its operational capabilities are not stellar, but the high level of its fighting spirit and the readiness with which its followers embrace self sacrifice have allowed it to expand its control over the region.

In the meantime, its enemies are collapsing. In Iraq, however, the Islamic State has retreated a bit since the regime's forces have regrouped, thanks to Iranian and US aid. It is important that this retreat guide the policy of the coalition, and especially that of the United States, and encourage it to formulate a relevant and effective strategy.

One possible strategy is to see the threat of the Islamic State as a chronic illness that cannot be fully cured that the world must learn to live with while adhering to a certain regimen of medications. Less metaphorically speaking, this means seeing the conflict as lasting. At this point in time, it is obviously impossible to defeat the Islamic State in full, so no attempt to do so should be made. The objective of all action must be to contain it within smaller and smaller areas, where its influence is tolerable for the international community, and to continue long term attacks. The Islamic State has yet to face professional military forces that possess the skills of integrated battle groups. However, experience shows that even regular forces sometimes find it difficult to confront a resolute enemy that uses guerrilla tactics.

At the same time, it seems that the Islamic State is in the process of institutionalization. Its desire to control the region that it has conquered requires closer control of commanders and battle groups. Its transition to more regular military constellations and hierarchic command and control processes will develop in a natural and unidirectional way. This process, however, is bound to take its toll on the Islamic State, given that it will make it easier for conventional military forces to operate against it.

## Notes

- 1 See the video of March 2015 at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f\\_0dOyUS0Cw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f_0dOyUS0Cw).
- 2 AP, "In an ISIS Training Camp, Children Told: 'Behead the Doll,'" *al-Arabiya News*, July 18, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/features/2015/07/18/In-an-ISIS-training-camp-children-told-behead-the-doll-.html>.
- 3 Yehonatan Dahoah-Halevy, "The Strategy of ISIS's Education Bureau," Jerusalem Center for Public and State Affairs, March 2, 2015.
- 4 This essay addresses the entity of the Islamic State established in areas of Iraq and Syria, rather than its proxies or districts.
- 5 Steve Niva, "The ISIS Shock Doctrine," *The Immanent Frame*, February 20, 2015, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2015/02/20/the-isis-shock-doctrine>.
- 6 Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery: The Most Critical Stage through Which the Umma Will Pass*, trans. by William McCants, Institute for Strategic Studies at Harvard University, May 23, 2006, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/>

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- 7 Alaa al-Lami, "ISIS' Fighting Doctrine: Sorting Fact from Fiction," *al-Akhbar*, October 31, 2014, <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/22280>.
  - 8 Ibid.
  - 9 The Butcher, "'Inghemasiyoun': Secret to ISIS Success: Shock Troops Who Fight to the Death," *Pundit from Another Planet*, July 8, 2015, <http://punditfromanotherplanet.com/2015/07/08/inghemasiyoun-secret-to-isis-success-shock-troops-who-fight-to-the-death>.
  - 10 "Does ISIS Keep its Same Military Strength?" *Levant News*, March 27, 2015, [the-levant.com/tag/does-isis-keep-its-same-military-strength](http://the-levant.com/tag/does-isis-keep-its-same-military-strength).
  - 11 "Islamic State Weapons in Iraq and Syria: Analysis of Weapons and Ammunition Captured from Islamic State Forces in Iraq and Syria," Conflict Armament Research, London, September 2014, [http://www.conflictarm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Dispatch\\_IS\\_Iraq\\_Syria\\_Weapons.pdf](http://www.conflictarm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Dispatch_IS_Iraq_Syria_Weapons.pdf).
  - 12 Kirk Semple and Eric Schmitt, "Missiles of ISIS May Pose Peril for Aircrews in Iraq," *New York Times*, October 26, 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/27/world/middleeast/missiles-of-isis-may-pose-peril-for-aircrews.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/27/world/middleeast/missiles-of-isis-may-pose-peril-for-aircrews.html?_r=0).
  - 13 "Islamic State Weapons in Iraq and Syria."
  - 14 "Islamic State Used Chemical Weapons against Peshmerga, Kurds Say," *The Guardian*, March 14, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/14/islamic-state-isis-used-chemical-weapons-peshmerga-kurds>.
  - 15 Tobias Feakin, "ISIS Pushes for Offensive Cyber Capability," *The Strategist*, June 1, 2015, <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/isis-pushes-for-offensive-cyber-capability>.
  - 16 Kevin Strouse, "We Don't Actually Know How Big ISIS Is – And Neither Does ISIS," *Overt Action*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.overtaction.org/2015/03/we-dont-actually-know-how-big-isis-is-and-neither-does-isis>.
  - 17 Denver Nicks, "CIA Says ISIS Ranks May Have Tripled," *Time*, September 12, 2014, <http://time.com/3340662/cia-isis-isil>.
  - 18 In the absence of an estimate of the number of wounded, experience with this sort of fighting suggests double the number of dead.
  - 19 Laura Smith-Spark and Noisette Martel, "U.S. Official: 10,000-plus ISIS Fighters Killed in 9-Month Campaign," *CNN*, June 4, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/03/middleeast/isis-conflict>.
  - 20 L.L. "Foreign Fighters In Iraq and Syria," *Radio Free Europe*, updated on January 29, 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/infographics/foreign-fighters-syria-iraq-is-isis-isil-infographic/26584940.html>.
  - 21 See note 9.
  - 22 Metin Gurcan, "How to Defeat Islamic State's War Machine," *al-Monitor*, October 14, 2014.
  - 23 Ibid.

- 24 Dog Leaks, “The ISIS and its Military Tactics,” *Invisible Dog* No. 35, November 2014, [http://www.invisible-dog.com/isis\\_tactics\\_eng.html](http://www.invisible-dog.com/isis_tactics_eng.html).
- 25 Souad Mekhennet, “The Terrorists Fighting Us Now? We Just Finished Training Them,” *Washington Post*, August 18, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/08/18/the-terrorists-fighting-us-now-we-just-finished-training-them/>.
- 26 Hassan Hassan, “The Secret World of Isis Training Camps – Ruled by Sacred Texts and the Sword,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/25/inside-isis-training-camps>.
- 27 Metin Gurcan, “Don’t Expect Peshmerga to Beat Islamic State,” *al-Monitor*, September 1, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/09/turkey-syria-iraq-kurdistan-isis-military-pesmerga.html#>.