The Islamic State as an Intelligence Challenge

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The Islamic State is a rising force in the Middle East, acting to overturn the existing political order by erasing borders, overthrowing regimes, and leading a religious war. Since from an intelligence perspective its defining characteristics, both strategic and operational, differ from those that traditionally occupy the intelligence communities in the West, it presents a significant intelligence challenge.

The intelligence on the Islamic State is not of a uniform fabric, and it is not possible to detach it from the viewpoint of the interested party of a specific intelligence facility. Therefore, the intelligence challenge must be broken down into the various levels of security activity: national intelligence required for decision makers; strategic intelligence required for military leaders; operational intelligence required for arena commanders in the campaign; and tactical intelligence required for the combat forces, in the air or on the ground.[1]

Before analyzing the Islamic State intelligence challenge, it is important to distinguish between generic intelligence viewpoints vis-à-vis strategic and operational challenges, and the unique intelligence challenge that the Islamic State constitutes in Western eyes (the countless issues that derive from the intelligence war being waged against the Islamic State will not be specified here). The Islamic State represents a substantive enemy for the United States and its allies, which are fighting it with varying degrees of intensity. Although Israel constitutes an enemy for the Islamic State, as affirmed by different Islamic State spokesmen, it is not part of the entity's active efforts. However, Israel must make stringent assumptions in everything pertaining to the threats facing it from the Islamic State. These assumptions

should be reflected, first and foremost, in activity by the Israeli intelligence community to study and prepare a response to the Islamic State.

The Islamic State is a broad phenomenon with branches primarily in the Middle East and Africa. Although based in Iraq and Syria, its widespread cyber activity brings it well within the purview of the West. The question of the systemic boundaries for the intelligence discussion of this phenomenon is a strategic decision stemming from the strategic context of those involved. The choice by the United States to deal with the regional presence of the Islamic State stems from the American strategic effort to stabilize the region while confronting radical Islamism. In contrast, the Israeli perspective should deal with operational military threats that the Islamic State poses on its borders.

This article will focus on the intelligence challenge posed by the Islamic State from the perspective of the party managing the overall effort against it, i.e., the international coalition led by the United States, and focus on the ramifications for Israel. It will not deal with the rising intelligence efforts of the EU countries to confront the Islamic State, which are focused primarily on homeland security issues. Despite a certain similarity between Israel and the US regarding the intelligence challenge, the nature of the confrontation that is liable to take place between Israel and the Islamic State is completely different. Therefore, the Israeli intelligence effort should be discussed separately regarding the challenge that it presents. This differentiation stems from the understanding of the strategic and operational context of the Islamic State phenomenon from Israel's standpoint, which relates to the phenomenon as it is manifested primarily in Iraq and Syria, and secondarily in the Sinai Peninsula. In this context, there are two central aspects: Israel's geopolitical interests in the northeastern territory and the impact of the rise of the Islamic State there, as well as the need for Israel to preserve a proper defense and security regime inside its borders.

The Strategic Surprise in the Rise of the Islamic State

The meteoric rise of the Islamic State in June 2014 stunned the intelligence organizations in the United States. President Obama criticized the American intelligence community,[2] claiming that it did not correctly assess events in Syria and the inability of the Iraqi army to prevent Salafi jihadi forces from establishing themselves in the territory. Another claim maintains that intelligence organizations in the US were surprised by the founding of ISIS and the speed of its advance toward the announcement of a caliphate, and

estimated that the central threat expected in this context is the return of volunteers to their Western home countries.[3]

In response to the complaints, American intelligence organizations recalled a warning that they issued in 2012 in regard to the strengthening of Salafi jihadi forces, which the administration did not address thoroughly because it did not want to become entangled once again in Iraq.[4] There were those who explained the intelligence gap by claiming that it is not the function of intelligence to monitor the Iraqi forces, which were regarded as allied forces. This argument was accompanied by an emphasis on the reduction in intelligence gathering ability in Iraq beginning in 2011.[5] Others explained that Islamic State leaders surprised themselves by their success – a claim that relates to the chaotic nature of strategic emergence, and especially for the reality in the Middle East in recent years. However, this in itself questions the very ability of intelligence bodies to supply early warning.

Nevertheless, the major significance of the aspects described above is not intelligence-related or oversight in early warning, but rather the ongoing irrelevance of Western intelligence for the current strategic environment in the Middle East. This, first and foremost, is due to the lack of understanding of the region and environment in which the Islamic State grew, as well as a lack of use of chaotic-emergence assessment models. The discussion solely around the issue of surprise misses a central function of intelligence – assistance in formulating relevant policy regarding unfolding developments in the arena.

The Islamic State as a Part of the Ecosystem

In order to gain a strategic understanding of the Islamic State, it is necessary to understand the "ecosystem" in which it grew and its overall links with states in the region and other actors. In any discussion of the ongoing struggle against global jihad, cultural and religious issues are especially relevant. The intelligence framework on the national level is required to understand the relevant phenomena and ideology, and specific religious, historical, cultural, social, and tribal aspects. A more particular way of understanding the Islamic State is through a genealogical viewpoint, i.e., the development of the Salafist jihad phenomenon.[6] Intelligence must internalize historical meanings, which include deep theological doctrine. Indeed, the commander of special operations for the United States in the Middle East noted that the West lacks an understanding of the ideology behind the phenomenon:

"We have not defeated the ideology…and we haven't even managed to understand it."[7]

In addition, strategic intelligence on the Islamic State requires an understanding of the governmental vacuum that has emerged in northeastern Syria, as well as an understanding of the battle that the Syrian regime and Hezbollah are waging against the opposition forces since 2011-2012, together with an understanding of the significance of battle for the opposition forces themselves. In order to gauge the depth of the Islamic State phenomenon, political and geostrategic understandings must thus be integrated with a cultural and social understanding of the groups in the territory.

The self-definition of the Islamic State as a caliphate, with the theological ramifications derived therefrom in regard to what may be called "redemption here and now," makes clear that this body cannot be regarded as a state in the Western configuration, but rather as a subversive ideology that challenges the existing Western and national order and has immediate implications for the phenomenon's future development. An understanding of this religious-messianic mindset will also clarify the steps taken by the Islamic State, which in Western eyes appear at first glance to be politically and strategically irrational, and which make the entire world rise up against it. As such, the major Western intelligence conceptual assets regarding Western "rational" players and issues of deterrence are highly irrelevant in this case.

Another aspect of the intelligence challenge is the need to examine the economy of the Islamic State, which is vital for assessing its viability and locating the sources of its power. These should also serve as a source for military targets to be attacked. An additional critical aspect for intelligence handling is the extent of the organization's governance and control, manifested in areas such as education, religion, law, and infrastructures, and is based in part on instilling a feeling of fear and dread among the residents. If the West succeeds in pursuing the Islamic State's centers of gravity, perhaps it will be able to strike it in order to bring about a reduction in its power at home. As such, confronting the Islamic State will occur not only on the battlefield.

How Far will the Islamic State Spread?

The question of how far the Islamic State will spread in the future is very relevant from Israel's standpoint, since it overlaps with the question of whether and in what circumstances the war against Israel would figure among the Islamic State's priorities. The answer to this question is influenced in

part by the actions of all actors, especially the international coalition and the Russian effort.

The conduct of the Islamic State until now indicates that it will spread to places where there is a sympathetic ethnic infrastructure, as well as to places in which it identifies a governance vacuum. More than offering an assessment of its plans – which its own leaders might not know themselves – such mapping will help in formulating strategy that, if sound and comprehensive, could have a negative impact on the Islamic State in its efforts to expand.

The Islamic State as a New Operational Intelligence Challenge

The State of Israel has much experience in dealing with paramilitary organizations, and it has developed advanced abilities against the challenges that these impose upon Western armies. The most significant operational challenges that have arisen vis-à-vis Israel in recent years arose from ongoing friction, which makes it possible for both sides to learn and prepare themselves for future confrontation. To compensate for their inferiority, the major challenge that Israel's rivals have created from this friction is "static disappearance." The Israeli response to this challenge is embodied, inter alia, in the creation of a "target bank" for future confrontations. In contrast, the Islamic State has adopted a different alternative: "dynamic disappearance," which is based on movement, i.e., conquering territories or relinquishing them when required by circumstances.

The operational intelligence response that Israel has devised as part of the battles it conducts with paramilitary organizations lies in a combination of continuous intelligence preparation and intelligence control (such as ability to "hold territory") in real time. The most significant challenge in dealing operatively and operationally with the Islamic State is the need to develop a target bank of a phenomenon that is still not active on Israel's northern border. A partial response to this is monitoring the Islamic State's logistical deployment in Israel's direction, if this occurs.

In order to enable the development of a relevant approach to dealing with the Islamic State, intelligence is required – as with any other rival – to identify centers of gravity or logic by which it operates, and if damaged, will impact on its overall performance. In order to reach a relevant operational understanding, one must identify the links between the various provinces of the Islamic State, the manner in which its military array is structured and operates, where command centers are located and the relationship between

them, the structure of the chain of command and religious leadership, and the extent of control by the Islamic State in the various regions. Operational intelligence on the Islamic State is required to investigate its logistical abilities, examine the extent of its fitness, the ways in which it raises funds and recruits manpower, and weaponry. This is in order to indicate the weak points in these processes, which could disrupt its activity if damaged.

The Cyber World as Intelligence Space for Collection and Influence

A particular central direction of intelligence activity in dealing with the Islamic State is cyberspace, the media, and social networks. One of the Islamic State's major assets is its ability to exploit these areas to recruit supporters and fighters, as well as using them as a platform for transmitting messages of deterrence and intimidation. Intelligence on cyberspace is required as a primary collection target for the branches of the Islamic State and the pool of recruits, in addition to a central target for disruption and transmission of messages that contradict the propaganda messages by the Islamic State, such as messages of psychological warfare for deepening conflicts and splits between commanders and sub-groups. Cyberspace also constitutes a space in which confrontation with the Islamic State can be created, which will enable familiarity with the entity and enhance the ability to learn about it.

Conclusion

The intelligence community discourse on the phenomenon of the Islamic State initially dealt with the issue of warning – did the American intelligence community warn about this phenomenon or not. This article contends that the critical question is not warning as a separate issue, but rather what intelligence should be developed in the West and in Israel in order to support the decision making process and the shaping of relevant policy vis-à-vis the rising challenge of the Islamic State.

In tandem, it is important to note that that Israeli intelligence requires warning about the Islamic State on various levels: (a) strategic – will Israel become a priority for the Islamic State? When? In which directions will the Islamic State spread? What are the risks for moderate regimes in the region? (b) operational – what are the concrete intentions of the Islamic State against Israel: Harassment? Development of a prolonged permanent threat? Are there operational preparations and deployments by the Islamic

State toward Israel, and if so, does it see Israel as part of the international coalition or a target in and of itself? (c) tactical – is a terror attack by the Islamic State planned against Israel, and if so, what form will it assume?

The fighting currently directed at the Islamic State has great potential for developing intelligence on its patterns of action; it also constitutes a central challenge: the State of Israel is liable to encounter a quick, adaptive rival that knows how to operate in an environment of heavy firepower and a wealth of intelligence, and conduct complex and cruel operations. Therefore, intelligence is required to prepare the system for a possible surprise, primarily out of a need to formulate an operational response vis-à-vis a phenomenon that Israel has yet to experience on the battlefield. Additional functions required by intelligence after the war begins are developing an in-depth understanding of the Islamic State phenomenon as an ideological and military and civilian establishment; an understanding of the directions in which it can spread that depend on its potential rivals; and the impact of action by the international coalition on these directions.

Intelligence on the Islamic State phenomenon must be more integrative than ever before. It must include cooperation between a country's various intelligence entities and personnel (research and gathering), as well as cooperation with foreign intelligence organizations. The intelligence communities dealing with the Islamic State challenge must establish joint teams for developing knowledge of strategic and operational issues.

The unprecedented challenge posed by the Islamic State is addressed without the experience that has accompanied the State of Israel's activity against other strategic and operational challenges for decades. This singular entity called the Islamic State, which operates with advanced methods, including the internet, and possesses the capability to adapt rapidly to modern developments, requires the Israeli intelligence community to adopt similar qualities of quickness and rapid adaptation to the changing intelligence challenge.

Notes

1 This terminology appears in Itai Brun's *Intelligence Research: Ascertaining Reality in an Era of Upheavals and Change* (Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center – IICC, 2015), pp. 48-49.

2 Ephraim Kam, "The Islamic State Surprise: The Intelligence Perspective," *Strategic Assessment* 18, no. 3 (2015): 21-31.

3 Peter Baker and Eric Schmitt, "Many Missteps in Assessment of ISIS Threat," *New York Times*, September 29, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/30/world/middleeast/obama-fault-is-shared-in-misjudging-of-isis-threat.html.
4 Paul Lewis, "ISIS Not Comparable to al-Qaida pre-9/11, US Intelligence Officials Say," *The Guardian*, September 3, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/03/isis-militants-al-qaida-911-intelligence-officials.
5 Ibid.
6 Ephraim Kam, "The Rise of the Islamic State Organization," *Strategic Assessment* 17, no. 3 (2014): 42-43.
7 Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/.