

The Strategic Challenge: Contending with the Islamic State

Udi Dekel

The Current Situation

The United States, the West, and Israel were all caught off guard by the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL) – primarily by its scope, its power, and the expansion of its influence throughout the Middle East and beyond. The Islamic State is a new kind of hybrid actor combining a number of different forms: a terrorist organization, a religious ideological movement, and an Islamic state operating in accordance with *sharia* law. It performs governing functions, controls large swaths of land, and aspires to impose an Islamic caliphate on and beyond the entire Arab world. The wide variety of logics, dimensions, forms, and challenges with which the Islamic State presents the region and the world necessitates the formulation of a multidimensional response for contending with the phenomenon.

The United States found itself with no strategy for grappling with the rise of the Islamic State, despite defining it as the “primary strategic problem” of the Middle East¹ with negative implications for the international system. The aim presented by President Obama – defeating the Islamic State – proved to be overly ambitious, certainly in the short term. More than a year later, President Obama, updating the strategy, said: “The United States and our Armed Forces continue to lead the global coalition in our mission to destroy the terrorist group ISIL....Our strategy is moving forward with a great sense of urgency on four fronts – hunting down and taking out these terrorists; training and equipping Iraqi and Syrian forces to fight ISIL on the ground; stopping ISIL’s operations by disrupting their recruiting, financing and propaganda; and, finally, persistent diplomacy to end the Syrian civil war so that everyone can focus on destroying ISIL.”²

However, the US commitment to quash the Islamic State stemmed from a degree of responsibility for the very phenomenon and its effects: the Islamic State emerged out of the Sunni uprising waged in response to the American invasion of Iraq and the establishment, within its territory, of a Shiite dominated regime that subsequently joined the Iranian-led Shiite axis. The entity's growth was also bolstered by the quick US withdrawal from Iraq, the poor performance of the states in the region, and the power vacuum that resulted within states lacking effective governance (Syria) and suffering from a failed regime (Iraq). The Islamic State's spread to additional areas such as Yemen, Libya, and the Sinai Peninsula exploits this vacuum in these governance-lacking regions and is also based on their access to weapons and money.

After the initial surprise, the United States formulated a sequential strategic approach, whereby it would first be necessary to address the problems in Iraq – the Islamic State's home base – and then deal with Syria, where the struggle is more complex due to the large number of foreign actors and rebel forces involved. It quickly became clear that the Islamic State has made effective use of its ability to move between the two spheres – Iraq and Syria – in order to seize control of additional territories and populations and build itself an image of success.

As long as there is no solution to the crisis in Syria, which constitutes a main battlefield between Sunnis and Shiites and is subject to intensive Iranian and Russian intervention, the motivation of Sunni forces to join the Salafi jihadist organizations in general, and the Islamic State and the al-Nusra Front in particular, continues to rise.³ Concomitantly, Sunni states continue to support the opposition groups in Syria with the aim of reducing Iranian influence and toppling the regime led by President Bashar al-Assad. The Islamic State is taking advantage of the struggles between the various forces in Syria, and when it observes that the different sides are wearing each other down, it sends in advance forces with the aim of establishing control over additional regions, or at least demonstrating an ability to reach almost all parts of Syria.

Building a Coalition and an Operational Concept

Although the United States has succeeded in building a broad coalition of more than 60 states that committed themselves to join the fight against the Islamic State, the goal of defeating it has proven to be difficult to achieve

and is likely to take more than a decade if the campaign continues to be conducted in its current form (as of the summer of 2015).⁴ The interim goal of halting the expansion of the Islamic State is also likely to take a significant amount of time – between three and five years.

Moreover, despite the establishment of the broad international and regional coalition against the Islamic State, a critical mass of forces and capabilities has not yet been achieved. Particularly conspicuous is the absence of ground forces (“boots on the ground”⁵) possessing capabilities typical of special forces and the determination and motivation required to fight the forces of the Islamic State. Most coalition airstrikes against Islamic State targets have been carried out by American squadrons and, as of August 2015, had injured approximately 12,500 Islamic State operatives and struck 7,600 Islamic State targets.⁶ However, the Islamic State numbers more than 30,000 fighters, and according to varying estimates continues to recruit approximately 1,000 new volunteers each month from a large number of countries around the world. At the same time, it continues to control large regions of Iraq and Syria and to expand its influence in additional regions by means of Salafi jihadist groups that express an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State and proclaim the areas in question to be under its control, as in Libya and the Sinai Peninsula.

Potential American capabilities are far greater than those used in the current US military offensive against the Islamic State. American airpower is capable of destroying 7,600 targets in less than one week of consolidated effort. For example, in the 2003 air campaign against the Iraqi army, the US Air Force dropped an average of 1,039 munitions per day with an average of 600 daily sorties. In contrast, by the summer 2015, in its operation against the Islamic State, the average rate of American attacks stands at 43 munitions and 11 attack sorties per day. This lack of operational effectiveness also stems from a lack of intelligence regarding targets, holes in intelligence coverage, distance from the regions of fighting, the failure to establish no-fly and no-movement zones, difficulty forging satisfactory cooperation with local actors, and the absence of ground forces.

In practice, the operational concept of the war against the Islamic State that was drawn up in Washington has not reached full implementation, not to mention maximum use of all its components. This concept, based in part on ground operations by Iraqi government forces against the Islamic State, quickly proved to be flawed. These forces are weak and lack the motivation

to fight, and have been superseded by Shiite militias operated primarily by Iran and Kurdish militias operating primarily in their own areas. The US effort to build up the Sunni militias of tribes has also failed as a result of the Sunni population's lack of faith in the United States and the Iraqi government. At the same time, the United States is reluctant to transfer weapons to Sunni militias opposing the Islamic State following cases in which such weapons were plundered and ultimately fell into the hands of enemies of the United States.

The building of opposition forces to the Assad regime in Syria based on non-Salafi jihadist elements has also proven to be a virtually impossible task. It has been underway for an extensive period and is contingent to a great extent on the goodwill of Jordan and especially Turkey, both of which share borders with Syria. The first forces that were sent to the battlefield in Syria were immediately destroyed or disarmed by the al-Nusra Front. More significant, however, is that the Islamic State has also proven to be capable of quick learning and rapid adaptation to new conditions. These attributes have hampered the effectiveness of the fighting conducted against it and the ability of the coalition forces to curb and contain it.

The more critical the need for special forces and special ground operations against the Islamic State, the greater the difficulties involved with recruiting forces from among the members of the international coalition, due particularly to their reluctance to send forces to engage in combat. Increased airstrikes have also turned out to be less effective than originally anticipated. In addition to the intelligence shortage, this has stemmed from the desire to avoid harming the non-combatant population; the lack of centers of gravity; and the need for aircraft to take off from distant airports without an ability to sustain a continuous presence over the areas of fighting. Also ineffective has been the increase in the number of American forces allocated to the training and operational instruction of Iraqi forces, including the allocation of American observation and operational mentoring personnel and coordinators for front line Iraqi operational units.

The bottom line is that to date, the US coalition effort against the Islamic State has not generated the desired outcome. The defeat of the Islamic State, the termination of its influence in Iraq and Syria, and the failure to prevent its influence from spreading to other areas have been hindered primarily by the failure to actualize components of the operational concept and its limited implementation.

A major problem of the international effort against the Islamic State has been the partial mobilization of some of the coalition members. Turkey, which as a result of its geostrategic location, and in addition to its membership in NATO, plays an important role in the struggle against the Islamic State, has conducted itself in a highly equivocal manner, and most of the time has actually helped the Islamic State. Turkey regards the Islamic State as a means of achieving Erdogan's ultimate goal of toppling the Assad regime in Syria and, under the cover of the war against the Islamic State, is pursuing its own private war against the Kurdish underground (PKK) and the Kurdish militias in northern Iraq and northern Syria.⁷

Other members of the international coalition, including Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, are likewise playing a two-faced game. On the one hand, they regard the Islamic State as a major threat, but on the other hand, they also recognize that it constitutes a threat to the Shiites in the region, particularly for Iran – their main enemy.⁸

Finally, the United States itself – the leader of the international coalition – lacks sufficient determination in the fight against the Islamic State. The United States is capable of defeating the Islamic State on the battlefield in Iraq and most likely also in Syria, but the chances of the Obama administration's undertaking the necessary effort to do so appear extremely slim. After years of military intervention in the Middle East (Afghanistan and Iraq) that have yielded no positive return, opposition to unnecessary risks is on the rise within the American public and Congress.⁹ Under such conditions, there is no reason to believe that the United States will succeed this time in places where it has failed in the past.

What Is Required to Curb, Weaken, and Dismantle the Islamic State

Achieving the strategic goal of curbing and ultimately defeating the Islamic State will require the promotion of a new multidimensional strategic concept based on the stipulation of clearly defined accomplishments required in a variety of areas: from the presentation of an idea that can compete with that of the Islamic State to the employment of smart power in combination with political, military, economic, social, ideological, infrastructural, and consciousness-oriented means. What follows are ten required efforts:

a. *The implementation of consciousness-oriented warfare.* The first and immediate aim is to prevent all possible successes of the Islamic State,

which seeks to foster an image of ongoing success while minimizing the impact of its failures. The Islamic State's successes have been the product of the element of surprise, the parallel operation on three geographical levels (local, regional, and global), the high mobility of its forces, the assistance of forces on the ground, and use of the element of fear, which causes rival forces to flee prior to battle (as in the city of Ramadi in Iraq¹⁰). In addition, the Islamic State takes advantage of regions with power vacuums or weak regimes and seizes control of them with relative ease. In Syria, for example, the Islamic State stands on the sidelines watching the struggles among the different groups of rebels and against the forces of President Assad, and when the fighting forces reach a significant level of mutual destruction, it launches a surprise attack not necessarily aimed at holding territory over the course of time but, first and foremost, at demonstrating success. The continuity of successes in turn encourages organizations, groups, and individuals to join the ranks of the Islamic State. It is therefore critical to formulate an opposing consciousness of Islamic State failures and to taint its leadership with the image of a group of failed criminals. It will also be necessary to demonstrate its limited strength on the battlefield, to deepen its isolation, and to prove that its efforts are not improving the living conditions or addressing the needs of the Sunni population in the territories under its control.

- b. *The need for high quality ground forces.* Achieving operational effectiveness against Islamic State forces will require the use of ground forces with enhanced capabilities, with an emphasis on special forces relying on intelligence-guided warfare. The West fears sending ground forces based on the desire to avoid becoming bogged down by the anticipated subsequent mobilization of local forces against the foreign forces, and in light of its failures in Afghanistan and Iraq. Therefore, as a first step, and in light of the precedent in Yemen, it will be necessary to make use of the ground forces of Sunni countries (not Iran, whose involvement encourages mobilization into the ranks of the Islamic State), closely guided by joint commands that include American forces and that will provide them with air support. Such countries include Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Gulf states, and minority militias, such as those of the Kurds. The campaign will also require a multi-layered intelligence effort in order to improve the operational effectiveness of the forces fighting the Islamic State.

- c. *Establishing a framework for a multinational force.* Such a force should be established based on existing organizations such as NATO, in order to increase the order of battle taking part in the fighting against the Islamic State to achieve a critical mass, and to increase the coordination between the participating countries.
- d. *Targeted killing of Islamic State commanders and the prevention of terrorist attacks.* Since the onset of coalition attacks, the United States has achieved a number of successes in targeted killing operations against leaders of the Islamic State.¹¹ This is an effective way of disrupting their activity and keeping them on the defensive. At the same time, it is necessary to include lower ranks among those being targeted, i.e., intermediate commanders and paid advisors, former Iraqi army commanders, and former members of the Baath Party, who today make up a sizable portion of the activists of the Islamic State. Such pursuit of the leading commanders and activists of the Islamic State must involve intelligence cooperation between coalition members around the globe.
- e. *Starting to think in terms of a new state structure.* The dream of a “united Iraq” or a “united Syria” in the future Middle East is fading fast. The United States and the international coalition must demonstrate greater creativity and flexibility regarding the future borders of states and other entities in the region. One rule of thumb for the process must be to avoid a situation in which Shiites control Sunnis or vice versa. It will also be necessary to allow the establishment of autonomies based on ethnic, tribal, and cultural identity. In addition, ethno-national groups such as the Kurds must be allowed the right to self-determination, including the establishment of a Kurdish state in Kurdish regions, at least in northern Iraq and northeastern Syria.
- f. *Iran is the problem,* as increased reliance on Iran will have detrimental effects. Washington and the West regard Iran more as a lever for solving the problems of the Middle East than as a subversive force fostering instability and operating Shiite militias and other proxies on its behalf.¹² The Sunni countries cannot come to terms with Iran playing a major part in the solution. Therefore, if a situation emerges in which Iran and its agents are fighting Sunnis and receive Western legitimacy and support for its hegemonic status in the region, these countries will employ the range of destructive abilities at their disposal, including the provision of indirect assistance to the Islamic State and Salafi jihadist groups.

- g. *Mitigating the internal tension in the Sunni camp*, and in the process strengthening the more pragmatic forces that are willing to accept the rules of play of the international coalition, such as Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. To ensure that these states survive and are able to neutralize the internal emergence of groups and individuals supporting the revolutionary idea of the Islamic State, they must improve their governance, deal with corruption, work toward the separation of religion and state, insist on judicial systems, invest in education toward openness, and open routes of employment and self-fulfillment for the younger generation. They must also make a focused effort to improve the situation of the strata of the population that serve as recruiting grounds for Islamic State volunteers: poorer and weaker segments of the population, disgruntled young adults, threatened and isolated Sunni tribes, and those subject to extremist religious exhortation who lack the ability to contend with its arguments and its efforts to persuade.
- h. *Stopping the flow of volunteers*. Also necessary is a comprehensive effort by different countries to stop the recruitment of foreign volunteers and prevent them from joining the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. In late 2015, these volunteers were estimated at approximately 30,000.¹³ The return of these volunteers to their countries of origin presents great danger to the internal security of Western states and Arab states alike. For this reason, the states of the West must halt the flow of volunteers to the Islamic State by means of strict border control practices, supervision of preachers in mosques and on the social media, and the formulation of ideas and ideologies that can compete with Salafi ideas. They must also prevent the transfer of funds and trade with the Islamic State.
- i. *Nothing should be done to delay the effort to stabilize Syria and neutralize the influence of the radical forces there*. The strategy must address the fundamental problems of the Middle East that motivate large groups within the Sunni population to identify with the idea of the Islamic State. Defeating the Islamic State will require a sustainable solution for the problem of Syria. After all, although the Islamic State emerged in Iraq, Syria was the site of the declaration of the Islamic caliphate and has become a base for assisting in expanding its control. The brutal policy of the Assad regime pushes volunteers into the hands of the opposition, including the Islamic State. Moreover, the Sunnis in Syria would, if they could, presumably choose to fight Assad over the Islamic State.¹⁴

The opposing coalition of Russia, Iran, Assad, and Hezbollah causes a counter-reaction of support for the Islamic State. In addition, the confusion and chaos created by the different coalitions operating in Syria enable the Islamic State to thrive there. Therefore, the United States must deny accomplishments to the Russian-Iranian coalition against the other rebels fighting the Assad regime. On the other hand, it must promote cooperation with Russia in fighting the Islamic State.

- j. *Intelligence and cyber warfare.* Also required is a combined effort of states and intelligence organizations against the Islamic State in the cyber realm and information warfare. This effort should be aimed at denying the Islamic State the element of fear achieved by displaying barbaric acts, and neutralizing its ability to engage in propaganda on the internet and influence masses and individuals through the social networks. At the same time, the internet facilitates the identification and neutralization of recruiters, volunteers, admirers and supporters, and communications media that serve to convey instructions. As such, the internet is part of the effort to neutralize Islamic State activity and its current expansionist trend. Also necessary is a focused effort to remove Islamic State propaganda immediately from the internet that aims to locate sources of support (ideological, economic, and financial), in order to block them and cut off the Islamic State from all external assistance.

Conclusion

The United States, along with other Western countries and the Arab world, must formulate a strategic concept for the fight against the Islamic State that integrates the ten components outlined above. This will require a sense of urgency, determination, and mobilization within the free world in order to bring about the collapse of the economic, social, and consciousness-oriented abilities of the Islamic State, stop the recruitment of volunteers into its ranks, and ultimately bring about its defeat. Perhaps the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, which were aimed at Western civilization, will mark the turning point in the world's mobilization against the Islamic State.

Notes

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