The Real World Capabilities of ISIS: The Threat Continues

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Politics are politics, but there are serious dangers in making claims about the ability to defeat terrorism in general – and ISIS in particular. One of the most critical limits to the way both Democratic and Republican Administrations have fought the “war” on terrorism is that they have treated it largely as a military struggle against individual terrorist and extremist movements, rather than as a broader campaign to deal with a range of threats that cannot be defeated without major successes against a wide range of constantly changing movements and without major efforts to reduce the causes of terrorism.

The end result to date has been that the U.S. has sometimes won major victories at a military level, but all of the foreign terrorist movements the U.S. has targeted have survived or mutated into different organizations with different names. Worse, if one goes back to “9/11,” none of the fundamental causes which keep extremist and terrorist movements alive – and generate new threats – have been reduced.

The real record of the “war” on terrorism is all too clear in the MENA region, Sub-Saharan Africa, Afghanistan, Latin America, and Asia. Even when the U.S. makes major military progress against a given movement, the group either recovers or some new form of terrorism emerges in its place. The U.S. can sometimes work with its allies and strategic partners to limit the military capabilities of a given terrorist movement and to reduce or contain its ability to spread, but this is not a lasting defeat of terrorism. Worse, if the U.S. effort to contain a given movement weakens, terrorism and extremism are all too likely to return.

Tactical Successes Against Terrorist Movements Do Not Defeat Terrorism

ISIS is no exception. It is still active in Syria, Iran, and other countries. Furthermore, U.S. official intelligence and military reporting makes this all too clear, regardless of political claims to the contrary. So does the historical record.

Changing the name of the threat in Iraq from Al Qaeda to ISIS or ISIL was scarcely a victory. The same was true of U.S. efforts to defeat terrorism and extremism from 2002 to 2011. Even containment has been all too uncertain in a county like Afghanistan, where the U.S. has been forced to seek a peace where it must try to use a terrorist movement like the Taliban to help defeat the spread of another terrorist movement like ISIS in the same country.

The U.S. may have helped to break up the ISIS proto-state or “caliphate” in Syria and Iraq, but it has scarcely defeated it. Moreover, even if the U.S. had succeeded in driving ISIS out of Syria and Iraq, this would scarcely have defeated terrorism if the same causes then created new movements. Moreover, the fighting to break-up the ISIS “caliphate” has opened up both countries to new forms of state terrorism from the Assad regime in Syria and Iran’s authoritarian theocracy.

It is equally dangerous to dodge the failure to truly defeat ISIS by talking about defeating its “physical” caliphate. To bound a movement’s capabilities simply by the territory it can directly control is absurd. Taking back Iraqi and Syrian towns and cities from ISIS was a major achievement, but the “physical” destruction involved did not cripple ISIS. It instead involved the destruction of the homes and businesses of ordinary people. If anything, the Iraqi government’s poor performance in restoring those homes and business has created a serious new cause of
instability that aids the potential recovery of ISIS – as does the creation of new refugee and displaced populations in Syria.

We need to be honest about ISIS and all of the “war” on terrorism. Driving the Taliban into the countryside in Afghanistan did not defeat it. Tactical victories against terrorism in the rest of the world have not ended terrorism in a single state. Furthermore, the ability of terrorists and extremists to exploit the Internet and global media remains a serious tool for terrorism and extremism that goes far beyond national boundaries and any given terrorist or extremist organization.

**U.S. Official Reports on the State of Terrorism in Iraq and Syria**

This makes it critical to understand what the U.S. government has actually reported about the level of continuing ISIS activity in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. Central Command (USCENTOM) has regularly reported on the fact that ISIS continues to be a threat, but the best unclassified reports that cover the entire pattern of ISIS activity in Syria and Iraq come from the reporting to Congress by the Lead Inspector Generals of the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

These three inspector generals report quarterly to Congress on *Operation Inherent Resolve*, and their unclassified report draws on full access to the U.S commands, U.S. embassies and their aid activity, and declassified assessments by the U.S. intelligence community. The report for April 1, 2020-June 30, 2020 is the latest report at this writing, and key excerpts make it all too clear that ISIS is injured – but not defeated. They also make it clear that the Assad and Khamenei governments pose rising state terrorist threats of their own.1

**Summary Assessment of ISIS**

The full quarterly *Operation Inherent Resolve* report for April 1, 2020-June 30, 2020 is 113 pages long, and it covers all of the aspects of the U.S. military and civil fight against ISIS. However, even if one ignores the portions that deal with the challenges posed by cutting U.S. forces, the need to create effective local antiterrorism forces in each country, the political and diplomatic challenges, and the need to create civil stability, the continuing threat is still all too clear.

It is also a threat that the report makes no effort to minimize. The summary assessment of ISIS takes up pages 18-26. The summary of the ongoing actions against ISIS in Iraq runs from pages 27-33. The summary of ongoing actions in Syria go from pages 56-63. The additional sections cover third party threats in the two countries. However, even a few key quotes make it all too clear that there is a broad official consensus that ISIS is not defeated:2

This quarter, ISIS temporarily increased the pace of its attacks in Iraq and Syria, which USCENTCOM attributed to the group’s typical escalation in Syria during the holy month of Ramadan (April 24 through May 23). CJTF-OIR said that in Iraq, this increase in attacks likely indicated an “opportunistic exploitation of a confluence of factors,” such as the ISF’s “preoccupation” with measures to contain COVID-19 in Iraq, as opposed to any “notable increase in [ISIS] capability.” CJTF-OIR stated that historical attack numbers, the complexity and consequences of the attacks, and the fact that ISIS was unable to sustain the increased tempo, “indicate that ISIS is not resurging.”

During the quarter, independent experts and researchers offered differing assessments of ISIS’s level of resurgence, with some saying the uptick in ISIS activity signified the group is growing stronger. One research organization’s assessment in May said that the spike in ISIS attacks in the first half of the quarter had “raised new fears about the revival of the group,” and appeared to be “early signs of an ISIS recovery.” The assessment said that the increase in attacks correlated with a weakening of sustained military pressure against
the group in both countries. The report said that in Syria, ISIS benefited from the “chaos” that followed Turkey’s October 2019 incursion into Syria and the U.S. troop redeployment. In Iraq, ISIS benefited from sustained mass protests and the ensuing political paralysis. The report said that without renewed counter-ISIS operations, the group could gain a firm foothold that would allow it to carry out frequent, large-scale attacks in both countries.

Additionally, researchers claimed that ISIS was taking advantage of COVID-19 in both Iraq and Syria. One research institute analyst assessed that ISIS benefited from a security vacuum left by the various military forces reducing activity due to COVID-19… A counterterrorism researcher told the press that ISIS was indeed trying to make the most of the pandemic by unleashing a “wave of attacks” that also coincided with Ramadan.

Separately, the DIA reported that ISIS attacks may increase further if pressure on the group is reduced due to the pandemic or competing priorities of anti-ISIS forces… Another research institute analyst assessed that ISIS is quite well adapted for operating during the COVID-19 pandemic. Noting that ISIS units in Iraq and Syria are isolated and self-contained, the researcher characterized the group as “the ultimate doomsday preppers”… Small ISIS cells operating in non-permissive terrain, including remote desert and mountainous locales, have little risk of exposure to the virus, according to CJTF-OIR, which reported that it saw no indications that COVID-19 adversely affected ISIS this quarter…

… CJTF-OIR reported that the Iraqi government’s restrictions, including curfews, likely limited ISIS’s freedom of movement in urban or residential areas, but also likely allowed ISIS to move more freely and with less fear of detection or interdiction by the ISF in outlying areas where restrictions were less enforced, which enabled the group to conduct more attacks. Moreover, due to travel restrictions, ISIS may have more easily identified officials exempted from such restrictions as potential targets, CJTF-OIR said.

Other experts noted that unless the root causes of ISIS’s proliferation are addressed—such as ineffective governance and service delivery, lack of economic opportunity, and sectarian division—the group would continue to regenerate. In a collaborative report compiled by the Wilson Center, one research analyst said that ISIS poses a “growing threat” to the Iraqi government and security forces and to the SDF, and it will seize on the reduction of Coalition troops in Iraq to reestablish itself.

Another security analyst said that ISIS has “reconstituted a capable insurgent force in Iraq and Syria, surging dangerously in areas difficult for the U.S.-led anti-ISIS Coalition to operate”… She said that Coalition forces have been able to suppress ISIS, but without addressing the underlying political and economic conditions that alienate Syrians and Iraqis from their government, “anti-ISIS Coalition pressure is unlikely to block or reverse ISIS’s reconstitution and may fail to prevent its re-establishment of a physical caliphate.”

In previous quarters, U.S. officials stated that the alienation of local populations can provide an opening for ISIS to gain traction. In January 2020, the DIA reported that ISIS seeks to influence local Sunni populations by exploiting their grievances, including perceived political marginalization and neglect, reconstruction delays, and sectarian divisions. CJTF-OIR deputy commander Major General Alexander Grynkewich told reporters in January that to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS, it is necessary to address “underlying conditions” like governance and corruption.”…Similarly, the DoS reported in 2019 that populations in both Iraq and Syria face high unemployment, insecurity, displacement, humanitarian crises, and a government failure to provide basic services. The DoS said that these security and socio-economic challenges in Iraq and Syria “leave ordinary civilians vulnerable to recruiting by ISIS and other extremists.”

USCENTCOM Commander General Kenneth McKenzie Jr., speaking at the Middle East Institute on June 10, said that the ISIS threat from Iraq and Syria was “not going to go away,” and that it was “only the result of direct pressure” that ISIS is being prevented from reasserting itself and attacking the United States and its allies. General McKenzie said he looked forward to a time when “local security forces are able to contain ISIS without significant external help.” He also stated that in areas of Syria under control of the Syrian regime and its Russian backers, the regime was failing to fix the lack of “basic human requirements” that allowed ISIS to rise in the first place, creating what he called a “plan for failure west of the Euphrates.”

**ISIS Remains Cohesive and Has Substantial Funding**
Other sections of the report show that ISIS has lost some of its senior leadership, but that it remains a cohesive threat – and one that is capable of self-financing and ongoing recruitment:

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**ISIS in Syria**

The report did not see major ISIS gains in Syria, but made it clear that ISIS was still an active threat:

As in Iraq, ISIS stepped up attacks in Syria during Ramadan, although overall, the DIA said that ISIS monthly attack claims across Syria decreased this quarter compared to the previous quarter. USCENTCOM reported that a mid-May spike in attacks during ISIS’s most recent “Raid of Attrition” campaign was not sustained following the campaign and this demonstrated a limited ability to ramp up its operations for a brief period before dropping back to normal levels…

While ISIS continues to demonstrate the ability to surge attacks for periods, the DoD OIG saw no evidence this quarter that ISIS has the ability to retake or hold territory in the Combined Joint Operations Area. ISIS mounted a complex offensive this quarter and briefly occupied several Syrian regime positions in Homs province during an April 9 attack… The DoD OIG observed that this underscores the challenge of defeating ISIS when Coalition and partner forces have limited territorial reach, and ISIS has the ability to operate in parts of Syria under regime control.
...The DIA stated that it has not seen any significant or sustained increase in ISIS capabilities in pro-regime controlled areas this quarter, and ISIS attacks were “opportunistic,” targeting pro-regime forces convoys and checkpoints in eastern Homs province and in southwest Syria... ISIS elements remain capable only of operating in small cells and conducting asymmetric attacks, according to the DIA...

Citing media reporting, the DIA said that ISIS’s activities focused along a broad area of majority Sunni Arab territory in northern Syria. However, it said that ISIS does not have the capability it once had to “target Sunni tribes writ-large,” and that it fears reprisals...

ISIS in Iraq

When it comes to ISIS activities in Iraq, the report notes that Iraqi forces had to resume major operations against ISIS, which raises question about the impact of cutting U.S. combat support and train and assist activity:

CJTF-OIR reported that all Iraqi operations commands resumed operations against ISIS this quarter… Some Iraqi commands paused counter-ISIS operations last quarter when the Coalition stopped operations in early January. At the time, the Coalition turned its focus to force protection following a U.S. drone strike in Baghdad, which killed Iranian Qods Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani…

Additionally, CJTF-OIR reported that relationships with ISF commands largely returned to pre-pause levels and that the ISF continued to be receptive to sharing information on mutual force protection concerns…However, CJTF-OIR said that the “fluid nature” of the operating environment is different than it was in January, due to the transition of several bases to the ISF, the measures put in place to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and the effect of the pandemic on ISF personnel… Despite these differences, CJTF-OIR said that the Coalition has built upon existing relationships with the ISF and that the relationship remains strong.

The Key Areas in the “War” on ISIS and Terrorism that the U.S. Government Does Not Report On

At the same time, neither the LIG report or any other official U.S. report address the lack of progress in reducing the civil, sectarian, ethnic, demographic, and economic causes of terrorism. The U.S. government also does not openly address the impact of the broader shifts that now seem to be taking place in U.S. strategy and of the additional cuts U.S. forces that will reduce the capability to deal with ISIS in the future.

The U.S. government does not address the details or impact of U.S. plans for major further withdrawals from Iraq and Syria, although current troop drawdowns have already been substantial and reports indicate that U.S. troop levels in Iraq will be cut to only 3,000 personnel. It does not address cuts in air strike capabilities, and cuts in intelligence, reconnaissance, and surveillance (IS&R) capabilities. These U.S. forces were critical in breaking up the ISIS Caliphate and making up for the problems in Iraqi and Kurdish-Arab forces in Eastern Syria.

What If the U.S. and Allied Forces Now Leave?

For all the claims about defeating ISIS, no public official report or plan estimates how long the U.S. should stay in Iraq or Syria, what resources it should keep, and what the cost might be. No official statements seriously address the problems in politics, governance, economics, and civil structures that make Iraq and especially Syria the equivalents of failed states. No report addresses the impact of a full U.S. departure and/or the end to U.S. aid during the next few years.

These omissions are critical, given the dangers in rushing out of Syria and Iraq too quickly. ISIS clearly remains a major threat in both countries. The U.S. has scarcely “won” the fight against ISIS decisively in either country, and ISIS has spread far beyond Iraq and Syria. Moreover, the U.S.
has not succeeded in reducing any aspect of the threats that state terrorism by the Assad and Khamenei regimes now pose to Syria, Iraq, and the region.

Unlike Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq are countries which have great strategic importance in terms of the flow of oil and its impact on the global economy. They affect U.S. ability to compete with China and Russia. They have an essential impact on the potential rise of extremist and terrorist threats that could attack U.S. strategic partners in the region and in Europe, as well as targets in the United States. The risks in premature withdrawal have already been a key cause of ISIS’s rise and success after 2011. Making exaggerated claims of success today and withdrawing too soon are scarcely the road to any form of decisive victory.
Chart One: Ongoing Attacks by ISIS in Syria and Iraq: April 1-June 30, 2020

Sources: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), Janes Terrorism and Insurgency database (Janes), and the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC).

For Additional in depth analysis of these issues, see:


