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Defeating the Islamic State: Commentary on a Core Strategy

Huba Wass de Czege

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to benefit those among the readership currently engaged in designing the strategies and tactics of the struggle against the Islamic State (IS) group, a movement led by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi that has become the scourge of Iraq and Syria.

In the rational pursuit of vital interests in any human undertaking, the design of concrete actions to pursue them must subordinate to a conceptual strategic design based on a well-researched theory of the specific situation.¹ Any such theory will be based on a combination of hard data and educated guesses about what those data mean. The underlying research must encompass not only the historic sweep of similar cases (history does not repeat, it educates), but it must also examine the peculiarities and differences of the present situation compared to any that came before. Finally, because of the differences between the present case and those of the past, it must adapt, rather than adopt, past practices. What results from such inquiry and contemplation is a rough but useful strategic framework that can be adapted as learning occurs. At the core of such a framework is a theory of the situation at the very heart of the matter and a strategy for resolving it – a core strategy. Other secondary aspects of the situation are accounted for separately in supporting strategies. Having an explicit consensus among allies on a core strategy aligns costly allied operations. Such a core strategy should drive the design of tactics and supporting strategies.²

My own enquiries along this line have led me to the following core strategy for accomplishing the vital and very difficult tasks at the heart of the IS crisis.

The Heart of the Matter

This situation is so complex that it is easy to lose focus. One must find, isolate, and take aim at the heart of the matter. The aspect of the situation making the present status quo intolerable enough to trigger a new American (and allied) intervention is the rule of the Islamic State militant group across great parts of Syria and Iraq, and the threat of this 7th century model of governance spreading if not checked at its origin. (There are already indications of this possibility in North Africa and elsewhere.) As such a regime swells in territory and membership, not

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1 This is a revision of a paper I circulated among planners and interested parties in August 2014 entitled "On 'Ridding the World' of 'The Islamic State.'"

2 To my way of thinking strategies are logical schemes for achieving broad conceptual ends employing conceptual ways and means along several lines of effort. Tactics are the practical schemes for achieving concrete ends employing concrete ways and means.

only Middle Eastern populations will be at risk, but also those of secular industrialized nations across the globe. In other words, the *IS problem is not a Syrian or Iraqi problem, it is an international problem*. And it needs an international perspective to resolve it.

Moreover, IS is, both structurally and in terms of its aims and methods, significantly different than Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda does not need to control territory to exist. It only needs to promote and work toward a foreordained future caliphate. To be what it is, IS *needs* to control territory and to rule a population by strict *Sharia* law, on the 7th century model prescribed by the Prophet Mohammed in Koranic scriptures. It draws immigrants to that territory by offering a place for those who wish to live under such rule, and a regime that rigorously enforces such laws. IS also provides a cause that pursues concrete near-term objectives within the current generation rather than the more distant ones Al Qaeda followers pursue across many generations. And that cause, succinctly expressed, is to defend, sustain, and expand a place and a regime that rules according to the prophet Mohammed's 7th century vision in every respect. Finally, because their ends are foreordained by the Prophet, IS leaders and fighters are emboldened to take great risks. This boldness, and the successes they have achieved, combines to attract action oriented adherents from abroad.

The difficulty for the largely secular-minded international community is that IS does not advocate a "perversion" of Koranic scriptures. It adheres to a strict interpretation of un-ambiguous prophetic passages of the holy book. And, like other believers of the Muslim faith, its members believe the Prophet Mohammed faithfully recorded the true word of Allah. What religious splits exist between IS orthodoxy and most other Sunni Muslim authorities (including Salafists of any stripe) are over methods and timing - gentler methods of the struggle now and a foreordained caliphate later. As a result, it will be difficult to drive a wedge, solely on the grounds of religious principle, between the IS and other Sunni Muslim believers, including moderate ones and many of Assad's other opponents in Syria.³ More effective wedge issues must be developed and used.

Changing an intolerable status quo, such as this, into an acceptable one is ambitious. Therefore the "acceptable aim" should be no more difficult than it needs to be. But it needs to be more than vague rhetoric, as is the general twin aims to "degrade, disrupt and defeat IS," and to "defend the allied homelands from IS inspired terrorist attacks." A useful core strategy needs to be more specific about ends, ways and means. What this amounts to is a core strategy designed around three major lines of effort clearly expressed in three short paragraphs of simple declaratory sentences.

The first line of operation is to win the struggle over the legitimacy to govern, make laws, and enforce them between IS and the alternative indigenous regime that will follow. Legitimacy is granted from below not imposed from above. Winning along this line of effort requires creating stable, functioning, and extremist resistant indigenous communities

³ I would like to acknowledge the comments of Dr. Alice Butler-Smith of the School of Advanced Military Studies on the August 2014 draft. Also see Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic* (March 2015). Also see Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (March/April 2015): 87-98.

under a political regime they consider legitimate. An effective interim replacement regime must be operational immediately in the aftermath of town-by-town and village-by-village fighting. (How these communities will fit into a stable Syria or Iraq, is a secondary concern at this point.) At present, the core strategic end of US policy is to recover Iraqi towns and villages to Iraqi sovereign control, and to support the more secular, or less extreme, opposition to Assad's regime in the Syrian civil war toward both an overthrow of the Assad regime, and a defeat of the Islamic state movement. The problem is these complex ends may make impossible the less ambitious one of first *creating stable, functioning, and extremist resistant indigenous communities under a local political regime they consider legitimate.*

The second is to *defend the occupied populations in Syria and Iraq from the "armed propaganda" of the violent IS militants during the fighting for each community and afterwards.* A fearful and exposed population is lost to whomever attempts to govern next. Winning along this line of effort requires a very disciplined interim political and security regime to provide immediate security. It must be capable immediately of discovering and arresting covert indigenous IS cells. And it must immediately begin to recruit and train a competent and trustworthy indigenous self-defense force.

The third is the offensive effort *to defeat the militant group and its agencies town-by-town and village-by-village.* Winning along this line of effort would require a focused and discriminating force to do three things: destroy the IS "terrorist army" and its weapons; prevent the escape of its members to organize anew elsewhere; and retain the moral high ground and legitimacy in the process.

The power of this trinity derives from synergy among the three major lines of effort, but a weakness in one cannot be compensated by the strength of another. The power to transform intentions into desired outcomes along each of these lines of effort depends on finding and applying an effective causal logic unique to this situation, which is the subject of the following paragraphs.

Winning the Legitimacy to Govern

Winning the legitimacy to govern territory occupied by IS requires separating IS from the support of the people in that territory and transferring their support to an alternative they can accept. IS relies on the people for protection, intelligence, supplies, funds, and recruits. This support is partly coerced through conquest by military power. It will be difficult to have the people of the occupied region see IS and its fighters as violent outlaws ruling illegally, as is the secular view, when what they do can be justified by some using scripture. An additional difficulty is their support is also derived from indigenous and immigrant believers in the IS orthodoxy and cause.

There are some obvious mistakes to avoid. In Afghanistan and Iraq we saw how quickly the relief of liberation from one oppressive regime can turn into dissatisfaction with the regime of a foreign liberator. Differences in nationality are not all that makes a foreigner. Iraqis and Syrians of a different religion and ethnicity will be judged "foreign" in the communities they liberate.

IS derives moral authority when it is regarded the warriors of a legitimate Muslim Caliphate. This authority must be undermined as much as possible by word and deed. The conduct of allied fighters is regulated by international law, that of IS fighters is regulated by 7th century Koranic scriptures. When IS fighters bear arms and use them, in secular eyes they become common criminals, not “war criminals.” The legal secular logic of modern states is this: when IS fighters are captured, they are arrested, tried by legitimate authorities, and punished for their crimes according to the laws of the country where they committed them. Legitimate international authorities, and the people who have been oppressed by IS, must together judge the prisons and courts legitimate.

An effective interim replacement regime must be organized town-by-town and village-by-village before the fighting begins. It must be operational immediately in the aftermath. There is no such thing as “ungoverned space” except when it is unpopulated. Some form of governance takes shape organically, and violent groups like IS will either impose their form of order, or influence the existing one to their advantage. There is no useful objective standard for governance, only a relative one. The governance of the replacement regime and its agencies must be better in the eyes of the people than the alternative. People will favor indigenous governors over foreign ones. This is why foreigners have such difficulty with winning the struggle for the legitimacy to govern. To the extent IS is seen as foreign, and the replacement regime as indigenous, the better the result.

If a force comprised of allied “foreigners” is necessary to remove IS fighters from occupied communities and neighborhoods, the allied fighting force must shortly move on to the next fight and an interim indigenous political and security regime must take its place to organize, resource, and develop a functioning community under an acceptable and permanent indigenous governance. It would be unrealistic to expect Sunni communities in, Anbar province, for instance, to accept as “indigenous” a Shia militia from anywhere else in Iraq. Likewise the successful relief of Kobani in Syria can be credited as much, or more, to the ethnic affinity of the Kurdish fighters on the ground to the citizens of the town than to the increased allied air support these fighters received.

It will be necessary to place a layer of autonomy between these communities and centralized nationalistic governance. And when they are incorporated into national political structures, they must have a voice in the government.

Defending the Population from “Armed Propaganda”

The second struggle of this trinity—defending the population from the “armed propaganda” of violent IS extremists—is crucial to being able to govern legitimately.

And, liberated communities need *immediate* protection from stay-behind IS elements and re-infiltration of IS fighters and agents. And undisciplined occupying strangers of the allied side must not be allowed to impose a tyranny of their own.

Violent movements like IS extort intelligence, recruits, support, and compliance through fear, threat and cruelty example – for example

the numerous public beheadings that have been reported under IS rule. Without these enablers, violent movements wither.

Once security and governing elements of IS are driven out of the communities they occupy, they will attempt to leave covert cells behind, or re-infiltrate them later. The proverbial “three men and one knife” in an otherwise unarmed community can control the people. The antidote is around-the-clock security, which is costly in manpower and difficult to emplace from the outside and is best done from inside out and bottom up, with motivated and trusted self-defense forces. It must be the primary task of the interim political and security regime to provide immediate security to discover and arrest covert indigenous IS cells, and to recruit and train a competent and trustworthy indigenous self-defense force.

It is possible to avoid the mistakes of the “Sunni Awakening” and “Son’s of Iraq” model of several years ago and still take advantage of old-fashioned social and political structures to build local security forces without creating a “Sunni Army.” First, it is necessary to incorporate this idea into the original strategy. I envision the local indigenous regimes that finally replace IS in the occupied territories to emerge from the bottom up, as communities are “liberated.” If so, then this local security force is automatically subordinated to whatever indigenous governmental structures evolve from the bottom-up. Community by community liberation plans not only address removing ISIS control but also plan for an interim political regime and a disciplined interim security force that rapidly is phased out as a permanent local force under local civilian control replaces it.

Because this line of effort is also the most expensive in terms of trained and armed manpower there is really no other alternative. Some studies based on rare historical successes have judged the price to be no less than 20 security personnel per 1,000 citizens.⁴ Whatever the specific number, removing IS without immediately securing the aftermath is a wasted effort because the “cancer” will return.

Fighting and Defeating IS

Keeping people safe and getting them on the side of peace under a legitimate local government is not enough. The movement led by Abu Bakr al Baghdadi will not be defeated if the IS “terrorist army” is not confronted with a two armed approach capable of enforcing its destruction in place and preventing its escape to organize anew elsewhere. And for the outcome to be victory, these operations must be focused and discriminating, so that the lives and property of the people IS has enslaved and impoverished are preserved. Retaining the moral high ground and legitimacy in the process is crucial to success.

Accomplishing these tasks will depend on getting to know the enemy very well, having good intelligence at the beginning and building an ever greater capacity as operations progress, and being more creative and strategically savvy than the enemy. It will depend on skilled surgery to excise the militant group and its agents town-by-town and

⁴ James T. Quinlivan, “Force Requirements in Stability Operations,” *Parameters* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1995-96): 59-69. Also see Huba Wass de Czege, “On Policing The Frontiers of Freedom,” *Army* 56, no. 7 (July 2006): 14-22.

village-by-village. And destroying the IS “terrorist Army” in place, and preventing the escape of its members.

Pursuing offensive war against any determined enemy ought to proceed along two complementary lines. The first combines powerful measures aimed at influencing the decisions of the enemy’s uppermost leadership, and softening the will of followers and supporters. A second combination of strong measures and maneuver makes the decisions of IS leaders irrelevant by negating their power to resist conditions that we might wish to impose on them regardless of how their will is affected. The power in this approach is how these two “arms” combine, rather than what they achieve separately.

The first arm operates on the ancient logic of offensive war — the destructive military instrument, combined with all other means of applying psychological pressure, operates on the state of mind of leaders, followers, and supporters, causing them to give up fighting and accept the will of their enemy. This logic applies mostly to winning battles and firefights. It is a very insufficient logic for winning wars. In fact, it may prolong warfare when the occupied populations are exposed to heavy casualties in the process and the survivors become enraged and join the defense of IS territories.⁵

When it is necessary to change an intolerable status quo, it is not sufficient to rely on military operations that merely generate losses among enemy leaders and followers. IS will use brutal tactics and, like Hamas in Gaza, will shield itself among innocent civilians. It will starve the population to remain well fed. IS will fight fanatically. It is actually necessary to take away the IS leadership’s options other than capitulation, one by one. This option-eliminating and constricting arm includes systematic encirclement of separate communities to reduce them piecemeal, simultaneous attacks from multiple directions to divide IS fighting efforts, closing borders to escaping or reinforcing IS fighters and leaders, relentless pursuit into sanctuaries to eliminate safe havens, and constricting, and then stopping, all forms of organized motorized movement, and all means of organizational support to include: taxation, extortion, conversion of local oil supplies into funds, the flow of arms and ammunition, strategic and tactical information, food for its fighters, and, most of all, the flow of immigrants and recruits.

These enforcement challenges can be overcome only when the other two elements of the trinity—defending the population from armed propaganda and winning the population to the side of peace under better governance—function well.

Conclusion

This core strategy may not be self-evident to all, but it can serve to inspire better ones based on newer knowledge and better research. This “trinitarian” core strategy is fruitful. I have raised matters important to get “right enough” and important to achieve consensus with allies, the sooner the better. It is less important how good the initial core strategy

5 Huba Wass de Czege, “Military Power, the Core Tasks of a Prudent Strategy, and the Army We Need,” *Strategic Studies Institute*, August 6, 2014, <http://www.StrategicStudiesInstitute.army.mil/index.cfm/articles/Military-Power-Core-Tasks-of-Prudent-Strategy/2014/08/06>.

is than to treat it as a work in progress, adapting as learning takes place. Once adopted it is more important to engage all parties in trying to prove it inadequate than to prove it correct. And, whatever emerges as a core strategy, there will be great temptations to compromise its principles in execution. For success, this very difficult undertaking will require allied unity and disciplined execution. Otherwise, this intervention will not achieve a worthy end. And, the fighting will continue until intervening powers tire of it.

