

Global Security Briefing – November 2014

THE EVOLUTION OF THE ISLAMIC STATE CONFLICT

Paul Rogers

Summary

Events in Iraq and Syria during October – not least the desperate battle for Kobane and a spate of executions in Iraq’s Anbar province – have demonstrated the limitations of aerial attack by the coalition of Western and Arab states in containing the activities of Islamic State (IS). The coalition is hamstrung by its divisions over the need to oppose Syria’s Assad regime and a lack of strategy to counter the local and global appeal of IS as much as by the paucity of available ground troops. The result is increasingly stalemate, and this may be more to the advantage of IS and its very long game than to its opponents.

Introduction

The last briefing in this series examined the nature and development of Islamic State from 2012 to 2014. Among the significant aspects of its development were:

- The extent to which the paramilitary core of the movement owed much to the background of Iraqis who had direct combat experience against US and UK forces, especially Special Forces, in Iraq in the mid-2000s;
- The unusual ideological context of Islamic State with its eschatological dimension, meaning that its leadership was working to a singularly long time-frame.
- The significance of the antagonism of Sunni clans to the Shi’a-dominated Maliki government (2006-14) and the hope that the Abadi government would be far more inclusive, thereby eroding support for Islamic State in Iraq;
- The policy of the Assad regime in Damascus of concentrating its forces on non-jihadist rebel groups, thereby aiding the self-generated narrative of the regime facing a terrorist threat and implying the need for western support;
- The imperative for Islamic State to gain more recruits from the region and beyond;
- Its skill in communications, especially the use of new social media; and
- Its probable desire for confrontation with the “far enemy” (the West) and the consequent dangers arising from western states satisfying this desire.

This briefing examines development during October and seeks to assess the prospects for success of the coalition operations against Islamic State.

Developments in October

By the end of October, coalition forces had conducted over 600 air strikes, mostly against IS targets in Iraq and Syria, although some initial strikes were also conducted against other jihadist paramilitary groups, principally around Aleppo in Syria. The purpose of the air strikes has been mainly to limit the advance of IS paramilitaries, especially in parts of north-west Iraq, in order to allow allied ground forces such as Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga units to regroup.

There was a sustained air operation to prevent IS forces taking the town of Kobane on the Syria/Turkey border, and a sustained negotiation to persuade Turkey to allow Kurdish military units from northern Iraq to transit through southern Turkey to aid the defence of the town. Towards the end of the month the Turkish government reluctantly agreed, and a reported 150 Peshmerga entered Kobane. The Ankara government remains cautious about this policy, primarily because it views Syrian Kurdish paramilitaries as too close to the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), a Turkish Kurdish rebel group. Ankara reserves its main opposition to the Assad regime and argues for an externally-imposed no-fly-zone to limit Damascus' military capacity.

Elsewhere in Syria, the Assad regime's forces accelerated their attacks on rebel groups such as the Syrian Revolutionary Front and the Islamic Front, indirectly benefitting from the concentration of the US-Gulf States air campaign against Islamic State. This has led to representatives from these groups protesting bitterly that the US-led coalition is making their position more vulnerable, a claim made more evident by the losses the Syrian Revolutionary Front experienced at the hands of the local al-Qaida franchise, al-Nusra Front, around the city of Idlib at the end of the month.

In Iraq, coalition air power was used to aid Iraqi forces in regaining control of the strategically important Mosul Dam. This was a small but significant reversal for Islamic State forces but they had never had comprehensive control of the district. Elsewhere in Iraq they made some significant advances in Anbar province, including towns close to Baghdad International Airport and western suburbs of Baghdad. Indeed, there are indications that IS has paramilitary units already embedded in some of those suburbs. Given that they control the city of Fallujah, 50 km to the west of the capital and also have forces in Abu Ghraib, 15 km from the airport, there remain expectations that at some stage IS might mount a surprise assault on the extensive US military facilities that are being developed there.

At the same time, IS forces also engaged in brutal suppression of Sunni clan groups in parts of Anbar Province that failed to support them, as well as executing substantial numbers of Iraqi police. While IS forces have long had a reputation for brutal action against Iraqi government forces, the use of such actions against Sunni groups has raised the substantial risk of other Sunni clans moving against them. Given that the progress of Islamic State across north-west Iraq in June-August was greatly aided by the previous support from Sunni clans and former officers of the Sunni-dominated pre-2003 Iraqi army and Ba'ath Party, any change in attitude is a threat to IS sustaining its hold. The willingness to take this risk suggests that IS planners believe that they are becoming sufficiently strong that they have far less need for such support, but it may also indicate a potential loss of control of territory by IS.

At a wider level, the overall conflict within Iraq has continued to be immensely costly. In October, according to [Iraq Body Count](#), 1,797 civilians were killed, with much of the death toll towards the end of the month stemming from executions. According to provisional figures in the same database, almost 15,000 people had been killed in Iraq since January, making 2014 the deadliest year in the conflict since 2007. This compares to the UN's Q3 2014 estimate of 5,000 to 6,000 deaths per month in the Syrian war. The majority of this combined death toll is not directly attributable to Islamic State.

Coalition issues

The cohesiveness of the coalition has been called into question by several developments in October. One was a Saudi view, strongly argued by the former head of Saudi Foreign Intelligence, Prince Turki bin Faisal, that the priority for the coalition had to be the downfall of the Assad regime, and that the destruction of Islamic State would not be possible without it.

From a different perspective, the Israeli position was one of great concern that the coalition was not only failing to limit the Assad regime but was effectively cooperating with Iran, long seen as Israel's most important enemy in the entire region.

The problems for the Obama administration have been further compounded by a series of leaks to US media outlets that there are deep divisions in the administration between advisors in the White House and the Pentagon, the latter apparently resentful of, and deeply frustrated by, senior White House officials micro-managing the military operations. The most criticism was directed at the National Security Adviser, Susan Rice, and at the very frequent meetings of the National Security Council. This is compounded by a suspicion that President Obama's representative to the region, retired General John Allen, was so close to Iraq's previous Prime Minister, Nouri al-Maliki, that he is anathema to Sunni clans whose support is badly needed by the Coalition.

Although there have been reports of some progress being made against Islamic State in a few parts of Iraq, the consensus among independent analysts is that it will take many months for Iraqi forces to be trained to the point where cities such as Mosul might be re-taken. Similarly, the training of effective non-jihadist anti-Assad forces in Syria would take many months, if not years, to be completed. Overall, the outlook is therefore of a continuing air war, having relatively little impact on Islamic State while it holds onto substantial territory and seeks to gain more recruits.

Joining the cause

One of the key elements deciding the future direction of the conflict will be the maintenance of a substantial flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq to join Islamic State's paramilitary forces. IS was [reported by the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights](#) to have lost 464 members in Syria to coalition air strikes in the first month of bombing, to 23 October. [US intelligence officials estimate](#) around a thousand foreigners per month are travelling to fight in Syria to fight with groups including IS, mostly from across the Middle East but also from Western Europe. These figures put the total number of foreign fighters at over 16,000. In spite of the losses to air strikes and the obvious dangers of travelling to Syria and Iraq to join the war, there appears to have been no decline in recruitment to militant groups in the past month.

Furthermore, it is probable that Islamic State has benefitted from the impact of the Israeli campaign in Gaza in August which killed more than 2,000 Palestinians, including over 400 children. This conflict was widely reported in graphic detail by Middle Eastern TV outlets, including satellite news channels available world-wide, and there are reliable reports of young people in diaspora communities in Western Europe being extremely bitter at the lack of official opposition to Israel's actions. This bitterness is perpetuated because of the actions of the Netanyahu government, in concert with the al-Sisi government in Cairo, in restricting the inflow of building materials required for the repair and reconstruction of the thousands of buildings in Gaza damaged during the war.

Conclusion

The coalition's strategy is far from clear, partly down to conflicting aims which include destruction of Islamic State, termination of the Assad regime, differences over the need to work with the Iranians, and differing concerns over the risk of radicalisation of young people in Western states.

At the core of the current situation lies a dilemma for the coalition. The conflict between opposing parties is now close to a stalemate, with Islamic State having limited potential for

gaining more territory but the use of coalition air power being wholly inadequate to defeat it. Given time, it may be possible for the coalition to train Iraqi and other ground forces, but there is no guarantee of this. Meanwhile there are early signs that Islamic State is using more persistent force to control the territory it now holds.

That may eventually undermine support for its aims among local Sunni populations, and an implication of this is that it needs more recruits from outside. Gaining such recruits, though, is partly dependent on Western air strikes and their effect, given the clever use of new social media by Islamic State and its ability to present itself as a vanguard in the defence of Islam. Thus, current Western policy may be just what IS strategists want. Indeed there may be serious attempts to provoke a more intensive air campaign, not least through brutal actions against Western citizens and even attacks in Western states. Much will depend on whether such provocation succeeds.

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