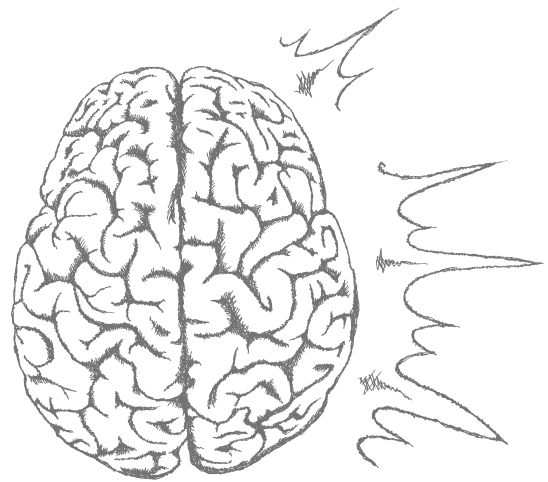


WIELDING INTELLIGENCE AS A WEAPON



Defeating the Islamic State requires a patient commitment to building multinational spy networks

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The Islamic State (IS) is much more than a terrorist organization; it is a terrorist state containing almost all governing elements. Over the past three years, since the beginning of the civil war in Syria, the IS developed from an extremist fringe and marginal faction participating in the civil war to become the strongest, most ferocious, best-financed and best-armed militia in the religious and ethnic wars waged today in Syria and Iraq. Many experts suggest this organization is neither Islamic nor a state. I consider it a guerrilla organization using mainly terrorist methods.

The Middle East, as outlined by the World War I-era Sykes-Picot agreement, has begun to disintegrate, and the IS does not seem like a passing phase. The structures being established indicate that, even if the actual leaders of the IS are killed, the organization has created a succession procedure that will allow it to survive, just as al-Qaida managed to outlast the death of leader Osama bin Laden. Killing the leadership of the IS is not the best method because there are many replacements, and the organization is embedded in the Sunni population. Uprooting the IS will be long and arduous. Without creating a chasm between the IS and the local population, and without reaching a long and lasting political solution that will put an end to Sunni-Shiite rivalries in Iraq and to the conflict in Syria, the chances of success will remain negligible.

As Henley-Putnam University noted in a May 2015 article titled “Intelligence and the Islamic State”: “The success of the Islamic State in conquering large parts of Syria and Iraq demonstrates the fragile nature of the countries in the Middle East and the volatility of the security problems in the region. The Islamic State is a relative newcomer to the plethora of Middle East terror

and Islamic extremist groups that arose over the past 50 years. Its forerunner was ‘al Qaeda in Iraq’ (AQI), a group formed in 2006 by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. AQI was so violent and extreme that Osama bin Laden dissociated al Qaeda from AQI. At the same time, Iraqi Sunni tribes formed the Awakening Movement (Sahwa) to combat AQI. Zarqawi was killed later in 2006 by a U.S. air strike. AQI was weakened by the Sahwa and did not resurface as a significant force until 2011 when the group, now under the name Islamic State of Iraq, joined the fighting in the Syrian civil war. The change of name (ISIS/ISIL) and leadership with al-Baghdadi did not diminish the group’s propensity for extreme violence. ISIS originally affiliated with Jabhat al Nusra, a group associated with al Qaeda, but soon split to display a willingness to fight any and all in the Syrian conflict.”

That propensity among the IS to threaten loyalist and rebel forces in Syria has awakened a common reaction among those formerly hostile parties. As the geopolitical intelligence firm Stratfor indicated in its 2015 story “How Islamic State Victories Shape the Syrian Civil War,” the Assad regime and its armed opponents realize that weakly held territory has become a target for the IS and that population centers such as Aleppo, Homs and Damascus — once largely untroubled by the IS — could fall to the group’s assaults.

Said Stratfor: “Though the Islamic State certainly faces some critical threats of its own, including rebel and coalition efforts to cut off its supply lines through Turkey, the group is still able to maintain its momentum in a number of areas. Each new base, town or supply depot that it secures only boosts its foothold in Syria’s civil war, which in turn translates into gains across the border in Iraq. The Syrian government and disparate rebel forces must now dedicate more of their attention to the Islamic

State threat as it becomes an increasingly important factor in their battle plans and objectives.”

Concerning the future, it is probable that:

- The IS will focus on defending core supply lines used to provide equipment and soldiers.
- The IS will continue to show flexibility in conducting military offenses.
- The Assad government and rebels alike will have to devote more attention and resources to fighting the IS at the expense of battling each other.

The threat to Europe

Evidence is accumulating that IS members are planning to conduct major terrorist attacks against targets in the United States and Europe. Some of that would occur through the use of sleeper cells that give it a foothold outside of Iraq and Syria. Intelligence agencies report that the group has recruited foreign fighters to carry out terror attacks in Europe, and recent arrests on the continent indicate that the IS has a

in Iraq and Syria, overwhelming European security services. Hundreds of European battle-hardened jihadists return home every month, many ready to commit violence and recruit new terrorists. For countries such as France, the number of citizens waging war in Syria and Iraq, mostly for the IS, is unprecedented. Earlier jihadist campaigns in Bosnia in the 1990s or in Iraq a decade ago might have attracted a few dozen French nationals, but the fighting today in the Middle East has drawn upwards of 1,000 French citizens — 942 in Syria over the last two years, according to French intelligence.

French counterterrorism magistrate Marc Trévidic opines that French intelligence, police and judiciary have “disarmed” themselves in this new world of domestic extremism emanating from the Middle East. Here’s an excerpt from a recent interview he gave to a French magazine:

“Everything is different these days! Before, would-be jihadists had a smattering of instruction. There is no religious background now; it is the image that wins them over. The appeal is to their feelings, not to their intellect. The explosion is due to the Internet. The youngsters we have to deal with are overexcited, not intellectually radicalized. ... The profiles are completely disparate. Some are impossible to check out. Never before have we come up against women and minors! Before long, the only age group missing will be the very old. ... We can no longer sift them or monitor them as before to find out what their intentions are. We are forced to arrest them as soon as they set foot in the country. We need to know what they have been through. On the whole, they have been through horrendous experiences. We lack the evidence needed to probe them properly. However, some of them are potentially dangerous, all the more so in that they are forced into waging an individual jihad in the attempt to escape detection.”

German authorities estimate that 450 radical German Muslims have traveled in the direction of Syria. An official from German intelligence noted the difficulty in tracking German Islamists leaving Germany for Syria because they do not need a visa to enter Turkey. Southern Turkey provides a main point of entry into Syria for fighters aiming to combat

Assad’s regime for the “caliphate.” Several hundred of those radicalized Germans have returned home, despite the Federal Republic’s ban on IS activities. It is unclear if German authorities view these returning radicals as terrorists worthy of increased scrutiny.

The IS demonstrates another tendency as it assumes control of territory, reflected by the split in Iraq. Evidence



German police detain a suspect in the Kreuzberg district of Berlin in February 2016, part of a series of raids to hunt for four men suspected of plotting attacks in Germany in the name of the Islamic State.

more profound influence than al-Qaida did. As U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Brett McGurk stated, the IS is “better equipped, better manned, better resourced and better trained than the al-Qaida in Iraq that our forces faced.” McGurk dubbed it a globally expansionist jihadist organization swollen with obedient foreign fighters and suicide bombers.

Huge numbers of Westerners have joined the movement

comes from a June 2015 declaration from a group of old sheikhs and community leaders in Anbar province living and operating under IS control. They published a statement with the following principals:

1. These leaders and their tribes and communities have given their allegiance to the IS leader and recognize him as the leader where they live.
2. They call for all tribes and communities that fled Anbar to come back home with guarantees of safety and to live with dignity instead of being under Iranian government control that has treated Sunni refugees inhumanely.
3. They call for Sunnis everywhere to return home to help rebuild the IS as their new nation, free of Iranian influenced government.
4. They do not recognize any sheikh who is not on the ground or who is not returning to Anbar to be part of this new nation.
5. They vow to fight the Iranian-backed government and coalition forces who are supporting Iranian-backed militias and “popular mobilization forces.”
6. They do not recognize the Iraqi Army or security forces as nationally representative because they have a relationship with the Iranian military.

The appearance and the function of the IS show very clearly that the decision of the U.S. administration to dismantle the former Iraqi armed forces following the Iraq war was a strategic mistake.

The nature of the fight

A good summation of the fight we face comes from the article “Clash for Civilization” written by Anthony Cordesman

and published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies in 2015. Cordesman views Islamic extremist violence as the biggest threat to Muslim states and the international community. “It may be politically correct to keep referring to a “war on terrorism” in general terms, but the fact remains that the struggle is essentially a war for the future of Islam and one in which the struggle for power is centered on religion,” Cordesman wrote. “It is also clear that the strategic center of gravity in violent Islamic extremism is the Middle East, North Africa, and in South Asia states like Afghanistan and Pakistan, although Central Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of East Asia and the Pacific also face such threats.”

In Cordesman’s view, effective counterterrorism must come with the recognition that violent jihadist extremism can only be defeated by strengthening partnerships between Western and Islamic nations. These agreements must overcome religious and cultural divisions to deal with a violent minority that threatens all partners. It’s a mistake for the U.S., Europe and other non-Muslim states to limit counterterrorism within their own borders.

Many experts call for a re-evaluation of security policies and terrorism studies in light of the rise of the IS. According to the previously cited article published by Henley-Putnam University: “Terrorism studies needs to take into account both the new regional threat from the IS and the inevitable return of religious extremists to their home countries. Yet intelligence analysts are expected to use the past as a baseline, understand and accurately report the meaning of present events, and provide a cogent assessment of future threats. The reality is that intelligence analysts are part of the front-line fight to protect their nations from terrorism and other security threats.”



Iraqi pro-government forces advance during their successful operation to recapture the Islamic State-held city of Fallujah in 2016. AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The U.S.'s main strategy is to combat the IS using intelligence services, advisors and special forces, but few conventional American ground troops. Many experts in the U.S. disagree with this approach. Here's Stratfor's take: "The U.S. has sought the support and assistance of international partners to lessen the military and political burden of the operation. In this strategy, the first contradiction lies in the combination of attacking IS targets by air while selectively arming and training Syrian rebels on the ground, not to mention that the U.S. will be working with Iranian proxies in Iraq and pro-Saudi actors in Syria."

Intelligence shortcomings

The basic problem is how to use intelligence capabilities against the IS. Penetrating terrorist organizations is difficult. After the withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq, the U.S. lost most of its human intelligence (HUMINT) capabilities there. The use of superior intelligence-gathering capabilities and satellite technology to collect information on the activities of the IS in Iraq and share it with allied governments is critical, but HUMINT is still lacking. Few intelligence officers are on the ground identifying, recruiting and directing agents against terrorists.

Native assets with the appropriate appearance and linguistic and cultural understanding can penetrate deep into the enemy's heart. As Tom Rogan noted in a 2014 story in *National Review*, these eyes and ears are the apex of intelligence work. Today, the Jordanian intelligence service leads in the HUMINT effort, but it desperately needs more support. Further complicating matters is that the IS has learned from its predecessors. Whereas al-Qaida in Iraq relied on cellphones and other such communications platforms, leaving a trail that U.S. special forces exploited, the IS is justifiably paranoid about its exposure. Rogan said that wherever possible, its leaders "stay off the grid" and if the IS isn't using a cellphone, the vast signals-intelligence mainframe computers "generate nothing but heat."

As Rogan stated in his article: "The U.S. military is extraordinarily capable, but, just as an inexperienced fisherman cannot fish without knowing where to cast his nets, a military devoid of tools and intelligence can only 'cast' sporadic fire in the strategic darkness."

Bugs not bombs

No one can precisely predict the shape of the IS challenge in the future. The geostrategic situation has been transformed in the past five years. The Arab Spring unexpectedly destroyed the stability provided by the old political order. Islamic extremists thrived in the resulting power vacuum. An added dimension to the threat came from the IS. Strategic security policies and terrorism studies must be re-evaluated in response.

In his article "Defeating the Islamic State: A How-To Guide," U.S. blogger and security expert John Schindler noted: "The military defeat of the Islamic State by Western airpower and commandos, aided by local proxies, will set the stage for the strategic defeat of their movement. What must follow is a version of what I term Special War, tailored for counterterrorism, combining offensive counterintelligence, denial and deception, and long-term manipulation of the jihadists leading to their collapse and self-immolation."

Schindler noted that assassination is legitimate to use against "virulent terrorists," but remains a technique that must be used carefully and sparingly. "There is considerable false morality at work if we are willing to use drones to kill thousands of terrorists — and along with them hundreds of innocents from "collateral damage" — not to mention occupying countries for years with awful humanitarian consequences, but we are unwilling to wage Special War, which is far less expensive in blood, treasure, and morality," Schindler wrote.

Columnist David Ignatius of *The Washington Post* added his thoughts: "The CIA must work with partners to build spy networks inside the Islamic State. Recruiting jihadists is not 'Mission: Impossible.' The Islamic State is toxic and has made enemies wherever it operates. But to work this terrain, the agency will have to alter its practices — taking more operational risks and reducing its lopsided emphasis on drone strikes and other covert tools."

From this point of view, U.S.-Russian cooperation is important. However deep the divisions over the crisis in Ukraine, increased intelligence sharing between Moscow and Washington on IS militants, focusing on this common enemy, is a necessity.

The fight against the IS is creating what once would have been awkward pairings, such as the U.S. and Iran. Paris-based security analyst Rachel Marsden suggests that the two countries have reached some sort of agreement that leaves the U.S. to conduct airstrikes and Iran to collect intelligence on the ground to aid ground operations.

Wrote Marsden: "Iran has the military power and the intelligence capabilities to wipe out the Islamic State. And Iran has been quietly playing footsie under the table with the U.S. for longer than many Americans are probably aware — much to the frustration of the French, who consider it to be two-faced behavior by their ally."

To conclude, the IS does not seem to be a passing phenomenon. It will appear in many countries, particularly those with weak governments, and embed itself in the Sunni population. Intelligence services must work closely with partners and use all types of intelligence methods in the field. If we're facing a proxy war, we should also speak of proxy intelligence. Based on the West's reluctance to commit all of its military capabilities to the fight on the ground, the war will likely be lasting. But that doesn't mean intelligence should be lacking. □