



The
DEFEAT
of ISIS



Preventing Operational Atrophy in the Long War

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The 2011 withdrawal of combat forces from Iraq marked a turning point in America's Middle East credibility. Perhaps more insidiously, it may also have initiated the onset of early-stage operational atrophy in employment of its armed forces. The withdrawal decision was unabashedly political, underscoring what can happen when posturing substitutes for informed strategic thinking and when hard-fought lessons learned on the ground are eschewed in favor of politically attractive military techniques. The result was the metastasis of global Islamic militarism. Call it terrorism if you like; but, whatever label you give it, what we now daily witness is the manifestation of a focused and well-informed strategy that has proliferated in the Middle East because lack of US leadership there created a vacuum that the Islamic State of Syria (ISIS) was only too happy to fill. If only the problem were that simple or localized.

Despite the fact that ISIS has become the shiny object of this war that the Western democracies find themselves in, the issue is not about Mosul, the Middle East, or even the acronym du jour for the thug waging it. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper's comment that in his fifty years of service he has never seen a more diverse array of challenges and crises well describes the problem. What is required is an equally describable solution. The reader can decide if it's peculiar for the US State Department to join Iran in congratulating a newly elected Hezbollah-backed Lebanese president¹ or to naively believe that al-Qaeda is yesterday's news.² Looking to the Middle East's antipodes, in April of this year, eighteen Philippine Army soldiers were killed and fifty-six wounded in an ambush by Abu Sayyaf Islamic terrorists on the archipelago's southern island of Basilan. Six months later, Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte is courting China to help solve his problem.³ Meanwhile, conventional Russian forces absent the inconvenience of Russian uniforms are conducting "implausibly deniable [guerilla] operations in Ukraine."⁴ Sending a couple of hundred US trainers who, by their own account, are learning from their hosts⁵ is probably not the answer.

No, 2016 is not America's baptism of fire in global war. It might be, however, the first time the country has gotten into one with so little strategic direction or even concept of how to grasp the initiative, employ limited military forces judiciously, and set the conditions for a post-war world. The United States was hardly a superpower in 1941; but the "ism" it defeated in 1945 and the world it fostered in Europe and Asia bespoke a government that understood leadership on a world stage. Military operations were textbook Clausewitzian: the strong arm of a cogent national strategy. Tactically, soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines



learned as they went and defeated enemy formations that had enjoyed a significant head start in training and equipping. They did so at high cost. It was war and America left no stone unturned diplomatically, economically, militarily, or technologically. Operationally innovative concepts such as carrier aviation and amphibious operations proved their worth—strategic bombing not so much. Ironic.

We are told that 45,000 ISIS fighters have been killed as a result of coalition airstrikes abetted by special operations forces—ostensibly an attractive military technique we doggedly persist in. Its appeal lies in its lack of US casualties. The theory has academic underpinning in the 1996 publication of “Shock & Awe” by the National Defense University, although the firepower-centric document’s prologue makes it quite clear upfront that the concept is “not an antidote for a major policy blunder or mistake.” That same year, Marine Corps University published “Centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities,”⁶ a much better tool for military *and* political leaders, as history whispers to us that firepower alone is seldom the answer in counterinsurgency operations. Killing enemy soldiers is a means to an end, which of course raises the question as to what end it is the United States is seeking. If frustration causes you to toss a grenade into a stream with the objective of killing fish, you can be sure of two things: one, no matter how accurately you throw it, you’re going to kill a lot of aquatic life besides fish; two, the fish you don’t kill are going to swim away and become exponentially harder to find and catch.

America’s military capability far transcends precision strikes and special operations. The Army and Marine Corps are not blunt force instruments; both have studiously applied the lessons of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom in their respective force development processes. The 2006 Counterinsurgency Field Manual is a good example. Studied reflection and experimentation have created general purpose tactical formations that are superbly led, trained, and equipped for operations in what military doctrine likes to call complex terrain: urban, mountain, jungle. This is no accident. The center of gravity in counterinsurgency operations is the physical security of the innocents involved. Invariably, that means population centers and complex terrain. Christian or Muslim, Sunni or Shiite, noncombatants want to live their lives in peace, send their kids to school, and go about their business without the gnawing fear of death squads in the night or destruction from above. In two unpopular wars separated by four decades, America adroitly used conventional ground forces to simultaneously provide a secure environment and kill enemy soldiers without reducing homes and places of business to rubble.

The Vietnam-era US Marines’ Combined Action Platoon program and President George W. Bush’s surge in Iraq both demonstrated US resolve and commitment while seeking to provide for a secure environment. Bush and the Marines went against the grain of political (Bush) and military (USMC) sentiment. While most of the country opposed an increase of ground forces in 2006 and the US Military Assistance Command in Vietnam pursued the chimera of great land battles in unoccupied areas, a courageous political leader and

a small group of savvy local commanders saw their way to the root of the problem and acted courageously to solve it. Both examples carried serious risk: national stature and political survival at one end, the lives of thirteen Marines and a Navy corpsman led by a 22-year-old corporal in an isolated village at the other.

More often than not, vacuous strategic direction is traceable to lack of political will and carries the additional risk of fostering operational atrophy: defaulting to suboptimal military responses for wrongheaded, generally politically driven, reasons. The operational level of war is typically described as the link between strategy and tactics; in simplest terms, it is the judicious employment of the right mix of tactical forces to accomplish the desired strategic outcome—even beyond cessation of hostilities. It does not necessarily require a huge commitment of forces. Britain maintained an empire with Sikh police and platoons of distributed and highly visible regulars.

While the United States is not interested in maintaining an empire, it is interested in creating and maintaining a peaceful world order. To accomplish this, fundamental truisms apply. When America makes a promise or veiled threat, it must follow through. The difference between the 1990 “line in the sand” and 2013 “red line” is palpable. Just as rudimentary, we need to stop telling our enemies what we are *not* going to do militarily. Sanctuaries and other politically motivated restrictions are counterproductive to effective military operations, reflecting diplomatic failure and want of moral courage. Two months after the September 11, 2001 attack on America, one of the most brilliant and daring operational maneuvers in the global war on terror succeeded because a relatively small Navy/Marine Task Force used diplomacy to garner the unofficial support of Pakistan, elicited the participation of non-attached US and coalition forces, and benefited from a government at home and operational commander in theater who understood that the best way to achieve and visibly demonstrate victory was to put men on the ground. Special operations forces were operating effectively in the area, but it was time for something much more overt. Armed with a short but clear mission statement, Task Force 58 attacked from the north Arabian Sea hundreds of miles into Afghanistan, in order to send an unambiguous message to America’s enemies that the United States was physically coming to get them in their spiritual center of Kandahar. It did so with Vietnam-era helicopters. There was then, as there is now, risk in employing conventional ground forces, but no other military course of action has as profound a political and diplomatic impact. The most precise weapon system in the Western democracies’ arsenal is a well-trained soldier or Marine armed with his innate conscience and imbued with his commander’s intent and desired end state. Before-and-after photos of Ramadi in 2014 and 2016 testify graphically to the effect of other precision systems.

Yet the prospect of “boots on the ground” has become a self-imposed national third rail, despite the fact that Islamic militarism will never be defeated until the United States is willing to show the political courage to include its historically most effective military tool in counterinsurgency operations. Lacking in the current approach of meting out punishment



after the fact is an understanding that the foremost precept of war among civilians is allowing them to live their lives, not making them collateral damage or refugees.

George W. Bush's 2007 surge was the right approach, despite widespread congressional opposition and lukewarm Pentagon support. The 20,000 (ultimately 30,000) soldiers and Marines he deployed to Iraq were primarily conventional ground combat formations; Operation Iraqi Freedom came to the cusp of success as a result. These formations did not operate from remote operating bases. Soldiers and Marines patrolled on foot, physically and visibly imposing themselves in the simmering cauldrons of Baghdad and Anbar Province. Fear that friendly casualties would spike were initially realized, but the numbers soon tapered off—as did civilian casualties. American casualties incurred after 2007 are a fraction of the war's total.⁷ Neighborhoods were taken back and terrorists killed, arrested, or co-opted. As importantly, sectarian violence subsided; Iraqis turned away from gangs of thugs for "protection" and Anbar sheikhs gravitated to the "strongest tribe."⁸ While special operators were finding and killing key leaders and terrorizing death squads, Army and Marine Corps infantrymen were reintroducing normalcy to Iraqi life. Air support was available, but seldom used. Local Iraqis looked upon American ground forces with the newfound respect, admiration, and even affection that can only be earned by shared hardship and danger. In the final analysis, it was a "whole-of-military" effort and it worked.

Today's soldiers and Marines are even more capable than their predecessors a decade ago. Eighty percent of America's youth doesn't make the cut to don its country's uniform.⁹ Going one step further, some of the armed services' best recruits actively seek infantry service. Sensibly incorporating them into the ongoing war against Islamic terror is a sure way to eliminate the mistakes of 2003¹⁰ and 2011. The alternative is letting our nation's enemies continue to take our measure as a casualty-adverse military one-trick pony.

Happily, and because of its excesses, ISIS is apparently beginning to wear out its welcome in northern Iraq.¹¹ If so, we need to be careful that we do not equate this combination of self-inflicted wound and occupation of a devastated Mosul with a blueprint for future counterinsurgency operations. Empirical evidence will likely also point to destroyed homes and places of business, plus even more refugees added to those that ineffective policies have already created.

There are times when employment of JDAMs or TLAMs¹² is a viable course of action. There are at least as many times when it is not. In 2007 Iraq, it was a combination of special operations and conventional forces that took al-Qaeda to the mat. By withdrawing latter, the United States fumbled an opportunity to kill ISIS before it was born. While we await the much anticipated final assault on what's left of Mosul, the enemy is already implementing its own military and political lessons-learned process, evidenced by a labyrinth of bomb-proof tunnels¹³ and exploitation of a new hearts-and-minds approach

in recruiting fighters from violent and increasingly unpopular terror groups like al-Shabaab in Somalia.¹⁴ The real question is whether the United States is also assessing the campaign with a critical eye.

Overtness and physical presence are as important as precision strike on the counterinsurgency battlefield. General purpose ground tactical formations should be employed judiciously, but early. Slamming strategic barn doors shut after the enemy has fled for safer pastures or established a tactical upper hand is the result of failure to anticipate and to act decisively early. The United States and its allies must understand they are in a war that will have many battles and that military options are most effective if they are informed by, and an integral part of, a whole-of-government and whole-of-military approach. Mosul will be significant only if we examine it truthfully and exploit it—strategically, operationally, tactically—in the battles to come. The Department of Defense’s six phases of a joint campaign are not a bad place to start—especially for political leaders. Although their utility is sometimes called into question, perhaps it is because we tend to look at them as required sequential military steps or campaign status reports,¹⁵ rather than strategic planning guidelines. Our nation’s elected and appointed leaders owe it to their military counterparts to “shape” the environment (phase 0) in order to “deter” activities (phase 1) inimical to our national interests. It is the essence of strategy. While the defeat of ISIS in Iraq is imperative, there are challenges and crises elsewhere that would benefit from shaping and deterring activities at the same time. Preoccupation with ISIS and the Middle East falls short of eradicating Islamic militarism and other strategic threats globally. We cannot undo the missed opportunities of 2003 or 2011; but history will judge us harshly if we do not learn from them. In both cases, the decision to remove troops from the scene, whether Iraqi or American, was ill-advised. We should never employ US military forces without clear and unambiguous strategic objectives; once we make the decision to act, however, we must be willing to use all the tools at our disposal to achieve equally unambiguous victory and long-term post-victory success. It is what great powers and courageous leaders do.

NOTES

- 1 Oren Dorell, “Lebanon Chooses a President Supported by Iran and Hezbollah,” *USA Today*, November 1, 2016.
- 2 Aaron Zelin, “Is Al Qaeda in Decline?” *Huffington Post*, April 18, 2015.
- 3 Cris Larano, “U.S. Diplomat Calls Duterte’s ‘Separation’ Comment ‘Bad for Business,’” *Wall Street Journal*, October 24, 2016.
- 4 Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Ukraine: Sneak Peek at World War III?” *Breaking Defense*, July 13, 2015.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Harlan Ullman and James Wade Jr., “Shock & Awe” (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1996); Joe Strange, “Centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities: Building on the Clausewitzian Foundation So That We Can All Speak the Same Language” (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 1996).
- 7 Max Boot, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Liveright, 2013), 543.



8 Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2008). While chapter 25 carries the quote as a title, the book should be read in its entirety.

9 Kori Schake and Jim Mattis, “Ensuring a Civil-Military Connection,” in *Warriors and Citizens: American Views on Our Military*, eds. Schake and Mattis (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2016), 295.

10 Mention of 2003 refers to US failure during the post-hostilities phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom led by Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez and Ambassador Paul Bremer.

11 Yaroslav Trofimov, “ISIS Failure in Kirkuk Shows Its Loss of Sunni Arab Support,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 2016.

12 Joint Direct Attack Munition and Tomahawk Land Attack Missile.

13 William Booth and Aaso Ameen Shwan, “ISIS Tunnels Complicate Fight for Control of Mosul,” *Washington Post*, November 6, 2016.

14 Heidi Vogt, “Islamic State in Africa Tries to Lure Members from al-Shabaab,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 2016.

15 Paul Scharre, “American Strategy and the Six Phases of Grief,” *War on the Rocks*, October 6, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/10/american-strategy-and-the-six-phases-of-grief/>.



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