



HOOVER INSTITUTION WORKING GROUP ON MILITARY HISTORY



The Destruction of ISIS

PETER R. MANSOOR

Since the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and its announcement of the creation of the Islamic State in 2014, the Islamist terror group has been the scourge of the Middle East and a significant security concern for Europe and the United States.

At its peak ISIS controlled upward of 40 percent of Iraq and Syria; it had established affiliates in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Nigeria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Caucasus; and it had designs on the Philippines. It had enslaved minority populations (including Yezidis and Christians) in the Levant, conducted barbaric acts of rape, torture, and murder against its captives, and instilled a radically harsh version of Sharia law in the areas it occupied. Furthermore, ISIS has conducted or inspired terror attacks in a number of other countries worldwide, including Turkey, France, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Lebanon, Kuwait, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, and the United States. Destroying ISIS and its affiliates and discrediting its ideology are clearly in the best interests of the United States and its allies and partners around the world.

The goal of the United States and its allies must not be just the defeat of ISIS, but its total eradication. We have seen the result of defeating but not destroying a radical Islamist organization in the recent past. During the surge in Iraq in 2007 and 2008, US and Iraqi forces along with tribal auxiliaries crushed al-Qaeda in Iraq, the most virulent terrorist organization in the Middle East at the time. The failure of the Obama administration to complete its destruction, however, led to the group's rebirth as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS. We cannot afford to make the same mistake again. ISIS must be thoroughly crushed.

Destroying ISIS begins with eliminating its self-styled caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Belatedly, the Obama administration is ramping up US capabilities in the region to assist partners in conducting operations toward this end. The air campaign that began in the summer of 2014 proceeds apace, with forty-five thousand members of ISIS killed by US and coalition airstrikes since then.¹ The US-coalition train-and-equip effort has revitalized significant portions of the Iraqi Army, bolstered the capabilities of the Kurdish peshmerga, and helped to create effective Kurdish and Arab forces aimed at fighting ISIS in Syria. Strides have been made in cutting off ISIS's finances, especially its revenue gained from oil smuggling. Iraqi forces (along with, in some cases, the unhelpful assistance of Shiite militias) have retaken Tikrit, Baiji, Ramadi, and Fallujah. Iraqi Army and Kurdish peshmerga forces have closed in on Mosul, the battle for which will determine the fate of ISIS in Iraq. Syrian Kurds and



allied Syrian Democratic Forces have dealt ISIS setbacks in Syria and are preparing for an assault on Raqqa, the capital of the caliphate. Syrian forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, with help from Russian airstrikes, have retaken the ancient city of Palmyra.

Challenges remain before the coalition assembled to destroy ISIS can drive a stake through its heart, and even more significant obstacles will present themselves once that task is accomplished. ISIS is likely to fight to the death for Mosul and Raqqa, putting to the test the capabilities of the rebuilt Iraqi Army and the various rebel forces opposing ISIS in Syria. Unlike in Ramadi, where fewer than 1,000 ISIS fighters fought to retain the city, in Mosul there are between 3,000 and 4,500 ISIS fighters prepared to fight and die.² They have had more than two years to fortify the urban stronghold, which will undoubtedly be littered with roadside bombs, buildings triggered to explode, and other obstacles. Several hundred thousand Iraqi civilians remain trapped in the city as well, meaning that any assault will likely cause a humanitarian catastrophe. Nevertheless, for ISIS to be destroyed, Mosul must be taken.

The Obama administration has armed Iraqi formations, but has limited its support to Kurdish and Syrian Democratic Forces, equipping the latter only with small arms. The administration should ramp up this support to include antitank weapons and mortars, giving these forces the punch needed to fight ISIS on equal terms. In Tikrit and Ramadi, US airpower proved decisive in supporting attacks by ground forces on enemy positions. Its importance is likely to be magnified in the decisive battles ahead. To ensure Iraqi, Kurdish, and friendly Syrian ground forces engaged in combat receive the air support they need for the assaults on Mosul and Raqqa, US advisers and forward air control teams should be embedded in their formations for these battles.

There is little doubt that Mosul and Raqqa will eventually fall. Indeed, recent intelligence estimates view ISIS as a “shrinking and increasingly demoralized military force.”³ Attacks by Turkish Army and rebel forces in August captured the last ISIS outposts on the northern Syrian border, effectively sealing off the Islamic State from the outside world. Without a means to replenish fighters lost in combat, the days of ISIS are numbered. But as with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, these decisive combat operations will prove to be the easy part of the campaign. More difficult will be knitting together a political solution to provide the Iraqi and Syrian people under the former control of the Islamic State a measure of autonomy to prevent the reemergence of ISIS or its ideological successor. US diplomats should be seriously engaged in shaping a political solution to the recurrent problem of Sunni disenfranchisement from their governments. The Iraqi military needs US assistance to take Mosul; therefore, American leverage with the Iraqi government is at its peak right now. US diplomats should demand a real plan for dealing with the aftermath of battle now rather than trying to piece together a political bargain after Mosul falls, for once that happens, all bets are off and the free-for-all for control of Mosul and its environs begins afresh.

As hard as the creation of a political solution is likely to be in Iraq, where Iranian pressure is likely to hinder Baghdad from reaching out to the Sunni minority, it is even harder in Syria, where al-Assad has absolutely no interest in building bridges to the country's Sunni majority. Syria is a wicked problem that has no immediate solution. Due to the Obama administration's unwillingness to arm the Syrian rebels and the support given the regime by Russia and Iran, al-Assad's forces are well on their way to seizing the bulk of "useful Syria," the area in the western third of the country containing the country's vital economic centers and where most of the population lives. Even after Kurdish, Syrian, and US forces destroy the ISIS stronghold in Raqqa, the Sunnis living in the area will still seethe against the depredations wrought on their community by the al-Assad regime. Absent a political outcome that gives Syria's Sunnis a degree of autonomy, the son or grandson of ISIS will eventually emerge from the carnage.

Destroying ISIS affiliates around the world requires a coordinated campaign using all forms of power: diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and legal. Underlying the strategy against ISIS should be a policy of subjecting the organization and its affiliates to unrelenting and constant pressure wherever the group exists. Drone strikes, Special Forces raids, and support of friendly government and proxy forces all have a place in this war. But the war against ISIS must extend beyond the military means of power. It must, for instance, extend into cyberspace. ISIS cannot be allowed unimpeded access to social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram or the freedom to establish and maintain websites where it can post propaganda to inspire the radical fringe of Islamic society. The United States and its partners must continue to exercise financial and legal means to impede and eliminate terrorist financing. Intelligence agencies and domestic criminal investigative bureaus must focus on ISIS and its affiliates as well as al-Qaeda and its related organizations. Perhaps most important for the long run, the United States should use its diplomatic levers to convince the Islamic world to denounce ISIS, al-Qaeda, and affiliated organizations and to encourage imams to condemn radical Islamism from their positions of influence inside mosques.

Beyond targeting ISIS affiliates in their various locations, the United States must do more to support effective governance in weak and failing states. Nation-building has become a much maligned term of late, but the United States and its allies can bolster indigenous governments to help them fight ISIS and other radical Islamist groups that find sanctuary within their borders. Those who disagree that the United States can be successful at this task should look at Colombia, where US assistance to the Colombian government, along with a strong local leader, led to the defeat of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC. The United States should engage similar strategies with states such as Libya that are struggling with ISIS affiliates.

The destruction of the ISIS homeland in Syria and Iraq and pressure applied to its affiliates around the world, however, are necessary but insufficient requirements for its complete



destruction. The fallout from the dismantling of the caliphate will be an increase in terrorist activity elsewhere. As ISIS comes under increasing pressure in the Levant and Mesopotamia, more fighters are likely to migrate (or return home) to Europe. FBI director James Comey recently warned, “The threat that I think will dominate the next five years for the FBI will be the impact of the crushing of the caliphate, which will happen. Through the fingers of that crush are going to come hundreds of hardened killers, who are not going to die on the battlefield. They are going to flow out.”⁴ Europe’s leaky immigration system and the European Union’s open borders will ease the transit of potential terrorists onto the continent. Once there, they can integrate into local and diasporic Islamic communities to gain support before planning, preparing, and executing terrorist attacks. France and Belgium are already in the jihadist crosshairs, but Great Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and other nations with significant numbers of Islamic immigrants will also be at risk.

Despite more extensive barriers to immigration and refugee flows than Europe, the United States will not be immune to ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks. Thorough vetting of refugees and immigrants from countries with ISIS affiliates is essential to maintaining the security of the homeland. There is some concern that radicalized refugees could find their way to Europe, gain citizenship, and then travel to the United States to conduct terrorist attacks without the need for a visa. This is possible, but unlikely; there are plenty of targets for these would-be terrorists to attack in Europe without undergoing the expense and complications of coming to the United States to wage jihad—and possibly being caught in the process by the more efficient security arms of the US government.

Of more concern for the United States, and Europe for that matter, are homegrown terrorists who become radicalized through social media or other avenues for propaganda. In democratic states, there is a constant struggle between security concerns and the protection of civil liberties. In the past, for instance, the Department of Homeland Security has shied away from looking at social media due to privacy concerns. For example, the State Department refused to look at the social media postings of San Bernardino shooter Tashfeen Malik, even though she was not a US citizen at the time she applied for a fiancée visa to enter the United States. These sorts of policies must change, or the United States will be vulnerable to ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks for the foreseeable future.

The destruction of ISIS, however, begins with the annihilation of its self-proclaimed caliphate. Its obliteration will send a clear and strident message to would-be adherents: by signing on with ISIS, they are joining a losing cause. No one likes a loser, which is why al-Qaeda in Iraq no longer exists. Knocked onto the canvas during the surge, the organization eventually survived, but its name lost marketing vitality in jihadi circles. Rebranded as ISIS, the group made a comeback in the chaos of the Syrian civil war. It is time once again to knock out ISIS, this time for good, and consign it to the dustbin of history.

NOTES

- 1 Kristina Wong, "General: 45,000 ISIS Fighters Killed in Two Years," *The Hill*, August 11, 2016, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/291179-general-isis-fighters-becoming-easier-to-kill>.
- 2 Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, "US, Iraqi Troops Close in on last ISIS-held City," CNN, September 17, 2016, www.cnn.com/2016/09/16/politics/us-troops-mosul-base/.
- 3 W. J. Hennigan and Brian Bennett, "US Intelligence Indicates a Weaker Islamic State," *Columbus Dispatch*, August 28, 2016.
- 4 Deb Reichmann, "US Officials: IS Losses on Battlefield Won't End Threat," Associated Press, September 8, 2016, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/5c4d20622dd74c778a19676a25f16f8a/us-officials-losses-battlefield-wont-end-threat>.





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About the Author



PETER R. MANSOOR

Peter Mansoor, colonel (ret.) from the US Army, is the General Raymond E. Mason Jr. Chair of Military History at Ohio State University and a CNN military analyst. His twenty-six-year military career featured two tours of duty in Iraq, including as an executive officer to General David Petraeus. His most recent publication is *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*.

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