

Report

Enigma of 'Baqiya wa Tatamadad':

The Islamic State Organization's Military Survival

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The Islamic State (IS) organization's military survival is an enigma that has yet to be fully explained, but even defeating it militarily will only address what is just one of the symptoms of a much larger regional political crisis [Associated Press]

Abstract

The Islamic State organization's motto, 'baqiya wa tatamadad', literally translates to 'remaining and expanding'. Along these lines, this report examines the reality of the Islamic State organization's continued military survival despite being targeted by much larger domestic, regional and international forces. The report is divided into three sections: the first reviews security and military studies addressing theoretical reasons for the survival of militarily weaker players against stronger parties; the second focuses on the Islamic State (IS) organisation's military capabilities and how it uses its power tactically and strategically; and the third discusses the Arab political environment's crisis, contradictions in the coalition's strategy to combat IS and the implications of this. The report argues that defeating the IS organization militarily may temporarily treat a symptom of the political crisis in the region, but the crisis will remain if its roots remain unaddressed.

Background

After more than seven months of the US-led air campaign on the Islamic State organization and following multiple ground attacks by various (albeit at times conflicting) parties, the organisation has managed not only to survive but also to expand. This result is even more puzzling given the group's small numbers and limited resources compared to those of its enemies, in addition to the great losses it has suffered since early 2015.

In June 2015, US Deputy Secretary of State, Antony J. Blinken, announced that coalition air strikes in Syria and Iraq had destroyed more than 6,200 IS targets and killed more than 10,000 of its fighters since September 2014. In December 2015, the Pentagon announced that it had executed 8,600 US air force attacks alone, comprising of more

than 28,000 bombs dropped on the organisation's sites in Iraq and Syria, for a total of an average of sixty bombs and seventeen air strikes on a daily basis for nearly a year and a half.(1) The Pentagon estimated the death toll of IS (Daesh) fighters during the last seventeen months at 20,000, but did not recognise any civilians killed with the exception of six people killed by 'mistake'.(2) In December 2015, US President Barack Obama estimated that the group had lost 40 per cent of its territory in Iraq,(3) while other reports, issued by military research centres specialising in intelligence analysis, estimated that the organisation lost 14 per cent of its territory (12,800 square kilometres) in Iraq and Syria between January and December 2015.(4)

Despite losses in Ramadi, Tikrit, Baiji, the countryside of Hasaka, and some of the towns and villages around Raqqa, Homs and Hama, the Islamic State organisation has not collapsed. This is contrary to what was predicted given the balance of forces on the ground and defied conventional military analysis taking these factors into account.

Comparing IS with the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Baath Party in Iraq, the former lost control of its capital, Kandahar, within two months of a US-led international coalition air strike campaign in coordination with opposition forces loyal to the coalition. Similarly, the latter lost control of its capital, Baghdad, less than a month and a half after the Anglo-American invasion starting in March 2003. However, in the case of the IS, even after a year and a half of strikes by an international coalition consisting of more than sixty countries, the organisation has maintained both its capitals, Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. During 2014 and 2015, the organisation expanded its reach from the Syrian province of Aleppo to the Iraqi province of Salah al-Din, an area 650 kilometres in width.

This includes large parts of the provinces of Anbar, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Diyala and Salah al-Din in Iraq, as well as large parts of Raqqa, Hasaka, Deir Ezzor, Aleppo, Homs and Rural Damascus in Syria. The organisation had also conquered the suburb of al-Hajar al-Aswad and large parts of Yarmouk camp in Damascus until late 2015, and at one point it was less than five kilometres away from Umayyad Square in central Damascus. These so-called 'states' (according to the organisation's administrative-geographic division)(5) are home to an estimated ten million people. In addition, the organisation has control or influence in other areas, including parts of central and eastern Libya (Sirte and Bin Jawad), north-eastern Nigeria, eastern Afghanistan (especially Nangarhar), Egypt (north-eastern Sinai) and others.

Given the group's motto, 'baqiya wa tatamadad', literally, 'remaining and expanding', this report explores the reality of the Islamic State group's military survival despite being targeted by much larger domestic and international forces. The report is divided into three sections: the first is a review of security and military studies that explain the

reasons behind the steadfastness of militarily weaker players in the face of stronger parties; the second focuses on the organisation's military capabilities, tactically and strategically; and the third discusses the crisis in the Arab political environment, contradictions in the international coalition's strategy to combat IS and implications therein.(6)

Literature review

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, the military capabilities of armed opposition groups against states and governments have risen steadily. Many military and security studies have documented a significant increase in the success of these groups against existing state authorities or the authorities' inability to defeat these armed organisations, which are much weaker than other groups in terms of resources and numbers. In other words, this new phenomenon is a significant change from the prevailing historical pattern.

A study of 286 armed rebellions between 1800 and 2005 found that ruling authorities only won 25 per cent of the battles with armed insurgents between 1976 and 2005. In comparison, between 1826 and 1850, the ruling authorities' armies were successful against armed rebels 90 per cent of the time.(7)

The RAND Corporation, partially funded by the Pentagon, reached mixed conclusions in a study of eighty-nine insurgencies, finding that government armed forces triumphed in twenty-eight cases (31 per cent), non-state armed forces won in twenty-six cases (29 per cent), and there were mixed outcomes in nineteen cases (21 per cent, including cases of political negotiation or geographical division, etc.).(8) The rest, sixteen cases (18 per cent) are insurgencies that have yet to conclude.(9)

Security and military studies have provided a range of reasons explaining the military success of weaker insurgencies in the face of more powerful entities, whether they happen to be international alliances, individual countries or non-state actors, such as armed institutions (i.e., factions of the government's army or armed revolutionary organisations). Most explanations and the theories they build upon have focused on rugged geography and complexities of topography, popular support factors of various types (populist, ethnic, sectarian, regional, religious, ideological) and international military support for the weaker party, as well as the military tactics and strategies of the conflicting parties.

Mao Zedong, a prominent theorist of modern revolutionary war, sheds some light on the local population's loyalty to any successful armed resistance, whether against tyranny or colonialism, stating: 'The guerrilla must move amongst the people as fish swim in the

sea'.(10) In other words, an insurgent group must be adept at navigating its relationships with the local population in order to survive in its areas of operation.

The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual, which is based primarily on experiences in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, reached the same conclusion, emphasising that conflict between a regular soldier and an insurgent is a 'loyalty contest' to co-opt the general public who are mostly not in favour of the warring parties. Therefore, success in the fight against an insurgency requires winning the hearts and minds of a neutral public.(11) There exists a near consensus among strategic military specialists in revolutionary war studies that for the local population to be brutally treated by regular forces aids the irregular combatants in recruitment, collecting resources and validating their legitimacy. General Stanley McChrystal, former commander of US forces in Afghanistan, referred to this relationship as 'insurgent math', meaning that every innocent civilian killed by regular forces multiplies the number of insurgents in any given conflict.(12)

Military explanations that focus on geography and its complexities are numerous and varied. James Fearon and David Laitin, like other researchers, find that geography is one of four critical variables in situations of successful armed rebellion.(13) Sun Tzu, a renowned Chinese military commander and philosopher even considered geography as one of the five critical factors in any armed conflict, regardless of its type.(14)

For Zedong, guerrilla wars are more effective in large countries where it is easy to hit the regular forces' supply lines with small numbers and at low cost.(15) The well-known French officer and scholar of revolutionary wars, David Galula, asserts that 'the role of geography, a significant one in an ordinary war, may be overriding in a revolutionary war. If the insurgent, with his initial weakness, cannot be assisted by geography, he may well be condemned to failure before he starts'.(16)

Kenneth Boulding introduced the 'Loss of Strength Gradient' (LSG) to geographic explanations. In its simplified definition, the term means that the further away fighting centres (like capitals, large cities and camps) are from the regular forces, the more likely it is that they will lose some of their strength.(17) Sebastian Schutte adjusted the theory in 2014, stating that regular forces lose 'accuracy'(not necessarily strength) in hitting targets the further they are from the centres. Their attacks become more random and less accurate (in killing insurgents), and thus, local anger increases the rebels' legitimacy, along with their ability to mobilise and recruit.(18)

Other studies have focused on the importance of different forms of external support to the militarily weaker party. The RAND study of eighty-nine armed rebellions against a variety of systems (authoritarian, democratic, colonial) found that armed movements

that benefitted from the care of an external state or states won militarily in 67 per cent of unresolved cases. However, when external support ceases, and dependency shifts internally, the ratio of victory decreases to 25 per cent of unresolved cases.(19)

Another group of military strategy scholars have shown that a weaker party's victory may be explained through field tactics and military strategy. In terms of field tactics, a Yale University study found that modern military vehicles (especially armoured vehicles and aircraft) undermined the ability of soldiers to create positive relationships with the local population, and thus undermined their ability to gather valuable intelligence from local collaborators.(20) Much of the literature on military strategy, particularly from US and British universities, is in agreement that the state no longer has the monopoly on employing new military technologies in weapons, communications, information and intelligence gathering, transportation, infrastructure, regulatory and administrative sciences.(21)

In other words, 'breaking the monopoly' has allowed armed organisations independent from states and regimes to improve their combat performance. In short, a review of the literature concludes that the marked increase in the number of regimes defeated by weaker and smaller armed organisations diverges from previous historical patterns.

Military capabilities of the Islamic State group (Daesh): Strategy and tactics

Elements of the military and strategic studies discussed in the previous section help explain events in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and elsewhere. However, the military organisation's survival and expansion has not been fully explained until recently. Explanations citing geography, popular support factors, external support and related theories do not help much in understanding the situation. We find that most of the areas under IS control are not as rugged as the mountains of Cuba, Afghanistan or Chechnya, where weaker military parties have benefitted from the geographic complexities. The 'support factors' do not exceed minorities that shrink and grow according to the ferocity and brutality of regimes in conflict with IS. The Institute of Administration and Civil Society Studies in Iraq conducted a micro-level opinion poll in the city of Mosul and found that in June 2014 the percentage of those who believe that IS represents their views or interests did not exceed 10 per cent.(22) However, when the poll was repeated in December 2015 after international coalition strikes had begun, this support increased to 39 per cent of those polled.(23)

Some of the IS organization's supporters (not members) in areas such as Sirte (Libya), Deir Ezzor (Syria) and Sinai (Egypt) view it as a lesser evil than that of the ruling regimes. In addition, the organisation is not only in a state of war with many governments and regimes inside and outside the region but with large segments of

conservative Muslim communities, as well as with many of the Sunni and Shia Islamic currents, and even with some jihadists, including al-Qaeda and other organisations. As for external support, despite the existence of conspiracy theories, it has not yet been proven that IS receives formal support directly from any government or regime like past Soviet support for the Cuban rebels, or Pakistani and Saudi support for the Afghan Mujahideen parties.

The group's military tactics and strategies may help explain its ability to withstand and expand more than ever before. Relatively speaking, the organisation does not have large numbers and equipment compared to the sophisticated resources of its enemies. With regard to numerical strength ratios, in 2014 the CIA estimated the number of the organisation's fighters to be between 20,000 and 31,000.⁽²⁴⁾ In comparison to the Iraqi armed forces only, this figure means that there is one fighter to every ten Iraqi soldiers, without taking into account supportive or allied forces like the popular and tribal groups, Peshmerga units and the international coalition forces.⁽²⁵⁾ These ratios only estimate numerical strength, without taking into account the quality of the weaponry, ratios of fire intensity, effects of air support and intelligence and strategic regional and international aid. The bottom line is that these factors and ratios are not exactly in the organisation's favour.

Thus, the IS organization has focused on using of a mix of general principles in military strategy, rigidity in the field and a decentralised framework of command and control. This has included capitalizing on the commitment of soldiers to leadership schemes and dedication to their work, even resorting to high levels of brutality. This specific combination of unusual tactics on the ground and implementation of fast, accurate and repeatable methods has meant the organisation has been able to overcome its lack of manpower and equipment and even win the battles where victory was unexpected based on traditional military data.

It is noticeable that combat methods used by Daesh are in line with what was written by Tzu, the Chinese military commander and philosopher, in particular the collection of intelligence information about the enemy, stealth before and after striking, beating the weak flank, using the element of surprise in a highly efficient way, avoiding the enemy in its strongholds and the time of readiness.⁽²⁶⁾ Tactics of 'urban terrorism', especially car bombs and suicide bombers, led by sudden, frequent and extensive use of snipers, and assassinations before and during attacks, combined with traditional methods of revolutionary warfare, have proven highly effective for the organization despite the small number of IS fighters.

The attack pattern is set up to establish control on the ground (in a village, town or city neighbourhood), which is followed by the organisation's combat units attacking from

three sides at the same time while using high intensity fire to push the defending forces to the fourth side. When the defending forces gather on the fourth side, they are hit by one or more car bombs (either detonated remotely or by suicide attackers), which often leads to the defending forces' collapse or weakening, which makes the attack much easier.

Captain Hassan Al-Hajri, one of the commanders of the Suqour al-Jabal Brigade in Syria, pointed out that after attacking with booby traps, the 'Inghemasiyoun', a small commando unit of no more than twenty IS shock troops (many of them foreigners), carry out further attacks.⁽²⁷⁾ This unit is subjected to special training on tactics of close quarters combat.⁽²⁸⁾ Their main task after attacking with booby traps is breaking enemy lines, raiding targets and then progressing slowly.

A former officer of the Free Syrian Army's (FSA) 101st Brigade says, 'After a car bombing, IS sends in ten to fifteen fighters of different nationalities. They advance fifty metres and lie down, then they advance another fifty metres, then lie down and concentrate their efforts. With regards to this specific method of attack, we have not heard of it being taught at any Arab military academy, even that of the Baath Party'.⁽²⁹⁾

It seems that the use of booby traps or improvised explosive devices (using containers, cars, motorcycles, etc.) have proven highly effective for Daesh in breaking through frontlines, initiating attacks and as a defensive tactic, but their place in the military strategy of the IS organization (Daesh) is still a mystery. Some military analysts argue that the element of shock, and its effect in weakening and confusing enemies, has proven valuable for IS. Others focus on the extensive damage caused by car bombs, arguing that a quick resolution of battle is in favour of the organisation's forces even if the conventional military balance is not in their favour.

There is another important aspect with regards to the command and control framework of the IS organization. It sometimes attacks sites and towns that are not important strategically using limited numbers, giving the indication that in these cases mid-level leadership have made decisions regarding the attack without deferring to senior leadership. Despite the failure of some of these attacks tactically and on the ground, their frequency and success in other instances is important at the command and control level. This decentralised method of military action which seems to be Daesh's modus operandi is more developed and militarily effective than the methods of many Arab armies.

In practice, IS has overcome a major obstacle that impedes the military effectiveness of some Arab armies, which typically lack the ability to innovate and improvise without high level orders, have little ability to adapt to sudden and unexpected circumstances and are

unable to work independently tactically and on the ground. The degree of centralisation on the ground may reflect the weakness of 'strategic coherence' between military units and 'tactical turmoil'; it is a traditional point of weakness that may defeat and obliterate any military entity. However, in the case of IS, central senior leadership with a decentralised field structure has proven vital for military performance. This dynamic allows the organisation to make quick decisions when facing superior forces. In addition, it seems that IS leaders on the ground learn quickly, continuously adapting their performance.

With regards to defence tactics, IS' air defence forces are weak, limited and undeveloped. The organization has thus far demonstrated it can only combat helicopters and old military aircraft flying at low altitudes (at the level of 20,000 feet or less), which has cost the organization quite a lot. The traditional warfare style (especially the use of armoured vehicles) has been undermined to a large extent due to coalition air strikes, and the lack of capacity at the disposal of its ground forces to respond. The organization has managed to avoid further losses by dispersing and hiding heavy weapons and some armoured vehicles and tanks that survived from the bombing.

With regards to offensive tactics, its fighters benefit from a mix of weapons being used by opposition forces: Russian, US and Chinese weapons. This makes it difficult for coalition air forces to distinguish between 'friendly' forces and IS forces. The difficulty of precisely pinpointing targets is made worse by the limited number of joint terminal attack controllers (JTAC), which are command centres for qualified personnel who work on providing the coalition's air operations with information.(30)

Finally, the quality of the fighters who join the organisation has added to its military balance, in terms of persistence on the battlefield and 'loyalty' to their goal. The organisation's combatants are divided into three categories: the first are former members of regular armed forces (especially from Iraq, Syria, Egypt and Georgia), and those who served in a variety of sectors, including the republican guard, military, intelligence, weaponry and police (civilian and military). The second category includes unlawful combatants who fought in previous wars and have abundant combat experience in a variety of geographies (mountains, jungles, deserts, cities, villages and towns). The third category is comprised of local fighters who have accumulated long-term experience in combating local regime troops and providing logistical support for building networks over the past decade.

Some fighters, especially those belonging to the second category, fought many defensive battles to prevent the enemy from controlling villages, towns or cities in several countries. In later wars, those same fighters used commando tactics when they lost land to their enemies. These tactics relied on light infantry units with ten to fifteen fighters

clashing with the enemy at close range (fifty to 250 metres), which deviates from the use of heavy artillery and shelling of aircraft.

The near future and the far enemy

A good ending point would be to draw attention to the environment in which the IS organization has developed, remained and expanded. In most countries in the region, with few exceptions, legitimacy is obtained through religious advisory opinions (fatawa) or through extreme nationalism. In most Arab political environments, elections, constitutions, laws, principles of good governance and social and economic achievements are merely secondary factors, and typically only symbolic.

The regional context is one in which the bullet is frequently seen as more effective than the ballot in reaching power and staying there. In this context, a large portion of political, social and cultural elites see force as a way to filter and eradicate political dissent, through torture at the very minimum, or through genocide at the maximum. Mutual concessions and political compromises to prevent bloodshed are seen as 'betrayal'. The Islamic State organization other jihadi trends have merely taken this ideology and increased the dose of violence, multiplied their targets and radicalised religious interpretation, meaning they have not departed from the prevailing political context in the region. The trends and organisations in and of themselves are a natural consequence of this pattern of violence and ruthlessness.⁽³¹⁾

Therefore, IS does not face considerable difficulties in recruitment of the small groups that support it because the repressive political environment helps to give credibility to its tactics. The long-term strategy being used to contain and destroy it presently depends on four major pillars: two military and security pillars, one political and reform pillar and one intellectual and rhetorical pillar. More specifically, this seems to include:

- air strikes to contain it in the short term;
- local partners who collaborate with the coalition forces to weaken and destroy it on the ground in the medium or long term;
- attempts to repair the political environment through settlements and reconciliation or democratisation to create a political and social environment that would prevent the organisation from reproducing;
- and the production of ideologies and discourses to counter the ideas and behaviours of the organisation and behaviours arising in the long-term.

However, some of these pillars are incompatible with each other, with the most conflicting ones the second and third pillars. They create what can be described as an imbalanced approach to combating such groups, particularly considering that the regimes themselves have committed massacres against their own people and crimes against humanity, thus being 'partners' in the fight against terrorism (which are some of

the second pillar's concerns) would cancel out the third pillar of the strategy over the long term. Thus, the defeat of IS militarily – a result that should not be seen as an accomplishment of tactics/field significance given the enormous differences in numbers, equipment and weaponry – may temporarily treat a symptom of the political crisis in the region. However, the roots of the crisis remain (unless the third pillar proves successful, which is outside the scope of this report). Consequently, these ensnared roots will generate another symptom, much like this organization, that may be even more extreme, violent and rigid.

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