

The Predictable and Permanent Nature of the Islamic State

Written by Glen Segell

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GLEN SEGELL, NOV 12 2014

The battlefield victories of ISIL (the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), also known as ISIS, is neither a surprise nor an intelligence failure. This is despite the apportionment of blame by American President Obama on the US intelligence communities' underestimate of ISIL's victories in Syria (The Washington Post, 9/29/14). There is a difference between Iraq and Syria, even if ISIL is operating in both. One of hundreds of worst case scenarios drawn up by intelligence analysts, military planners, and academics in 2007 predicted the turn of the tide in Iraq in favor of organizations such as ISIL (Segell, 2009).

Hence, a closer reading of the debate or argument between the President and the intelligence community shows that President Obama was stressing ISIL in Syria, and the intelligence community was referring to ISIL in Iraq. So both the President and the intelligence community are correct and mistaken. They are both mistaken because even if there was 100% accurate information about ISIL in both countries, there is a difference between prediction and forecasting. Prediction can determine the probability of events transpiring, while forecasting determines a timescale and timeline. No politician, intelligence analyst, or military strategist could have forecast when the turn of the tide of the battle would come in favor of ISIL in Iraq, or when they would have achieved such victories in Syria.

The debate between the President and the intelligence community is important for democracy and civil-military relations. In a democracy, it is the citizen-elected civil authority that is granted control of policy decisions when, why, and how to use military force. The field of civil-military relations details how, in a democracy, the military authorities are subservient to this citizen-elected civil authority. It is the responsibility of the intelligence community to keep the decision-maker, the President, informed accurately at all times so that he can make valued decisions. In the debate over ISIL, the intelligence community should have been more fastidious in keeping the President informed accurately, and the President should have made known his priorities. Democracy was not subverted in this instance, but the weaknesses in communication between the President and the intelligence community are apparent.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq to ISIL Migration Was Expected

Now that the information has been provided and the decisions have been taken, the important questions are whether or not the air strikes will succeed and whether ISIL can be conquered. Inherent in the 2007 predictions was the analysis that Al-Qaeda in Iraq would move beyond ideological outlooks, beyond local attacks on Shiite targets in a cycle of violence, and beyond attempts at transnational attacks on western targets. During analysis of the evolution of Al Qaeda in Iraq, the Congressional Research Service (2007) determined that remarks from Al Qaeda leaders, including the future ISIL leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadhi, showed that Al Qaeda would make a serious attempt to establish a center of gravity by building and defending a working quasi-state on the ground.

The prediction was not radical, for the quasi-state or Islamic State (caliphate) is inherent in Al-Qaeda ideology and a natural progression in political Islam for the past 200 years. History is thus a major help in understanding ISIL. Such an analysis can see a parallel with the Jihad of Abd al-Qadir in North Africa in the 1830s and 1840s, and of Muhammad Ahmad (the Mahdi or Redeemer) in Sudan in the 1880s. Indeed it is the dream of many Muslims worldwide "To unify all Islamic countries into a single Islamic state or Caliphate" (Hussein Solomon). The conclusion

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was a simple one: expect Al-Qaeda in Iraq to form a caliphate. This is now in progress in the north and west of Iraq, and the north and east of Syria.

ISIL in Iraq

Many of the predictions in the 2007 worst case scenario were based on expectations of American withdrawal of forces from Iraq. It was understood that a Shiite government in Baghdad could not dictate to Sunni tribal leaders nor control traditional Sunni towns and cities. It was understood that at the time of American withdrawal, prisoners would be released that would include former Sunni leaders from Saddam's Ba'ath party and officers from Saddam's army. Subsequently, counter-insurgency operational strategy planned for the expectation that some if not most of these would join up with Al-Qaeda in Iraq (Canada, 2008). Indeed the taste of power from Saddam's dictatorial days would be one that would be hard to relinquish and not to retake once there was no American military in Iraq. This is exactly what transpired from 2011 onwards, including the prominent Abu Wahab Al-Dameshqi Al Ribat and Hashim Aljmasa (Iraqi News 6/15/2014).

The scenario was monitored and since there was no loss of American intelligence on ISIL in Iraq, there has progressively since 2011 been an accurate assessment of ISIL in Iraq's manpower, military and financial capabilities, leadership, and planned targets for attack. Despite the intelligence, there was little that could be done to thwart the rise of ISIL in Iraq. The reconstruction of the new Iraq Army trained by American forces was aimed at defending Iraq externally and not at internal security. Internal security would be by a new police force. Information and Psychological Operations were aimed at gaining public support for the Iraq police who were multi-ethnic and locally recruited, and not for the Iraqi Army who was predominately Shiite, or for armed militias (the term phrased for Shiite groups promoted by Iran) (Segell, 2011).

However, the local police in the traditional Sunni areas of Iraq identified and even joined ISIL, an action that had been expected and noted by a CPATT assessment during the training of these forces by a US police training unit (CPATT, 2006). At the same time, Sunni tribal leaders and the former Ba'ath party officials gained social support, sponsored by ISIL ideology and religious consent through local mosques. Simultaneously, the political Shiite regime in Baghdad was weakened with the onset of the Arab Spring, growing Kurdish nationalism, and Iranian intervention. It was no surprise that by the spring of 2014, ISIL saw the opportunity to play its hand and move armed forces to take major cities such as Mosul, persecute minorities in Kurdish held areas, and situate on the outskirts of Baghdad. It was well within expectations that they would achieve victories within five years of American withdrawal from Iraq. Air strikes will not remove these from positions of local authority nor diminish their local popular support.

ISIL in Syria

Al-Qaeda worldwide and ISIL are compartmentalized as a strategy and a tactic to prevent their overall destruction. This is an organizational and structural feature typical of many terrorist and freedom-fighting organizations, as well as state-run intelligence agencies and security structures, to guarantee secrecy and continuity. So one part of ISIL, that in Iraq, formed a strong coalition of former Ba'ath party officials and officers from Saddam's army and Sunni tribal leaders, and waited their opportunity.

In the interim, another part of ISIL saw the Syrian civil war and the Arab Spring as opportunities to expand their caliphate ideology and territorial aspirations into Syrian territory bordering Iraq. In a similar vein, the Kurds have quasi-jurisdiction over territory in three sovereign states: Iraq, Syria, and Turkey.

So long as the Syrian army is engaged elsewhere, ISIL has apparently created a trans-national caliphate. Nevertheless, ISIL in Syria is a more obscure entity to predict, forecast, and analyze than ISIL in Iraq. Essentially the Syrian civil war has numerous struggles. Predominating are those between the Syrian Army, controlled by President Assad in Damascus to regain control of the entire Syrian sovereign state, and any force opposing this objective. However, there are also numerous armed struggles between the forces opposing Assad, and much international assistance for his regime, as well as many of the opposing rebel forces. So there have been reports of ISIL fighting the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic Front, and even Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda. This has helped

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Assad and thwarted western attempts to topple him (Al Jazeera 9/18/2014).

The Future of ISIL

There is no way of guaranteeing who will occupy the Syrian territory that ISIL controls, should air strikes successfully force them to flee back to Iraq or annihilate them. Hence cracking the ISIL nut in Syria will not depend on American airpower, but rather on the strength of the forces of Assad and other rebels. This will also determine the future of Assad's regime. Any international intervention for or against any force in Syria may lead to anarchy rather than the elimination of any particular force or the victory of another.

International air strikes against ISIL military targets in Iraq are too little and too late. The towns and cities of northern and western Iraq are now in control of ISIL and Sunni tribal leaders and former Ba'ath party members. Even if every ISIL fighters were to be killed, the Shiite government in Baghdad will not have control of these, without conceding substantial political power to let them into the government of Iraq. This would entail letting radical Sunni ideologists into the Iraq government, which would only further the territorial expansion of the caliphate. It is not foreseen that the majority Shiite population of Iraq would permit this. So Iraq has now been de facto divided into at least two states: southern and eastern Iraq for the Shiite, and an ISIL caliphate for the Sunni in the north and the west. Time will tell if the Kurdish northern enclave can survive.

The foremost strategy should not be air strikes but information and psychological operations. The goal should be to diminish popular support for ISIL both in Iraq and Syria. History is thus a major help in providing examples of the evolution and transformation of regimes away from their radical and extremist stances to one of coexistence and participation in the international system. This is both post-Colonial and post-Cold War, as well as Middle Eastern. Some examples are the Mau-Mau of Kenya, the end of South African Apartheid, the resolution in the Balkans, and even Shiite Iran that has accommodated western styles amongst the general population. Perhaps Sunni Iraq can also do so.

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About the author:

Dr Glen Segell is Visiting Professor and Research Fellow at the University of the Free State, South Africa and a Research Fellow at the Ezri Center for Iran & Gulf States Research, University of Haifa, Israel.