

The Cult of the Offensive: The Islamic State on Defense

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There is nothing mystical about ISIS as a defensive force: where it has succeeded, it has done so almost entirely due to the absence of effective opposition, not because of its inherent strength.

To read the full version of this excerpt, download the PDF or [visit the CTC website \(https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-cult-of-the-offensive-the-islamic-state-on-defense\)](https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/the-cult-of-the-offensive-the-islamic-state-on-defense).

The Islamic State has been on the defensive in Iraq for more than eight months and has lost practically every battle it has fought. After peaking in August 2014, its area of control has shrunk, slowly but steadily. The group's ability to control terrain has been dictated largely by the weakness of its opponents. When the Iraqi security forces (ISF) and the Kurdish Peshmerga have committed resources to an attack, they have dislodged the Islamic State's defenses, particularly when Western airpower, intelligence, and planning have been a large part of the mix.

This paper will use case studies from recent battles in north-central Iraq to argue that the Islamic State has a distinctive defensive operational style, and that this style has many exploitable weaknesses as the coalition considers new offensives in Anbar province and Mosul. In many ways, the Islamic State's defensive style is reminiscent of the German military between 1944 and 1945: At the tactical level they are highly dangerous and can still win engagements, but at the operational level they lack strategic coherence and they display a chronic inability to defend terrain... ❖

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