

Operation Inherent Resolve: An Interim Assessment

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Jan 13, 2015

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Brief Analysis

Coalition airstrikes in Iraq and Syria have had clear benefits, but a broader campaign involving more intelligence and targeting assistance on the ground is required to reap the full strategic benefits of turning back ISIS.

Since President Obama ordered U.S. forces to begin operations against the "Islamic State"/ISIS on August 7, the coalition has flown over 5,000 strike sorties employing some 4,000 weapons, as well as 1,700 intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) sorties, over 22,000 air refueling sorties, and over 1,300 airlift sorties delivering some 6,000 tons of humanitarian and military aid. These numbers are small compared to past air campaigns and could convey an impression of tactical ineffectiveness; for instance, coalition aircraft flew an average of 800-1,000 strike sorties daily during Operation Desert Storm. Yet when viewed at the operational and strategic levels, the campaign has clearly achieved some notable successes.

THE CAMPAIGN IN IRAQ

The ISIS offensive in Iraq has culminated. Whereas the group previously conducted rapid advances covering great distances to surprise and rout Iraqi army units, its forces there are now dispersed in a largely defensive posture, conducting only localized offensive operations. Although this is not exclusively the result of the coalition's campaign, airstrikes destroyed or damaged over 300 vehicles, 15 mortars and artillery pieces, and nine command-and-control nodes in the critical first two-and-a-half months of the operation when the group was still actively on the offensive, in addition to killing or wounding an unknown number of ISIS fighters.

These strikes also bought time for Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces to rally, prevented ISIS from massing for further attacks, and provided critical fire and logistics support in key operations, including the effort to retake the Mosul and Haditha Dams, the counteroffensive around Mount Sinjar, and Iraqi army efforts to blunt a major ISIS offensive toward Baghdad in October. Moreover, the humanitarian emergency involving Yazidi refugees on Mount Sinjar was quickly defused, saving lives and putting a humanitarian face on the intervention. The latter effort played

well in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, increasing public support for the operation and buying time for it to succeed.

THE CAMPAIGN IN SYRIA

Coalition airstrikes in Syria began a month-and-a-half later than in Iraq but have increased in intensity as ISIS shifts away from the stagnant Iraqi front toward what it perceives as easier targets in Syria. To date, airpower has helped halt and reverse the group's offensive against the Kurdish enclave in Kobane, with over 470 strikes causing heavy casualties among ISIS forces and the loss of many hard-to-replace heavy weapons and vehicles. The defeat in Kobane was perhaps the most high-profile setback for the group in the past year and may further remove its luster of invincibility.

Strikes elsewhere in the country have focused on attriting the group's senior leadership, reducing its illicit revenues from oil smuggling, and degrading its training and logistics facilities. Operations in Syria have also provided a useful opportunity to conduct counterterror strikes against the Khorasan Group, an al-Qaeda network embedded within Jabhat al-Nusra.

UNPRECEDENTED PRECISION AND RESTRAINT

The manner in which the campaign has been conducted has also been important. Coalition air operations have been carried out with an extremely high degree of precision and restraint. Thus far, reliable claims of civilian casualties -- approximately fifty each in Iraq and Syria -- are very low considering the number of weapons delivered. Although it is difficult to verify such figures due to the lack of coalition presence or independent journalists on the ground in ISIS-controlled territory, significant effort has clearly been expended to ensure collateral damage is limited. This restraint has likely decreased the damage inflicted on ISIS, but it has also paid huge dividends in assembling a broad coalition, with eight Western and six Arab states conducting strikes and dozens more providing humanitarian aid, training, or military aid.

CONSTRAINTS AND SHORTFALLS

The campaign has not been without challenges. Airpower has been constrained by U.S. political and military leaders enacting policies that limit the number of targets struck each day. First, the decision to avoid putting U.S. boots on the ground removed the proven technique of partnering Special Forces with indigenous troops to identify enemy targets for airstrikes. To offset this limitation, U.S. advisors have been embedded in various Iraqi headquarters in an effort to identify requirements for air support and pass them to the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Qatar, which is overseeing the air campaign. Unfortunately, Iraqi command-and-control appears too lethargic to pass targets to the CAOC in a consistently timely manner.

Second, U.S. Central Command and the Pentagon are treating the campaign against ISIS as an economy-of-force effort secondary to operations elsewhere in the region. This is particularly true with regard to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance forces, which remain overwhelmingly focused on supporting retrograde operations in Afghanistan. Throughout the anti-ISIS campaign, CENTCOM has used six to ten times as much ISR in Afghanistan as in Iraq/Syria. Without ground units, the responsibility for finding and fixing ISIS targets falls almost exclusively on ISR, but the dearth of such capabilities in Iraq and Syria routinely leaves the CAOC with far fewer targets to strike than aircraft/weapons to strike them. The problem is especially keen when ISIS conducts simultaneous offensive operations in two or more locations, stretching coalition ISR too thin to support all of the most critical requirements.

NEAR-TERM OUTLOOK

In Iraq, army and Peshmerga forces will likely continue to retake key terrain around the edges of ISIS-held territory in the coming months, eventually extending government control to much of rural western Iraq. Yet the Iraqi army's past track record suggests that it is unlikely to fully secure those rural areas or, more important, drive ISIS from Sunni urban centers. Over time, this could lead to strategic stalemate characterized by a chain of ISIS-controlled urban islands surrounded by a sea of contested desert and river-valley lines of communication.

In Syria, ISIS is keeping with its modus operandi of avoiding enemy strength and instead probing for and exploiting areas of weakness. With its Iraq offensive halted and its efforts to destroy the Kobane enclave thwarted, the group is shifting its efforts in two directions: toward Aleppo in order to eliminate the more moderate Syrian opposition, and into southern Syria where it previously had little or no presence. This will likely result in more situations like Kobane, where isolated pockets of resistance struggle to hold on against heavy ISIS attacks. It will also decrease the number of moderate rebel groups as various brigades join ISIS, whether to survive or to ensure they are on the winning side.

NEXT STEPS

ISIS owes its survival to two factors. First, a power vacuum caused by the Assad regime's retreat from large portions of eastern Syria and the subsequent collapse of Iraqi security forces in the Sunni west of Iraq enabled ISIS to morph from a small, urban terrorist group to a de facto state. Second, the toleration of Sunni populations hostile to government forces allowed ISIS to hold large swaths of territory in both countries with relatively few fighters. These are issues that airpower cannot solve alone.

As for reconstituting and reprofessionalizing Iraqi and Kurdish forces and select Syrian rebel forces, the prospects for success are mixed. U.S. efforts along those lines might eventually pay off in Iraq, but only to a limited degree. And such efforts are unlikely to bear significant fruit in Syria anytime soon, at least in part because the number of forces being trained is too small to decisively change the dynamic on the ground.

Additional progress will require patience and the more creative use of airpower. Increasing the number of bombs dropped without increasing ISR and Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTACs) would only increase civilian casualties, risking unnecessary strain on the coalition and driving local Sunnis further into the ISIS orbit. Consequently, the first step is to increase ISR on the ground and/or team more JTACs with Iraqi forces.

As described above, killing more ISIS fighters will not eliminate the factors that enabled the group's rise in the first place. Thus, the coalition campaign should be expanded by stepping up efforts to debunk the group's image of invincibility among local Sunni populations and exploit its self-defeating tendencies. The longer ISIS controls an area, the more its nihilistic ideology turns the local population against it, as demonstrated by recent tribal revolts in eastern Syria and western Iraq. A successful tribal uprising is the group's greatest fear, so ISIS fighters tend to quickly crush any such resistance before it can achieve critical mass. If a tribal revolt were to succeed, even locally, it could create a powerful precedent with ripple effects across other ISIS-controlled areas.

Creating such an opportunity requires increased air support to Sunnis who are fighting ISIS. In Iraq, this should take the form of increased efforts to support local tribes against ISIS, sending the message that it is possible to resist the group. This would force ISIS to divert critical resources from operations elsewhere, relieving pressure on U.S.-supported Syrian rebels struggling to hold on to Aleppo and other portions of northern Syria. It would also discredit the narrative that coalition strikes seek to weaken the Sunnis rather than defeat ISIS, perhaps encouraging broader resistance against the group.

Providing direct air support in Syria is more complicated. Most of the coalition seeks the Assad regime's removal, so there is no government force with which to partner. And the various opposition factions are either ideologically

unpalatable to Western states or so poorly organized and equipped that they will be unable to undertake offensive operations against ISIS for the foreseeable future. Consequently, the air campaign should focus on two lines of effort: (1) degrading critical ISIS capabilities such as logistics, training, and command-and-control, and (2) preserving moderate rebel capabilities by providing certain factions with air support when they are under attack by ISIS. This would further attrite the group's combat power, undermine its image, and preserve a base of operations for training moderate rebels.

CHALLENGES AND RISKS IN IRAQ

In the short term, the strategy outlined above may require coalition intelligence and Special Forces to engage with Iraqi tribesmen, increasing the risk of U.S. casualties. Additionally, creating a Sunni armed force outside Iraq's security establishment risks perpetuating the country's sectarian conflicts after ISIS is defeated. Yet if Baghdad recognizes these units in a manner similar to the Peshmerga, they could eventually become the core around which a Sunni National Guard is built, speeding efforts to achieve long-term security in the Sunni areas west of Baghdad.

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