

ISIS Military Success: A Multiple Threat

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Brief Analysis

The United States should be launching selective airstrikes on ISIS sooner rather than later, particularly where the movement attacks key dams and minority populations.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has demonstrated remarkable strategic mobility and operational speed in a series of offensives over the past few weeks across its operating areas in Iraq and Syria. These have included:

- Attacks against Syrian government installations, including tightening its grip on the Syrian oil business.
- A wave of car bombs and suicide bombings that penetrated deep into Shiite Arab neighborhoods of Baghdad, demonstrating the organization's reach and robust support networks even outside Sunni areas.
- Twin offensives against the left flank (at Jalula, near the Iranian border) and right flank (at Sinjar and the Mosul dam, in the Syria-Iraq-Turkey tri-border area) of the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG's) defense line. In the latter location, ISIS appears to have perpetrated massacres of ethnic Yazidi civilians.

These apparently diffuse military efforts may be consistent parts of a well-planned next stage of ISIS's campaign.

A Focus on Baghdad?

IISIS -- which recently changed its name to the Islamic State (IS) when it declared a caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria -- has no chance of capturing Baghdad but may be seeking to isolate the city. This likely accounts for the heavy fighting to the north and south of the capital, with the west, including Falluja, already under ISIS dominance. If the major communication lines could be cut, in particular if bridges could be blown up -- and ISIS has shown a knack for such combat engineering feats in actions to the north of Baghdad -- then the city could be effectively deprived of foodstuffs, fuel, and potable water, and the population "trapped." This almost happened in 2004 despite the presence of more than 100,000 U.S. troops in country.

Simultaneously, ISIS could launch another, possibly even larger, wave of bombings than that seen in June and July to terrorize the population already under siege. This might be intended to force the Iraqi government to withdraw forces from strategic areas -- from the Haditha dam to the Bayji refinery -- to defend Baghdad, and if ISIS were "fortunate," such terrorist pressure could trigger an outburst of Shiite militia terror against the city's remaining Sunni Arab population, as seen in 2006-2007. For ISIS, such an outcome would be a strategic game changer, provoking exactly what the group wants -- a regional Shiite-Sunni conflict, with ISIS increasingly serving as the champion of the Sunni majority. This scenario may seem unlikely, but ISIS has not grown and won so rapidly by following logical scenarios.

The Kurdish Front

During the fall of Mosul in June, the KRG withdrew its troops more efficiently than the Iraqi army but did not really fight ISIS. Thereafter, the KRG not only alerted forces along its preconflict "green line" borders but expanded this front line, occupying Kirkuk and the significant oil fields to its north, and pushing south into multiethnic areas from Sinjar on the Syrian border to Jalula near Iran. This "forward" defense, however, involved seizing areas with significant Sunni Arab populations, some of whose members harbored sympathies for either ISIS or more traditional Iraqi Sunni Arab insurgent groups allied with ISIS. It is exactly here where ISIS has made dramatic gains in the past several days, although its surge forward in Jalula appears to have been checked, and the KRG has announced a counterattack toward Sinjar. Still, ISIS's record of holding conquered territory is quite good, and even the peshmerga will have its hands full taking territory back.

Why, then, did the peshmerga not hold on to part of its newly won territory? Unlike many Iraqi army units, peshmerga members are well motivated and, in most cases, well trained and disciplined. They are loyal to their regional government and are the shield between the KRG and insurgent areas. One explanation is that ISIS, while not numerous, is tactically strong, and nothing succeeds in war more than prior success, of which ISIS has had much in recent months. The group is awash in captured equipment, the ammunition stocks of several Iraqi divisions, and apparently considerable cash from oil smuggling, donations, and other sources. The Kurds had certain disadvantages as well. They are spread out on a front of roughly a thousand kilometers. Many of their units have either been hastily called up or redeployed from their usual sectors of the front. In Jalula, they were fighting in a largely Arab area where the majority did not support them. Geography is against them in Sinjar -- an isolated salient that extends deep into ISIS-held terrain, perilously close to ISIS's Syria strongholds.

Despite the persistent political fights between Erbil and Baghdad over power sharing and oil revenues, some interesting alliances are emerging in the effort to stop ISIS. According to press reporting, Baghdad has offered air support for the Kurds. Thus, Iraqi air force aircraft have been able to use Kirkuk airfield, under peshmerga control, to strike ISIS. Shiite militias also reportedly have negotiated to fly forces into Sulaymaniyah for transfer to Shiite villages to the south of the Kurdish line of control. Meanwhile, multiple reports document Syrian Kurdish reinforcements from the Democratic Union Party (PYD) fighting against ISIS in the Sinjar area, despite policy differences that have troubled relations between many Iraqi and Syrian Kurds for several years.

IMPACT ON U.S. INTERESTS

IISIS continues to show strategic acumen. Aside from dealing sharp setbacks to the Kurds and the campaign around and in Baghdad, the group focuses attention on key infrastructure -- dams, refineries, oil fields -- that can be used to generate cash and exert political control and influence. In some cases, this infrastructure can be used as weapons. For instance, seizing the Haditha dam could allow it to cut considerable electricity to Anbar province and beyond. Opening the dams, as it has done once near Falluja, could present downstream flood danger in Shiite areas. Moreover, by seizing transportation nodes such as Sinjar and Tal Afar, ISIS ensures its ability to rapidly move its

forces and supplies back and forth between the Syrian and Iraqi "fronts." Finally, while ISIS's top goal remains isolating Baghdad as a "station" on the road to a regional sectarian war, the group surely covets Kirkuk and its oil fields, the only world-class oil fields near the Sunni Arab parts of the country.

All of these developments should be of utmost concern to the U.S. government. After all, on June 19 the president declared that an ISIS state cannot be tolerated, and dispatched what has now grown to almost eight hundred military personnel to assist the Iraqis and protect the Americans remaining in Baghdad. The United States now has two military intelligence fusion cells operating, in Baghdad and Erbil. Enhanced U.S. intelligence support and combat advising are doubtless much appreciated, but more needs to be done. Washington is providing munitions to the Iraqi army but not to the Kurds. Yet the Kurds need ammunition, particularly for the Soviet-era tanks and artillery they seized in 2003. They need more and newer heavy weapons as well, plus the training and ammunition to make these weapons effective.

At least as important, the United States should be striking ISIS from the air when it threatens America's erstwhile Sunni tribal allies around the Haditha dam and Ramadi, or when it attacks peshmerga positions, or when ISIS threatens Baghdad. Such actions do not mean serving as Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian air force: until the political situation in Baghdad is clearer, such strikes must assuredly be limited and husbanded for high-value ISIS targets. But near-term selective U.S. strikes would increase Washington's clout and leverage with Iraqis of all sectarian and ethnic stripes. The United States is striking al-Qaeda elements throughout the broader Middle East, from Pakistan to Libya and Somalia. Given that top U.S. officials, including National Intelligence director James Clapper Jr. and Attorney General Eric Holder, have described the growing dangers posed by ISIS, strikes should not be delayed for even a moment longer.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Iraq and Turkey. ❖

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