



‘DEFEAT INTO VICTORY’: LESSONS FOR REBUILDING THE IRAQ SECURITY FORCES FROM MODERN ARAB MILITARY SUCCESS STORIES

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January 21, 2015

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The Problem

Defeat of large Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) formations at hands of relatively small ISIS forces in June 2014 the result of deep-seated, longstanding problems:

- Politicization
- Cronyism, corruption, and poor leadership
- Inadequate training
- Poor maintenance practices
- Lack of motivation/will to fight

U.S. and its allies are now undertaking a major train and equip effort to rebuild and retrain the ISF and *peshmerga*, to set conditions for offensive ops to retake areas seized by ISIS

- 9 ISF brigades, 3 *peshmerga* brigades, 1 Tribal Security Force brigade

Experiences of several modern Arab militaries provide insight into factors that have been most important in turning around defeated armies and transforming defeat into victory—or at least a degree of success



Cultural Constraints on Arab Military Performance*

Large, conventional Arab militaries have repeatedly failed when attempting modern maneuver warfare due to poor tactical leadership, weak command and control, and inability to employ combined arms

- Key shortcomings: lack of initiative, inability to improvise, lack of flexibility, inability to work well together
- Caveat: these generalizations seem to hold for large, mass Arab armies; conversely, some hybrid actors, such as Hizballah, Hamas, and ISIS have demonstrated greater initiative and flexibility—albeit mainly at the small unit level

These problems are rooted in Arab culture:

- Emphasis on conformance to group norms and deference to authority discourages initiative, and leads to inaction in the absence of explicit orders
- An education system that emphasizes rote memorization rather than critical reasoning skills results in a tendency to adhere to “school solutions,” rather than independent thought, action, and innovation
- Preoccupation with honor/saving face results in suppression of unpleasant facts, inaccurate reporting, and a reluctance to accept responsibility

These culturally conditioned patterns of behavior have crippled the tactical performance of Arab militaries

- Junior officers demonstrate little initiative, creativity, flexibility, or capacity for independent action
- Passivity, adherence to the letter of an order, inability to improvise, and a sluggish pace of operations
- Inaccurate reporting means that planning and operations are often based on inaccurate information

Arab militaries fared best when they adapted foreign doctrines and practices to conform to their own cultural proclivities and organization preferences, and their specific operational requirements

- This is because military doctrines are not “universal,” but reflect the prevailing cultural traits of the society they emerge from, and thus may not “fit” another country’s circumstances

*This and other parts of this briefing dealing with Arab culture and military effectiveness draw heavily on Michael Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack, “Armies of Snow and Armies of Sand: The Impact of Soviet Military Doctrine on Arab Militaries,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 55, No. 4, Autumn 2001, 549-578.



Case Study #1: Egypt in 1973 war

Sadat considered continued Israel occupation of the Sinai intolerable, and had repeatedly vow to liberate it

Initial Soviet-Egyptian war planning envisaged a crossing, breakthrough, and exploitation to seize all of Sinai ('Granite') IAW Soviet doctrine

- This was unrealistic, given Egyptian capabilities and limitations, and the overall military balance

Sadat appointed LTG Ahmed Ismail Ali as Minister of War (10/72) to energize the planning effort and develop a more modest and realistic 'Egyptian' warfighting strategy ('High Minarets') IAW Sadat's concept:

- Egypt needed only to retain toehold on east bank of canal to discredit Israeli security assumptions, and revive the diplomatic process from a position of strength

War plan developed without Soviet input and diverged from Soviet doctrine; embodied a uniquely Egyptian limited war approach

- A set-piece offensive to seize a bridgehead on the far side of canal, followed by transition to the defense, and defeat of Israeli counterattacks by attrition, rather than maneuver

Extensive scripting of crossing at all levels obviated need for initiative, improvisation, or coordination of combined arms operations

- Every soldier had only one mission which he learned to perform by heart
- Operations rehearsed incessantly, until every member of every unit knew exactly what to do in each phase
- Entire crossing operation rehearsed 35 times prior to the war

Relied on SIGINT derived from Israeli comms to assess accuracy of blue force (Egyptian) SITREPS

After 1967, made efforts to increase proportion of enlisted with high school degrees, and drafted college students for first time to increase quality of junior leadership

- Also made efforts to soften class divide between enlisted and officers

Innovative, creative use of antitank and air defense systems (RPG-7, AT-3, SA-7, ZSU-23/4, SA-6) to neutralize Israel's main strengths: armor and airpower

Egypt (w/help of US wartime diplomacy) achieved its war aims, setting stage for recovery of rest of Sinai through negotiations



Case Study #2: Iraq during Iran-Iraq War

Iraqi invasion of Iran had bogged down into a bloody war of attrition; Iran, with a much larger population and its culture of 'jihad and martyrdom' seemed better suited to this kind of war

Following the loss of Faw (2/1986) and facing the prospect of defeat, Saddam agreed to abandon Iraq's static attrition-based defense, and permitted his generals to conduct limited offensive operations

- Saddam also agreed to cede greater control of operations to his generals, accelerating a trend started in 1982 of depoliticizing the military, promoting officers based on merit, and giving his generals greater latitude

Launched new mobilization, including drafting of college students, to improve quality of junior leaders and to man expanded Republican Guard Corps

- Republican Guard transformed into a large, capable offensive strike force, expanding from 7 to 28 brigades

Iraqi general staff came up with a uniquely 'Iraqi' approach involving extensive scripting of set-piece offensive operations to obviate need for initiative, improvisation, or coordination of combined arms operations

- Every soldier had only one mission which he learned to perform by heart
- Operations rehearsed incessantly, until every member of every unit knew exactly what to do by rote
- Operations planned to last several days duration to limit potential for unexpected developments that could upset the plan
- A departure from their eclectic, but heavily British-influenced doctrine; possibility of Egyptian advice/influence?

Superb planning, modest improvements in tactical performance, massive conventional/CW artillery fires, and vast numerical advantages during the 1988 offensives allowed Iraq to regain lost ground

- This, combined with Iraq's air campaign against economic targets and the renewal of the war of the cities, threatened Iran with the collapse of its war effort, enabling Iraq to finally achieve the cease-fire it had pursued since 1982



Case Study #3: Hamas in 2014 Gaza war

Hamas evolved from a group that conducted terrorism exclusively, to a hybrid organization engaged in both terrorism *and* conventional combat

It turned in lackluster performances in its 2008-2009 and 2012 wars with Israel

- Avoided decisive engagement in 2008-2009 war; Israeli ground forces stayed out of Gaza in 2012 war

It has faced significant challenges to its ability to inflict casualties on Israel and to avoid painful losses

- After Israel successfully neutralized its ability to conduct suicide bombings (thanks to intel, targeted raids, checkpoints, and the security barrier), Hamas developed home-made rockets
 - Hamas rockets still a nuisance that can severely disrupt life in Israel, and mortars still pose a threat to Israeli border communities
- Hamas's military and political leadership have proven vulnerable to targeted killings

In response, Hamas developed a strategy that turned Israel's preferred mode of operation against it:

- Created an 'urban hedgehog' (tunnel complexes and urban strongpoints) which made major Israeli ground incursions unacceptably risky
- Built offensive tunnels and large mortar and rocket forces to take the battle to Israel's civilian population and military
- Forced Israel to rely more heavily on standoff firepower, which could be expected to produce significant numbers of civilian casualties
- But the more Israel relied on standoff firepower, the more it damaged its international standing, and the more sympathy it generated for the Palestinians—at least in places such as Europe

Tunnels dramatically reduced Israel's ISR, firepower, and maneuver advantages

- Protected Hamas's leadership and combat forces
- Enabled Hamas fighters to close with and engage the enemy from protected/covered/concealed positions

Fighters given single task to master and perform (antitank, urban defense, tunnel assault, and rocket teams)

New Hamas approach has yielded a better tactical performance, though strategic outcome still unclear

- Israeli KIA as an measure of effectiveness: 2008-2009: 13; 2012: 2; 2014: 72

Perhaps most importantly, Hamas shaped the narrative to create perception of Israeli heavy-handedness abroad, while attempting to produce an "image of victory" for its domestic audience

- Avoided having fighters photographed, so only images from the war were of Israeli bombardment of Gaza, and Palestinian civilian casualties



Lessons for Iraq: 2015

Arab militaries did best when they adapted foreign doctrines and concepts to their own cultural, organizational, and operational needs, and developed their own unique approaches tailored to the challenges they faced

Success depends on an intimate understanding of the enemy, his strengths and weaknesses, and his way of war, and then developing a viable, locally-developed strategy to defeat him (see appendix)

Civil-military relations are key: if you don't get the politics right, you won't get the military piece right

- The military needs to be insulated from political interference to succeed; this is especially important given the nature of the fight the ISF is engaged in and the perception of sectarian bias that has hindered the ISF in the past
 - This is a major reason that the ISF is in the fix it is currently in
- This is going to be hard, because of Iraqi politics, the limited U.S. role, and Iranian influence over the ISF and Shiite militias

Don't try to turn the ISF in a clone of the U.S. Army, but help it train/fight in a manner suited to its culture and its operational requirements, and focus on narrow competencies needed to defeat ISIS

- This should not preclude efforts to create a small number of well-rounded units capable of operating as we do... after all, some ISF units (e.g., Iraqi SOF) are very capable, while ISIS seems to have mastered its own unique brand of maneuver warfare

Help the ISF compensate for its weaknesses, and train/fight in ways that recognize the impact of culture (I):

- Heavily scripted, set-piece operations
- Exhaustive rehearsals on detailed mockups of actual objectives with emphasis on the rote fulfillment of essential tasks, including:
 - Assaults on strongpoints and built-up areas, followed by rapid consolidation of captured positions;
 - IED clearance and counter-SVBIED drills to facilitate consolidation on the objective and to fend off ISIS counterattacks;
 - Preplanned/rehearsed protective fires along likely enemy axes of approach to break up potential ISIS counterattacks;
 - Preplanned /rehearsed resupply of forward ISF units following seizure of objectives to quash fears of logistical abandonment;
 - Preplanned/rehearsed commitment of mobile reserves to break up ISIS counterattacks and interdict ISIS reinforcements;
 - Mobility and counter-mobility drills for organic/attached engineering units to preserve momentum of ISF attacks;



Lessons for Iraq: 2015 (Cont'd)

Help the ISF compensate for its weaknesses, train/fight in ways that recognize the impact of culture (II):

- Detailed planning that leaves little to the initiative of junior leaders and which leaves little need for improvisation
- Heavy reliance on mass, numbers, and overwhelming fires to defeat the enemy
- Explore potential of SIGINT derived from ISIS comms as an alternative source of information concerning blue force (ISF) disposition and capabilities
- Employment of weapons in unconventional/nontraditional ways to neutralize enemy strengths

The emergence of ISF formations capable of maneuver warfare will be a very long-term process; the above approach is more likely to produce better near-term results for most ISF units

- This does not preclude emergence of a small number of select units capable of implementing mission-type orders and functioning to a relatively high standard

Restore the confidence of the ISF by a series of small victories, building up to more ambitious operations

- Iraq's political leadership will likely push for big operations before the ISF is ready; U.S. advisors should push back

Achilles' heel of armies dependent on scripted, set-piece operations: when enemy activity forces them to diverge from carefully scripted plans, they are usually unable to improvise and regain the initiative

- And the enemy always gets a vote

Professionalize the military by mobilizing more high school and college graduates to improve the quality of junior leadership, and ensuring promotion on the basis of competence rather than loyalty

- U.S. should emphasize competence and professional qualifications, rather than "sectarian balance," as the former will more or less ensure the latter



Appendix: Toward a Successful Strategy Against ISIS in Iraq

ISIS has considerable strengths and weaknesses—but the U.S. currently lacks the ability to exploit many of the latter...

Strengths

- Seasoned leadership and effective military organization
- Resonant cause (revival of the Caliphate)
- Powerful propaganda machine (social media and Youtube)
- Aura of invincibility created by series of impressive victories
- Relatively well-equipped forces
- Adaptability
- Interior lines of communication

Weaknesses

- Overstretched forces—cannot adequately defend all areas it controls
- Ineffective governance/reliance on terror to ensure control
- Tendency to overreach—impose draconian version of Sharia
- Potentially fractious coalition—not all allies share its agenda
- Vulnerable to air strikes if they mass to attack
- Insufficient finances to govern 6-8 million people?
- Isolated and landlocked—lines of communications vulnerable to attack

Challenge is to neutralize strengths, exploit weaknesses

- Aura of invincibility dented by series of small ISIS defeats in Iraq? More must be done to transform psychological environment
- ISIS has no major external source of arms, relies exclusively on battlefield recovery for heavy weapons
- ISIS already alienating many erstwhile supports
 - Local uprisings have already occurred, many residents chafing under its rule
 - But most unwilling to risk rising up without confidence they will succeed, and a better alternative to ISIS

Defeat Mechanism

- Overextend ISIS through attrition and attacks on multiple fronts, rendering it vulnerable to internal uprisings and external attack
- Stir unrest in areas ISIS controls by limiting funds available to it for governance and provision of services (which is not its priority anyhow)
 - Lifting the pall of fear that prevents Iraqis from rising up against ISIS will be a major challenge
- Transform the psychological environment by creating perception that defeat of ISIS is inevitable, inducing ISIS's allies to defect, deterring prospective foreign fighters from joining it, and encouraging subjects to rise against it

Focus on fomenting uprisings against ISIS, rather than relying too heavily on a military-on-military fight

- Will Iraq's zero-sum political culture preclude the political deals that could make this happen?

Syrian piece of the strategy remains an unresolved matter, as success in Iraq not assured if ISIS retains its Syrian safe-haven

Source: Michael Eisenstadt, *Defeating ISIS: A Strategy for a Resilient Enemy and an Intractable Conflict* (Washington Institute, 2014)



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