

Global Security Briefing – April 2016

## Islamic State: In Retreat or Transition?

Paul Rogers

### Summary

Twenty months after the beginning of the US-led coalition air war against the self-styled Islamic State, the movement is definitively in retreat in Iraq and Syria and the US is increasingly, if secretly, pursuing a combined air and ground campaign. Yet IS is proving adaptive in holding core territory, not least around Mosul and Raqqa, in co-opting armed Islamist groups beyond the Levant, and in attacking Western and Russian interests beyond the battlefield. As per its “remaining and expanding” goals, the expansion of IS’s propaganda war to mobilise supporters globally is ever more crucial as its ability to remain is threatened.

### Introduction

Following the rapid spread of ISIS across northern Iraq during 2014 and the proclamation of its Caliphate that June, there was a sense in which it had exceeded its capabilities by the beginning of last year. On 8 February 2015, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry argued that the Islamic State (IS) was becoming over-extended and that the coalition was now “on the road” to defeating it. The [ORG briefing for that month](#) analysed the position and came to a less optimistic conclusion:

While IS has suffered some reversals, its core challenge remains the same and it has recently had further extreme Islamist factions pledge allegiance, including in Libya, Egypt, Philippines and Afghanistan. It is believed to be still attracting many hundreds of recruits every month from across the region and beyond. Perhaps of greatest concern is that if there are increasing tensions in communities in Western Europe, not least France, then the political and security response will exacerbate marginalisation among vulnerable groups. In that respect, the aftermath of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, though having little or no connection with IS, may have a significance that is currently being missed.

Over a year later, we are now hearing frequent reports that IS really is at last in retreat and that there are even prospects for the recapture of Iraq’s second city, Mosul. Iraqi Army units are gathering for this purpose, supported by US aircraft, ground-based artillery and special forces, and some villages outside of Mosul have already been freed.

This briefing revisits the question of the status and viability of IS, concluding that it is under the heaviest pressure it has experienced since at least the 2011 drawdown of US forces from Iraq, yet has a capability that should not be underestimated and is also developing a more sustained ability to take the conflict to its opponents.

## Reversals for IS

The US-led coalition's air war against IS started in August 2014 and over the past 20 months has involved at least 10,000 individual air raids, many of them on multiple targets. The US Department of Defence claims that the war has killed 28,000 IS paramilitaries, although there is no independent verification of the numbers, or whether many of these are supporters rather than fighters. There are certainly indications of civilian casualties but the extent of these is far from clear.

Estimates for the total number of paramilitary fighters within IS vary widely, with figures of around 30,000 commonly given although Kurdish military sources have quoted far higher figures of 100,000 or more. US intelligence agencies have published figures for the number of recruits joining IS from outside Iraq and Syria, with these being of the order of 15,000 in mid-2014 but rising to 25-30,000 more recently, including those killed there or since returned home.

Whatever the precise figures, there is no doubt that IS has been suffering serious losses and that these may not have been sufficiently made up with new recruits from the wider region and beyond. What is also clear is that IS has lost territory, most seriously in Iraq but also in Syria. In the former case the major losses have been Tikrit and also the symbolically important provincial capital of Anbar Province – Ramadi. These both fell to Iraqi government forces supported by Shi'a militias, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps elements and coalition air power. In Syria, IS recently lost control of Palmyra, although this was to the forces of the Assad regime supported by Russian air power.

US sources also report considerable success in destroying large stores of currency, much of it previously looted from Iraqi banks in 2014, and there have been unconfirmed reports that IS is not always able to meet the wages bills for its forces.

Overall, the view in the United States is that IS really is in retreat and that the prospects are good for its eventual collapse, even if there is considerable reluctance to suggest a time frame.

What is also clear is that the United States is substantially expanding its own commitment to the conflict. This includes stationing B-52 heavy bombers in the region at the Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, and the deployment of a large Marine Corps amphibious task group to the Gulf, a force substantially larger than the one it replaces.

Marines are already operating a powerful forward artillery position within Iraq, supporting Iraq Army units moving towards Mosul, with more such firebases being considered. Furthermore, President Obama is likely to increase the personnel available to Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) for actions in Iraq and Syria. These last two elements indicate strongly that the idea that the war against IS does not involve significant numbers of "boots on the ground" is wrong – a combined air **and** ground war is now in progress.

## IS's Current Status

While IS has clearly suffered reversals, there are a number of other factors to take into account, partly in relation to the conflict in Iraq and Syria, but also concerning IS capabilities beyond the immediate region. In this regard, the recent attacks in Western Europe may be especially relevant.

In Iraq and Syria, the loss of Ramadi, Tikrit, Palmyra and other towns has been serious but the actual process of taking territory from IS has been both slow and difficult, mainly due to the tenacity of the IS paramilitaries and the readiness of many of them to die for their cause. Time and again early Iraqi Army successes have become stalled, with recent moves towards Mosul thoroughly rebuffed. Even where territory has been gained, a pattern has emerged of IS paramilitaries successfully harrying Iraqi Army units for weeks afterwards. More generally the ability to survive a remarkably intensive air assault has surprised many analysts and it is clear that the very process has been a learning experience for IS itself, with ready changes of tactics introduced to limit the effectiveness of the air assault.

An [earlier ORG briefing](#) pointed to the manner in which IS had originated and evolved with a hard core of paramilitaries who had survived the long and violent “shadow war” against JSOC in Iraq between 2004 and 2008. Many of these have been at the core of the IS paramilitary leadership and it is highly likely that they have combined their earlier experience with more recently acquired knowledge of how to survive the air assault. There are indications, for example, that “targets of opportunity” are becoming less common for coalition forces, with this often limiting the impact of air attacks.

None of this means that IS can resist the coalition indefinitely, but the movement has already adapted to the war and may have been planning for just these kinds of reversals for some time. Two of the main adaptations have been to work more assiduously to improve links with other Islamist movements, whether in the Caucasus, West or East Africa or South Asia and also to develop a major base in Libya. There, IS has taken full advantage of the disorder and lack of government that has evolved since the western intervention in 2011, and has an estimated 5,000 to 6,500 paramilitaries based there. As a result there are now prospects for the West substantially extending the war against IS to Libya, even though a [recent ORG report](#) has warned of the problems that may result.

Even more significant than this, though, is the decision of the IS leadership to take the war to the coalition on its home territory. It now appears that this decision may have been taken two years ago rather than being a recent response to military reversals in Iraq and Syria. From early 2014 onwards there is evidence that IS began the process of encouraging the planning of attacks overseas, either through stimulating nationals or by a process of direct planning and training within Syria and, later, Iraq and Libya.

The results of this policy became evident a year ago, first with the attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis, then with the killing of mainly British tourists at the Tunisian resort of Sousse, the downing of a Russian airliner over Sinai and more recently with the substantial and highly organised attacks in Paris and Brussels. Other incidents in Sinai, Jakarta and California may also be indirectly linked.

There are two main motives for the attacks. One is to demonstrate to existing and potential supporters what the movement is capable of doing at some remove from its base in Syria, while also having an impact on the wider Muslim community, the *Umma*, not least to instil a degree of fear in the community of actions that IS can and does take against its Muslim opponents. The main aim, though, is to incite community tensions, especially in Western states with substantial Muslim minorities. By exacerbating anti-Muslim bigotry the intention is to affect those minorities, make them feel less secure and increase the possibility of a small number joining the cause.

Attacking community cohesion in Western states looks likely to be a core element of IS strategy in the coming months and years. By doing so it hopes directly to affect the stability of states but may also be aided by a parallel development that relates to the wars across the Middle East. Over the past year there have been huge increases in refugee flows into South East Europe, causing great problems for recipient countries, especially Greece, and countries on the route to Western Europe. The European Union has struggled to respond to this and some countries have therefore taken unilateral action, often in response to domestic antagonism towards the refugees who are seen simply as migrants.

Quite apart from the humanitarian consequences, the significance of this – of razor wire barriers stretching along borders, water cannon, tear gas and all the other paraphernalia of public order control – is that it is a propaganda coup for a group such as IS. Extensive media coverage across the Middle East, not least on 24-hour TV news channels, reinforces what are seen as callous European attitudes, especially from countries actively engaged in killing many thousands of Muslims in air strikes. Meanwhile, IS assiduously propagandises its world view of itself as the one true defender of Islam under attack from Crusader forces.

While the response to this must come primarily from Western states, it is essential that many states in the region, especially the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, should be encouraged to reverse the lack of emphasis they place on the threat to their own societies from IS. The difficult relationship with Iran, especially between Riyadh and Tehran, is a diversion that is welcomed by the IS leadership.

## Conclusion

While IS is under substantial pressure in Syria and Iraq, primarily because of an intense if largely unreported air war, it has retained considerable resilience and competence. What is more significant, though, is that the conflict is extending outwards, not just with developments in North Africa but, even more significantly, towards Western Europe.

The problem of IS is still all too frequently seen as one depending primarily on a military solution but it may well be that political factors, not least domestic European politics, will turn out to be even more important. As IS targets community relations in Europe so it becomes far more important for European governments and communities to work intensively to maintain and enhance community relations. Furthermore, the refugee pressures from the Middle East may have abated a little in the past three months but this should in no way distract European governments from the need to recognise that much more coherent and human-orientated strategies will be vital in the future.

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### About the Author

**Paul Rogers** is Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group and Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford. His '[Monthly Global Security Briefings](#)' are available from our website. His new book *Irregular War: ISIS and the New Threats from the Margins* will be published by I B Tauris in June 2016. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please **consider making a donation to ORG**, if you are able to do so.

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