The Decline of ISIS
and the Failing of Western Intelligence
By Jason Higgins

Summary: The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has garnered the status as the predominant threat affecting regional stability as the accepted face of modern Islamic radicalism. ISIS has been viewed as the primary force destabilizing the Persian Gulf region and the supposed successor to al Qaeda. However, the true threat of ISIS has been greatly exaggerated by the western press, public hysteria and its own self-promotion.

Strategically it is an organization that has enjoyed marginal success in the regional conflict in Syria and Iraq, currently suffers dwindling support, and has largely isolated itself from the greater Sunni Islamic fundamentalist movement. In the wake of all the attention being given to ISIS, what is seemingly going unnoticed is that the al Qaeda franchise continues to operate as the primary global unifier of the Sunni radical movement. Ayman al-Zawahiri is still recognized as the central and spiritual leader[1].

Further, the growing threat of Shia based militias has emerged triumphant in Iraq and are now pouring into Syria in support of the Assad regime. Perhaps of more concern should be the Iranian government that is providing most of the support. This suggests that Shia fundamentalism will quickly ascend as the dominant threat in the region.

Situation: ISIS has been only marginally successful as a movement and largely inflated by its own self-generated media campaign. Its ambition has been to develop as the dominating force of the overall jihadi movement. This has led to many counter-productive results.

ISIS has attempted to usurp al-Qaeda's position in an ideological campaign issuing several statements against al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. They proclaim him to be an antiquated relic out of touch with the current movement. Lacking any serious response from other jihadi groups who have refused to take up the ISIS banner, ISIS has elevated their message. They threaten to bring all jihadi groups into their fold by *means of the sword.*

The assertions by ISIS have led to a serious backlash from the greater jihadi community. First, al-Qaeda has stated its denial of ISIS's campaign of being for a holy caliph, arguing it is not at all legitimate. Next, the continued attacks on al-Zawahiri, still a highly-respected figure, followed by threats of war to anyone who did not submit to ISIS, has only served to enrage other jihadi groups. This has prompted calls to other Muslims not to pledge allegiance to the group.

During its rise as a separate entity, ISIS enjoyed the recruitment of large numbers of foreign fighters and even acquired large areas of captured territory. Yet despite early successes, they still

---

[1] Lahoud

failed to create any serious disruption within al-Qaeda ranks or gain any group defections[2]. On a military level, the ISIS campaign has equally been more spectacular than realistic.

In Iraq, the initial rise of the Sunni based ISIS organization initiated a response by Iraq's Shia majority. The Shia dominated Iraqi army, with support of several quickly organized Shia militias, recovered from initial defeats and have in recent years begun reasserting control and recovering even Sunni dominated areas of the country. They are marching on such ISIS centers as Ramadi, Falluja and Al-Anbar (Israeli Defense).

As of October 2016, Shia militias had launched an assault to the west of Mosul, opening up a new front in the battle to drive ISIL from the country's second city and the group's last major bastion in the country. The coalition of militias, known as the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), had until then not played a heavy part in the fighting, but recently launched offensives indicates a bigger role than many observers had anticipated. The growing significance of the Shia PMUs has led to serious concern. Some had hoped the Popular Mobilisation Units would not play a large role in the battle for Mosul, particularly as Sunni Muslims view them to be just as criminal as ISIL.

The Shia militias are operating outside the control of the Iraqi government. Nor are they responsive to U.S. requests not to participate. Right now the Shia militias remain a wildcard, based on what they've done in Ramadi and Fallujah.

The Iraqi Shia militia announced it plans to cross the border into Syria to fight alongside President Bashar al-Assad after "clearing" ISIL fighters from Iraq[3]. There is growing concern among Kurdish fighters over the developing influence of Shia militia groups in their region.

Kurdish militias such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in northern Iraq have voiced concerns and announced it would not let al-Hashdi al-Shabi, a Shia militia group, settle in the northern Kirkuk province. From the perspective of the Iraqi Kurds, Shia militias like Al-Hashdi al-Shabi intend to increase its numbers and activities in the region[4]. The Shia militias have played a complicated role in Iraq.

Following the fall of Saddam Hussein, Shia fighters that had previously fought the Baath regime were integrated into the reconstituted Iraqi army and the country's police force. However, some also remained militia members and fought a sectarian war with Sunni militants, which reached its apex in 2006. As a result of sectarian warfare and disastrous post-conflict reconstruction, Shia militia that functioned independently of the state became increasingly widespread and powerful.

When ISIS seized control of much of northern and western Iraq, the Shia unified as part of a concerted effort to defend their country and places of worship. To swell the ranks of the anti-IS forces, in the absence of a functioning Iraqi army, Iraq's Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the leading

---

[2] Lahoud
[3] http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/shia-militias-open-front-battle-mosul-161029083620389.html
[4] http://www.worldbulletin.net/news/180131/iraqs-kurdish-party-concerned-about-shia-militias

cleric in the Shia world, issued a religious edict calling on Iraqis to take up arms. Tens of thousands of Shia volunteers, as well as many Sunni tribal fighters, were immediately mobilised as a result to form what is known as the Popular Mobilisation. It was reported that Shia militia comprise up to 120,000 fighters.

Iran has considerable influence over Iraq's Shia militia because of its heavy on-the-ground presence. Iran was the only outside power that deployed advisors and Special Forces in the country when IS took control of Mosul and directly organised the anti-IS offensive[5]. The Syrian front is not yielding better for ISIS.

In more recent times their power has eroded, taking assaults from multiple fronts: Russia, U.S., British, Kurds, Alawite and Sunni Syrians. Consequently, ISIS is rapidly losing control over vast areas of territory including major cities like Manbij. It soon may well lose its base of operations at Al-Raqqah (Israeli Defense). Syria's situation, in reality, has not been as dire as generally perceived.

Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, in the north of Syria, are the country's three largest cities. They are at the core of Syria in every way: politically, culturally, economically and, of course, demographically. Assad's dominance over the Damascus-Homs-Aleppo axis, in addition to the coastal areas, Hama City, large parts of the south, and even a few small pockets in the northeast (Qamishli, Hasakah, and Deir ez-Zor), underscores that Assad remains the central actor of this war.

Assad does exactly rule all of Syria, but retains control of "useful Syria," the potentially economically viable regions encompassing at least two-thirds of the country's population. However, the means of controlling this region is due less to Assad's military forces and more to the militias that have risen in his support.

The "militiafication" of Assad's Syrian state has been going on since the start of the conflict in 2011. It began when so-called Popular Committees were spontaneously spawned or were recruited by intelligence services and pro-Assad businessmen all over Syria, mirroring the mobilization of anti-government demonstrators.

Early in 2011, the government began to use money and services to buy the allegiance of unemployed youth and to distribute guns, cars, and security clearances to trusted loyalists and their families, essentially weaponizing the vast web of client networks constructed over four decades of Assad family rule. Recruits included army families, Baathist true believers, intelligence-backed goon squads, religious minority communities, certain Sunni Arab tribes, and other local interests that either depended on the Assad regime or feared a takeover by the Sunni Arab–dominated rebellion.

---

[5] http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32349379

After 2013, there ensued an influx of highly effective Shia Islamist foreign fighters trained and supported by Iran and its regional proxies. Lebanon's Hezbollah militia is the best known and probably the most important of these groups, but it is far from the only one. Iraqi factions have also sent fighters to Syria[6]. With the gradual decline of ISIS, which is expected to become near irrelevant within the next year or so, the most likely concern will be the issue of the Shia threat that will exist in the aftermath.

Shia militias are quickly moving in to assert themselves as the new dominate entity in this region. Where ISIS existed as an independent entity, even from the greater Sunni jihadist movement, these Shia movements have been backed by and maintain close alliances with Iran. With the concern of the Sunni powers and the Kurds in the Gulf region who have feared growing Iranian influence, the only plausible conclusion will be greater instability[7].

Additional Considerations: The other complication that must be addressed is the problematic situation in regards to both western intelligence and western political leadership. Part of the problem in dealing with the new age of fundamentalist networks is that the entire strategic landscape becomes almost alien to intelligence services created and developed around a mission of operating against other nation-states. Thus, intelligence agencies and the political leadership that guides them succumb too easily to tunnel vision.

Intelligence gathering and analysis have always been a complicated affair that is considered educated guesswork as opposed to the perceived precision of analysis. For example, intelligence reporting on Afghanistan, Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the variety of stateless terrorist networks such as al Qaeda have severely challenged American capabilities. Even in earlier times, the Central Intelligence Agency's inability to predict the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 appears on a list of serious intelligence failures.

The very ability of the Taliban to rise up to fill the power gap left after the withdrawal of the Soviets and then become the staging ground for world jihadism was in no small part due to the inability of western intelligence to meet the challenge. Western intelligence agencies failed to achieve an in- depth understanding of the country's internal complex political and cultural dynamics.

The first attempt to address terrorism from the intelligence community came under the CIA director William Casey when in 1986 he established a counterterrorism center. However, the mission of this unit was to combat terrorists covertly with little concern for intelligence collection and analysis. This approach failed to incorporate an understanding and assessment of just who they were, their capabilities, motivations and overall intentions[8]. International terrorism was taking on geo-political complications.

---

[6] http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215?lang=en
[7] Immerman
[8] Immerman

In 1982, Lebanese Christian militia kidnapped three high ranking Iranian officials 25 miles north of Beirut. This act was followed by a series of abductions, carried out by groups aligned to Iran, of western citizens including the American academic David Dodge. Later in 1988, newly elected Iranian president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, articulated to the U.S. that if they were interested in having the American hostages back, the U.S. needed to instruct the Lebanese Christians to release the Iranian being held captive.

Western intelligence failed to fully grasp the level of significance terrorism was playing[9]. Terrorism was now viewed by intelligence services of the world as a means to engage in proxy warfare by competing nation-states.

President Bill Clinton took the first major steps to address the growing threat of global terrorism when in 1995 he signed Presidential Directive 39. This directive made the Director of Central Intelligence "DCI") responsible for pursuing an "aggressive program of foreign intelligence collection, analysis, counterintelligence and covert action."

He replaced John Deutch with George Tenet as DCI. Deutch favored technological intelligence collection methods over human sources. He shunned the use of any human sources who had any criminal dealings or even possessing criminal records. Tenet immediately ramped up the counterterrorism efforts of the intelligence community.

Under the Clinton presidency the CIA established a special station code named (The Alec Station) to specifically target and track the central figure of the al Qaeda network, Osama bin Laden. Following the 1998 terror attacks on Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, the Clinton administration took a radical step and designated the al Qaeda network as the priority threat over traditional nation-state concerns of Iraq and Afghanistan.

However, despite this new emphasis, the actions of the Clinton administration and the CIA fell short of intended goals. The CIA neither succeeded in penetrating the terror network with any significance nor was it able to develop viable actionable intelligence, as further unpredictable terror attacks continued to occur.

The policy further failed in that its counterterror emphasis was directed almost completely on one group, al Qaeda, despite threats and debilitating attacks that were orchestrated by other terror organizations with absolutely no connection to al Qaeda. In 1996 the terror attacks on the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 U.S. servicemen was carried out by the Lebanon based Hezbollah organization[10]. Hezbollah is also the organization responsible for the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon as well as the abduction of Lebanon CIA station Chief William Buckley and Lieutenant-Colonel Richard Higgins in the 1980s[11]. The ascension of George W. Bush to the presidency reversed the direction of national security concerns.

---

[9] Jaber
[10] Immerman
[11] Jaber

Under president Bush, the national security team dismissed the pursuit of al Qaeda and instead refocused the energies of the intelligence community on Iraq and the Saddam Hussein regime. The security policy emphasis for the Bush administration became nuclear deterrence not terrorism. When the Twin Towers in New York were attacked, the U.S. was quick to respond with an assault of the al Qaeda headquarters country of Afghanistan. However, immediately following the attack, the Bush national security team was interested in refocusing attentions back to Iraq with the unsubstantiated premise that the country maintained close links to the al Qaeda network[12]. Beyond politics, the complication of intelligence gathering in an age of stateless terror networks, was the engrained culture within of the intelligence community.

American intelligence fixated on the immediate threat directly in their purview, but this was not well suited to operate against insurgencies. Within the first few weeks of the second Iraq war, the United States military assumed authority over the Iraqi army and seized control of the capital city of Baghdad. However, the insurgency that emerged several months later plunged the U.S. and its allies into a much longer struggle. Insurgencies became a complicated new dynamic as it became a more fluid with a constantly changing situation: one network gets extinguished but an entirely new one arises to take its place starting the whole process over again.

In the early stages of the insurgency, intelligence collectors on the ground were seeing the rapid transition of the insurgent threat shift from Sunni al Qaeda networks and the like to Shia militias backed with training, funding and equipment from Iran. Yet despite growing evidence of this transition, leadership presiding over intelligence operations in Iraq were inclined to ignore it on the basis that they only saw Sunni insurgents as their concern.

U.S. policy was indifferent in their attitude towards Iran and the Shia. U.S. intelligence staff were pressured by superiors to focus their energies entirely on the Sunni insurgency. They were also pressured to liberally share intelligence with Syrian officials who were longtime allies of Iran. This allowed Iran to build a strong presence in Iraq during the U.S. occupation. Two years after the occupation began, the Shia had replaced the Sunnis as the most prominent threat to coalition forces in Iraq.

The problem with the U.S. intelligence community is that it was never designed to operate against insurgents and terror networks. Its organization and methodology is still rooted in the cold war, targeting its operations to collecting information on other nation-states. It still operates with stove pipe systems of intelligence flow, rigid jurisdictional lines between agencies and departments and tunnel vision that focuses too strongly on the 'immediate threat' and not the future ones emerging in the distance[13]. We operate in a world where terrorist threat priorities vacillate between the different worlds of Sunni and Shia movements. Within these movements individual groups can arise or falter based often on popularity with rank and file adherents and supporters.

---

[12] Immerman
[13] O'hern

Conclusion: In the next year or two it is likely ISIS will deteriorate into irrelevancy while other Sunni terror networks will attempt to emerge as the new face, or al Qaeda will resume the mantle. However, on a strategic level it will be the Shia groups that will present the greater threat. Iraq and Syria will eventually stabilize under Shia rule with the militias playing a more significant role. These Shia militias will not only be battle experienced from the years of civil war. They will also have the backing of Iran who will most likely use them as proxies to operate against the Sunni led countries in the region as well as Israel and the U.S. In the long run bringing Iraq and Syria into Iran's control will aggravate the Sunni powers of the Gulf inevitably creating a more destabilized situation in the region.

Already Israel, as reported in previous reports, is more fearful of a battle-hardened Hezbollah organization. Hezbollah will have learned from its experience fighting ISIS and apply those lessons in a more aggressive strategy. They have often proven their ability to carry out complex and strategically debilitating terror operations. Now they will be able to operate even more dangerously in the region.

Furthermore, as these Shia groups have attracted so many young men to the movement, they will begin to gain an influence. It is likely they will push their operations beyond the immediate region of the Persian Gulf into neighboring countries dominated by Sunni led governments that hold significant Shia populations.

The concern that must be raised is whether western intelligence agencies, that have focused so heavily on Sunni based networks, can effectively acclimate to the Shia terror threat that will host different groups and agendas with over-arching organization. Will the intelligence community be able to reorganize itself to more effectively operate in a world where the enemy changes more quickly from one genre to another; terror networks emerge, grow and fall apart with new ones developing in their stead? Our intelligence community must be able to adapt more quickly while maintaining its ability to deal with traditional nation-states that still pose a threat.

Sources:
http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/shia-militias-open-front-battle-mosul-161029083620389.html
http://www.worldbulletin.net/news/180131/iraqs-kurdish-party-concerned-about-shia-militias
http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215?lang=en
http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32349379
O'hern, Steven K, *The intelligence Wars: Lessons from Bagdad.* Prometheus Books, New York, 2008.
Jabar, Hala, *Hezbollah: Born with a vengeance.* Colombia University Press, New York. 1997.
Gefen, Hannan. *Dealing with the accretions of ISIS.* Israel Defense Issue No. 34 September-October 2016, p68.
Lahoud, Nelly, *The "Islamic State": Between aspirations and realities.* Georgetown Journal of International Affairs.
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University Press, Summer/Fall 2016. P.10-15.
Immerman Richard H. *Intelligence and the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.* Political Science Quarterly: Journal of public and international affairs. Academy of Political science. Fall 216. P 477-501.