



Local conflict or global jihad ? The IS phenomena

by Péter Wagner

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The uniqueness of the Islamic State (IS) lies in its attempt not to capture an already existing state, but rather to create a new one. IS is not a new phenomenon, the roots date back to 2004, when Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi joined the Sunni Arab tribes in Iraq, in their insurgency against the invading US Army. However, in contrast to the majority of Iraqi insurgents, Zarqawi and his followers considered the deepening of the Sunni-Shia division as their major goal, in order to trigger a full-scale sectarian civil war. Zarqawi's organization evolved throughout the years, it has been called al-Qaeda in Iraq, Mujahedeen Shura Council and Islamic State in Iraq. Zarqawi swore loyalty to Osama bin Laden – whom he met personally in Afghanistan in the 1990s – in October 2004.

By 2010, Islamic State in Iraq came to near extinction, but with the uprising in Syria in 2011 it has gained new strength. Another factor which contributed to its resurgence was the Shia government in Iraq starting to alienate the Sunni population. As pressure was increased on the Sunni population and political elite, many turned to the jihadists: not that they would inherently incline towards extremist views, but they saw IS as the only force to protect them from the government. As the the group changed its name to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in 2013, it was signaling that their presence had been extended into Syrian territory. They were fast and successful in conquering land from the Syrian insurgent groups, but avoided confrontation with the Assad regime. Ideological puritanism, religiously grounded rhetoric, and a professional use of the social media have granted substantial popularity to the organization, which was joined by people from more than 100 countries, including members of rival Syrian Islamist groups. The vast oil reserves under IS-controlled territories in Iraq and Syria combined with other sources of revenue (trading antiquities, ransom, taxation) ensure the financial stability of the organization.

Nevertheless, the real strength of IS derives from the fragility of the Iraqi and Syrian states. Whenever sectarian conflicts deepened, IS grew stronger. We can therefore conclude that no military solution in itself can provide a remedy against IS, even if some news from the battlefield seem reassuring.

The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant is currently on the defensive. In the last few months the organization has been defeated on almost all fronts. Most visibly, the Iraqi Kurds' offensive in Sinjar cut the main supply road between the organization's capitals in Syria and Iraq, Raqqa and Mosul respectively. The conglomerate of Shia militias, the Hashed al Shabi or Popular Mobilization Units retook Baiji, the biggest oil refinery in Iraq in October 2015. Their offensive is driving IS slowly from the center of the country towards Mosul and Hawiya.

In the west of the country, Iraqi regular army units have finished surrounding Ramadi by taking the Palestine bridge and hence cutting the last supply line. From now on, the Iraqi Security Forces will clear one neighborhood after another from the IS forces.



In Syria a new military alliance was set up in October 2015. The Syrian Democratic Forces unite Arab, Armenian, Christian and Kurdish militias. The backbone of the SDP is the highly successful and disciplined YPG or People's Protection Units (an offshoot of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK), which led several operations in the past months to clear the easternmost Syrian province, al-Hasakah from the IS. With the latest push, Arab and Kurdish forces are only 35 miles from Raqqa, the terrorist organization's capital in Syria. While the joint Iranian-Russian-Syrian forces' main effort has been to liberate areas under the control of various opposition forces (including the al-Qaeda offshoot Jabhat al Nusra and other radical Islamist Forces), government troops are attacking IS lately around the city of Aleppo and Palmyra.

But as the horrible Paris attacks show, the terrorist organization is far from being defeated. Iraqi intelligence and U.S. officials claimed in October 2015 that IS could still generate 50 million USD per month through selling its oil. According to a report published by the IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre in the same month, IS was able to increase its attacks in the third quarter in 2015, which meant around 1000 separate attacks and 3000 non-militant casualties. IS is still able to strike Baghdad five to six times a day, and is adapting fast to the new realities. After losing the key road between Mosul and Raqqa, the organization moved engineers, workers and road construction vehicles to upgrade secondary roads connecting the two regions under IS rule.

Hungary in the anti-IS coalition

An international coalition (or the anti-IS coalition) was established in September 2014 with General John Allen as the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter IS. The 65-member coalition drew up an elaborate, complex and far-reaching plan, based on five objectives: providing military support to our partners, impeding the flow of foreign fighters, stopping IS's financing and funding, addressing humanitarian crises in the region, and exposing IS's true nature.

The most visible part is the first one. Military trainers from several countries have been deployed to Iraq to train and advise Iraqi and Kurdish forces. Parallely, the international coalition has provided military equipment and ammunition to the Iraqi Security Forces. The US alone offered to provide training and equipment for 12 brigades (9 Iraqi and 3 Kurdish), the Pentagon requested 1,6 billion USD funding for the Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF).

Hungary responded almost immediately to the humanitarian crisis arising after the fall of Mosul in June 2014. The Hungarian government and Hungarian NGOs provided humanitarian aid to the Kurdish region, while the Ministry of Defence deployed 250 tons of ammunition to the Kurdish peshmergas. The government offered 100 scholarships to university students from Iraq. In April 2015, the Hungarian Parliament passed a resolution with two-thirds majority to send up to 150 soldiers to Iraqi Kurdistan.



The mission involves 110 soldiers undertaking military duties in Northern Iraq, with six officers in positions of command – some outside Iraq. Currently 20 Hungarian soldiers train the Kurdish Peshmerga forces at one of three training sites in Atrosh, Dohuk province. 60 Hungarian soldiers have guard duties while the rest form the command element at KTCC (Kurdistan Training Coordination Center) HQ. Based on the first positive lessons learned by the Hungarian military trainers, the MoD is now planning to increase the number of trainers in the next rotation.

On the fifth event of our Euro-Atlantic Café, we will discuss the phenomenon of the Islamic State and evaluate the risks it poses to the European and the global communities. Have we arrived in a new world of global terror? If yes, is there any military solution to the crisis, and would it be possible to defeat IS without deploying ground troops? How high is the fight against terror on the current US political agenda, just a year before the next presidential elections? Ultimately, we will try to find answers to complex question of what happens after winning war? How can the Middle East be stabilized and is there any contribution Central Europe and Hungary could offer to help achieve a long lasting peace?

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