Operation Inherent Resolve and the Islamic State: Assessing “Aggressive Containment”

February 13, 2017

By C. Alexander Ohlers

C. Alexander Ohlers specializes in warfare and politics with a focus on transnational movements. He is also a former senior analyst and diplomatic liaison for the U.S. Department of State in Baghdad, Iraq. He holds a Ph.D. from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Abstract: Operation Inherent Resolve was originally conceived as a strategy to defeat the Islamic State by containing it territorially and degrading it through attrition or what is referred to as “aggressive containment.” While Operation Inherent Resolve has changed tactics and is now beginning to make significant territorial gains against IS, long-term strategies of aggressive containment have been ineffective in the past because they fail to address IS as a territorial insurgency and transnational network. As such, aggressive containment has two key drawbacks. First, this long-term strategy allowed IS time and sanctuary in Iraq and Syria that has enabled it to retain control, suppress moderate Sunni opponents, generate revenues and legitimacy, and expand regionally and internationally. Second, because the strategy has not successfully established political solutions or built moderate Sunni forces required for a lasting victory, there is an increased likelihood that IS will survive as a traditional or regional insurgency or be succeeded by other extremist groups.

The Islamic State (IS) emerged from al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQ-I) under the leadership of Abu Musab al Zarqawi, who was killed in 2006 by U.S. troops and succeeded by Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri al-Samarra’i (a.k.a. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi).¹ As a result of the “surge” and Awakening (Sahwa) Movement, the once successful group was all but defeated and largely relegated to the desert countryside and part of Mosul by 2010. Following the

¹ AQ-I was also known as Tawhid wal Jihad (monotheism and Jihad) and al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers in Iraq. The group later became known as the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), then the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and finally the Islamic State (IS).
2013 United States troop withdrawal, however, the organization entered Syria and expanded in Iraq, reemerging as one of the most violent modern insurgencies. At its peak, IS was able to seize and control expansive territories the size of the country of Georgia, command an estimated annual budget between $700-800 million, and attract approximately 30,000 fighters from 86 or more countries. The group has also expanded through multiple governorates (wilayats) throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Afghanistan and Pakistan, and continues to disseminate global propaganda and perpetuate an international terror campaign.

Strategies and tactics to address the rising threat of the Islamic State varied greatly. Some analysts and policymakers argue, as Senator John McCain did in a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing, “Time is not on our side.” They have called for using ground troops (e.g., special operations forces and quick reaction forces) in a more aggressive effort to defeat the Islamic State. Others submitted that time is a resource that works against IS, thus they propose long-term strategies of containment or, similarly, what political-military affairs analyst James Fromson and counterterrorism expert Steven Simon refer to as “aggressive containment.” Containment strategies seek to limit the geographical expansion of IS, often through a combination of air power and local partners on the ground. Aggressive containment, or attrition, also attempts to kill IS operatives, train and equip local and regional opposition forces, curtail sources of financing and support, and address political and ideological challenges over time.

Containment and attrition strategies are attractive to policymakers and the general public because they permit the United States and its coalition partners to counter IS with relatively low costs, few casualties, and little political risk in the short-term. Such policies, however, have conceded both time and maneuverability to a highly adaptable transnational insurgent network. This policy allowed IS an effective sanctuary in Iraq and Syria (and elsewhere) from which to build its organization and expand regionally and internationally. Strategies of containment and attrition have also failed to generate moderate Sunni forces in Syria and Iraq that can secure a more lasting victory against IS and other extremist groups.

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