

Decade of War: Applying Past Lessons to the Counter-ISIS Campaign

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Larry Lewis was a CNA field representative to the Joint Staff during the “Decade of War” study and the primary author of the report, *Decade of War, Volume I: Enduring Lessons from a Decade of Conflict*, which was published by the Joint Staff J7 in June 2012. These lessons are adapted from that paper.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark B. Geis'.

Mr. Mark B. Geis
Executive Vice President
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Executive summary

In 2012, then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey called for the U.S. military to “learn the lessons from the past decade of operations.” The Joint Staff conducted a study and produced what is commonly known as the “Decade of War Report,” which summarized key lessons from U.S. military operations since 2001. The report’s findings are relevant to the current Department of Defense (DOD) initiative of crafting and implementing a new approach to countering ISIS in response to the Trump administration’s executive order from January 2017 (included in the Appendix).

This paper takes six of the report’s lessons—on understanding the environment, rethinking the conventional warfare paradigm, leveraging strategic communications to achieve operational goals, managing transitions, and building effective coalitions—and applies them to the counter-ISIS campaign. Learning from and incorporating these lessons will help the United States and its partners promote sustainable security, counter ISIS more effectively, and reduce the risk of mistakes and missed opportunities observed in earlier U.S. operations in Iraq that contributed to the rise of ISIS in the first place.

Lessons for the counter-ISIS campaign

The “Decade of War report” from the Joint Staff looked broadly at the lessons learned from U.S. military operations since 2001. Six of those lessons apply directly to the current administration’s efforts to counter the ISIS threat, as described in its January 2017 Executive Order. This paper describes how the Trump administration can apply these lessons, both to avoid missteps and to generate success in ongoing U.S. counterterrorism operations.

Understanding the environment

LESSON: Failing to adapt to the operational environment and create a comprehensive plan leads to misaligned forces, capabilities, missions, and goals.

The Trump administration’s executive order, Presidential Memorandum Plan to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, dated January, 28 2017, calls for a plan to defeat ISIS that deploys three tools (per Section iii.C): lethal force, information operations, and the degradation of financial support. These are classic elements of a U.S.-style counterterrorism campaign against a terrorist network, as was undertaken in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Importantly, these military campaigns did not operate in isolation; they were part of a larger U.S. government strategy to develop the capacity of the host nation government. Using a counterterrorism approach that focuses on the three elements identified in the Executive Order in isolation, is a mismatch between the called for operational approach and the operational environment that demands a broader, comprehensive whole-of-government approach. Past operations have had similar mismatches that were recognized only later in the campaign. For example, the then-commander of U.S. counterterrorism operations in Iraq recognized in 2006 that capture-kill operations alone were not sufficient to eradicate the threat from terrorist groups. That led to greater cooperation between the counterterrorism mission and the larger counterinsurgency, reconstruction, and governance efforts in Iraq, which helped degrade terrorist capabilities in the longer term. General McChrystal introduced a similar approach in Afghanistan in 2009, though the various efforts were not as effectively coordinated.

The executive order also resembles early efforts by Colombia against the FARC—using an enemy-centric approach that achieved body counts of combatants but did not help set conditions for substantive progress in improving security. Colombia only made significant progress when it combined its kinetic actions with efforts to provide governance and promote reconciliation. A counterterrorism campaign conducted in isolation can produce near-term results but they are often not sustainable, which leads to a continuing, long-term security threat.

To avoid making Iraq and Syria a safe haven for ISIS and similar groups, the plan should go beyond the three tools specified in the executive order and include elements that focus on promoting legitimate governance, reducing sectarianism, promoting reconciliation and reintegration, and strengthening security force capabilities and sustainability. Illustrating the imperative for these additional elements, sectarian tendencies, including selective governance to only parts of the population as well as practices such as the torture of Sunni Iraqis at the hands of Shia Iraqi Security Forces, undermined the legitimacy of the Iraqi government after 2004. This lack of legitimacy led to unresolved grievances that contributed to ISIL's ease in capturing western Iraq in 2014. Elements of the Sunni population in Mosul and elsewhere in western Iraq initially welcomed ISIS because they represented freedom from sectarian practices that were endemic to the Iraqi government.

In Mali, the Tuareg's periodic uprisings have been similarly triggered by long-standing grievances that include selective governance and heavy-handed government responses dating back to the 1960s. This contributed to the fall of the democratic government in Mali in 2012; prior to this, the U.S. contributed to the overall capability of security forces through security assistance efforts but failed to address these long-standing grievances, which undermined the entire effort. Similarly, the Nigerian government is known for human rights violations and corruption, undermining its legitimacy in its fight against Boko Haram. Local populations are less likely to support a Nigerian unit coming into its town if that unit is not trusted or is feared. Efforts that focus on immediate security and ignore the bigger project of creating effective and legitimate governance and security increase the risk of near-term success being followed by long-term failure, usually evidenced locally by disenfranchisement and increased recruitment to violent extremist groups.

Rethinking the conventional warfare paradigm

LESSON: Conventional warfare approaches alone usually do not work with an irregular enemy; leaders must adapt and remain flexible.

The previous lesson addressed the need for a comprehensive plan against the threats the U.S. has encountered in the past 15 years. But a comprehensive plan is not enough—that plan must also be executed using a broader set of approaches than is commonly anticipated. In conventional war, forces typically employ a direct approach in combat—using force against an opponent military to achieve desired objectives. Against an irregular enemy in the operational context of Iraq and Syria, however, forces must use both direct and indirect approaches to achieve the desired effects. The executive order spells out two indirect approaches—conducting information operations and degrading financial resources. However, best practices from past U.S. operations suggest the value of other indirect approaches, including provision of services (e.g., jobs, medical care, water, electricity), capacity building of government institutions and nongovernment groups, reconciliation, and key leader engagements. These measures have tended to be inexpensive compared to the cost of combat operations and yet, when executed effectively, they have had near-term security benefits and have promoted the longer term sustainability of achieved progress.

Section iii.B of the Executive Order states that the new plan should contain “recommended changes to any United States rules of engagement and other United States policy restrictions that exceed the requirements of international law regarding the use of force against ISIS.” The use of force continues to be a critical tool in operations, but in past U.S. operations, including in Iraq and Afghanistan, the use of precision engagements and careful avoidance of civilian casualties became paramount in achieving strategic objectives, and international law requirements were not sufficient to safeguard national interests. Military leadership pressed forces to take additional steps to reduce collateral damage, such as exercising tactical patience and considering tactical alternatives.

In Afghanistan, U.S. forces found that protecting civilians and maximizing mission effectiveness were not conflicting, but rather were complementary objectives. Past U.S. analysis of civilian casualties showed that in many cases, civilians were being misidentified as enemy combatants. Addressing this misidentification problem meant that forces could simultaneously reduce civilian casualties and improve mission effectiveness. Conversely, U.S. forces found that when they caused civilian casualties, their freedom of action was curtailed and terrorist groups were strengthened thanks to local support and propaganda opportunities, which harmed the overall campaign at both tactical and strategic levels.

Leveraging strategic communications to achieve operational goals

LESSON: Being slow with public information and lacking a strong proactive narrative about the rationale for using force put the U.S. at a disadvantage with its adversaries.

The U.S. has been slow to recognize that it is in a battle for the narrative and that information can be deployed to achieve strategic objectives. President Trump's executive order correctly emphasizes the importance of information operations in the campaign against ISIS.

Indeed, terrorist groups continue to have more success promulgating their messages than does the United States. One reason is that terrorist groups are unencumbered by the need to be truthful; they can quickly fabricate information and evidence, putting the United States on the defensive. At the same time, the United States enjoys greater legitimacy, so the message it sends can be more widely regarded as credible if it uses a careful, evidence-based approach.

In past operations, the United States met with two challenges in implementing a "first with the truth" approach that bolstered its reputation and legitimacy. The first was a slow, reactive approach to communications. The second was a disconnect between tactical actions and U.S. values. Consider that tactical actions such as the Abu Ghraib detainee abuse in Iraq, the Kill Team Brigade in southern Afghanistan, and the burning of Korans in Bagram, Afghanistan, undermined the overall mission and tarnished the U.S. reputation.

Both of these challenges can be overcome. To avoid being slow to respond to allegations, U.S. officials should issue statements quickly that respond to allegations and put them in a holding pattern while investigations or inquiries are conducted to find the ground truth. To avoid operations that contradict U.S. values, leaders at all levels must reinforce the strategic and ethical importance of maintaining those values in the conduct of operations.

Managing transitions

LESSON: Failing to adequately plan for and resource transitions hinders completion of the overall mission.

To put it another way, when transitions between strategies or operations are managed well, they offer opportunities for advancing U.S. strategic interests; when they are not managed well, transitions offer opportunities for the adversary to gain advantage. The recent transition to the new administration and new civilian leadership in key departments and agencies makes this lesson especially pertinent.

In past operations, including in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. handling of transitions has often been characterized by:

- poor preparations and faulty assumptions (including a lack of contingency planning for less likely but still possible outcomes);
- significant disconnects between military and civilian planning efforts;
- shortfalls in the manning of key headquarters;
- arbitrary and unrealistic timelines;
- a lack of guidance and unity of effort from strategic leadership.

Past transitions have been challenged by planning efforts that did not develop detailed, practical branch plans for possible contingencies. Plans tended to be optimistic, incorporated incorrect assumptions, and lacked a back-up plan. These problems were exacerbated by having civilian elements play only a small role in planning efforts, which led U.S. forces to underemphasize civilian expertise and resulted in divergent military and civilian approaches in recent campaigns.

Transitions have also suffered from a lack of adequate resources, including sufficient time and manpower for planning efforts, and the manning of headquarters leading the campaign. For example, both the transition from CENTCOM to the Coalition Provisional Authority in 2003 and the later establishment of Multinational Forces-Iraq (MNF-I) suffered from these deficiencies. To remedy these shortfalls, staffing plans should include military personnel with experience leading strategic-level operations, and civilian positions should be filled with experienced personnel, with infrequent turnover to promote continuity.

Transition timelines should be based on conditions, not politics, to avoid hasty handovers of security responsibilities to the host nation government before it is ready. Premature turnovers can degrade security and hinder capacity-building efforts. Also, in Operation Resolute Support in Afghanistan and as part of Plan Colombia, the U.S. provided key enablers to host nation security forces to reinforce their capabilities for ongoing operations; this best practice should continue in Iraq as part of longer term efforts to deny safe havens.

Interagency coordination

LESSON: Faulty interagency coordination can undermine the mission, leading to slower progress or less than optimal results.

Interagency coordination is often impeded by inconsistent participation in planning, training, and operations; inadequate resources; and differences in policy and

organizational culture. Past studies show that DOD is consistently challenged to effectively partner with other U.S. departments and agencies. For example, a previous DOD lessons learned report, *Transition to Sovereignty*, found that between 2003 and 2007 in Iraq, the United States was unable “to apply and focus the full resources and capabilities of the U.S. in a concerted and coherent way.” Despite the critical need for interagency cooperation in large-scale operations, unity of effort is generally slow to develop and largely personality-driven, and relies on deliberate efforts from both military and civilian leaders.

In past operations, challenges to achieving unity of effort across the interagency have included:

- disparate organizational cultures and visions: differences between the action-oriented military and the collaborative and longer-term thinking of State and USAID led to friction;
- different levels of resources: the military’s considerable budget and manpower often eclipsed State and other departments/agencies, which complicated and clouded responsibilities for areas where State or other departments/agencies had overall organizational primacy;
- different lexicons: differences in language and the absence of interagency “doctrine” complicated joint collaboration and necessitated ad hoc improvisation.

The Joint Interagency Task Force—a model for interagency integration—has proven particularly successful, and may be a useful construct for harnessing interagency capabilities in the counter-ISIS effort. For example, JIATF-South successfully integrated different elements of national power to combat drug trafficking through the development of interagency tactics, techniques, and procedures; the creation of an interagency Standard Operating Procedure for counter-narcotics operations; and clear delineation of existing authorities, Rules of Engagement, and restrictions in the interagency context. JIATFs also supported counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past decade.

Building effective coalitions

LESSON: Illegitimate or ineffective partners can undermine U.S. counterterrorism efforts and, in some cases, make the problem worse.

The executive order requires the new counter-ISIS plan to identify new coalition partners, per Section iii.D. To mitigate challenges associated with sustaining coalition unity of effort, the United States should carefully consider potential partners in light

of information-sharing, intelligence-sharing, and other considerations. Coalitions offer the United States a number of benefits, including:

- Enhanced force levels and resources;
- Political credibility and legitimacy from having multiple countries with a unified position on the use of military forces;
- Being able to leverage the strength of various nations and their alternative ideas on how to address problems. For example, the UK brought to Iraq its experiences from Northern Ireland, which informed reconciliation efforts as well as the UK's counterterrorism efforts in Basra and Helmand. Similarly, Italy led the development of the Afghan police due to their experience with their own Carabinieri;
- Increased experience and proficiency of national partners. For example, the Georgian military gained considerable combat experience and learned the value of precision and restraint in the use of force from their deployments to Afghanistan. These partners should then be more capable for future operations.

At the same time, coalitions increase the complexity of operations and introduce challenges not experienced in U.S. unilateral operations, such as:

- national caveats
- interoperability limitations
- national interests
- information- and intelligence-sharing

The United States has publicly declared its consideration of both Turkey and Russia as new partners. Policymakers will have to take into account several key considerations in the decision of whether to add these two states as partners: national caveats, interoperability limitations, national interests, and information-/intelligence-sharing.

National caveats

National caveats allow countries to limit their potential actions and missions based on policy decisions and legal obligations, and have been a significant challenge in coalition operations since 2001. For both Turkey and Russia, such caveats may include specific groups that are considered or not considered targetable under their own national policies.

Interoperability

The use of different, non-interoperable systems limits the use of available capabilities. For example, the lack of an ability to participate in digital data links limited information exchange among coalition partners, leading to incomplete—and not shared—operating pictures, reduced battlespace awareness, and greater risk of fratricide and civilian casualties. Turkey as a coalition partner will tend to be relatively interoperable with the U.S. and its allies due to its efforts to integrate with NATO. Russia will lack such interoperable capabilities.

National interests

Coalition operations are also influenced by differing national interests. For example, Japan and Norway chose roles in Afghanistan that focused on reconstruction versus the larger counterinsurgency mission because of their national interests. As a potential coalition partner, Turkey would likely focus on particular areas of the country for its operations, because of its different view on the role and legitimacy of U.S. partner Kurdish forces in Syria.

Similarly, Russia has a fundamentally different view of the long-term viability of the current Syrian regime, and a more liberal view of acceptable collateral damage in the context of counterterrorism operations.

Information- and intelligence-sharing

Poor information- and intelligence-sharing routinely hindered effective coalition operations. Non-U.S. coalition members commonly said that poor information-sharing limited their inclusion in planning and operations. Classification issues and the lack of a robust, secure, coalition-wide information system challenged the ability to share needed intelligence and information. Turkey's potential role is aided somewhat because of initiatives to allow information-sharing across NATO allies. For Russia, intelligence- and information-sharing will be a considerable challenge.

Considering the common challenges facing coalition operations over the past 15 years, the addition of Turkey as a robust coalition ally appears manageable because of its efforts to integrate into NATO. The addition of Russia as an ally will be particularly challenging because of technical and policy considerations—interoperability barriers and intelligence-sharing—as well as disparate national approaches to counterterrorism operations and levels of acceptable collateral damage.

If the United States adds Russia to the counter-ISIS coalition, it should implement carefully considered measures on intelligence-sharing and the targets, and on

acceptable levels of civilian casualties that Russia may choose to accept. A good model to consider is the set of policies developed in support of the proposed Joint Implementation Cell for Syria in September 2016.

Summary

The United States has extensive experience in a wide range of operations since 2001. But while the U.S. military has shown that it can adapt *during* operations, it tends to be more challenged in using lessons from one operation and *applying* them to another.

As the Trump administration considers its plan for countering ISIS, it should learn from and incorporate lessons from counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan into a counter-ISIS strategy. Key lessons from these campaigns are summarized in this paper. Learning these lessons will promote sustainable security, enable a more effective approach to combating ISIS, and reduce the risk that the United States will repeat mistakes from past operations.

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Appendix A: Executive order

Presidential Memorandum Plan to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

January 28, 2017

NATIONAL SECURITY PRESIDENTIAL MEMORANDUM - 3

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS, is not the only threat from radical Islamic terrorism that the United States faces, but it is among the most vicious and aggressive. It is also attempting to create its own state, which ISIS claims as a "caliphate." But there can be no accommodation or negotiation with it. For those reasons I am directing my Administration to develop a comprehensive plan to defeat ISIS.

ISIS is responsible for the violent murder of American citizens in the Middle East, including the beheadings of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, and Peter Abdul-Rahman Kassig, as well as the death of Kayla Mueller. In addition, ISIS has inspired attacks in the United States, including the December 2015 attack in San Bernardino, California, and the June 2016 attack in Orlando, Florida. ISIS is complicit in a number of terrorist attacks on our allies in which Americans have been wounded or killed, such as the November 2015 attack in Paris, France, the March 2016 attack in Brussels, Belgium, the July 2016 attack in Nice, France, and the December 2016 attack in Berlin, Germany.

ISIS has engaged in a systematic campaign of persecution and extermination in those territories it enters or controls. If ISIS is left in power, the threat that it poses will only grow. We know it has attempted to develop chemical weapons capability. It continues to radicalize our own citizens, and its attacks against our allies and partners continue to mount. The United States must take decisive action to defeat ISIS.

Sec. 1. Policy. It is the policy of the United States that ISIS be defeated.

Sec. 2. Policy Coordination. Policy coordination, guidance, dispute resolution, and periodic in-progress reviews for the functions and programs described and assigned in this memorandum shall be provided through the interagency process established in National Security Presidential Memorandum - 2 of January 28, 2017 (Organization

of the National Security Council and the Homeland Security Council), or any successor.

(i) Development of a new plan to defeat ISIS (the Plan) shall commence immediately.

(ii) Within 30 days, a preliminary draft of the Plan to defeat ISIS shall be submitted to the President by the Secretary of Defense.

(iii) The Plan shall include:

(A) a comprehensive strategy and plans for the defeat of ISIS;

(B) recommended changes to any United States rules of engagement and other United States policy restrictions that exceed the requirements of international law regarding the use of force against ISIS;

(C) public diplomacy, information operations, and cyber strategies to isolate and delegitimize ISIS and its radical Islamist ideology;

(D) identification of new coalition partners in the fight against ISIS and policies to empower coalition partners to fight ISIS and its affiliates;

(E) mechanisms to cut off or seize ISIS's financial support, including financial transfers, money laundering, oil revenue, human trafficking, sales of looted art and historical artifacts, and other revenue sources; and

(F) a detailed strategy to robustly fund the Plan.

(b) Participants. The Secretary of Defense shall develop the Plan in collaboration with the Secretary of State, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Secretary of Homeland Security, the Director of National Intelligence, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, and the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism.

(c) Development of the Plan. Consistent with applicable law, the Participants identified in subsection (b) of this section shall compile all information in the possession of the Federal Government relevant to the defeat of ISIS and its affiliates. All executive departments and agencies shall, to the extent permitted by law, promptly comply with any request of the Participants to provide information in their possession or control pertaining to ISIS. The Participants may seek further information relevant to the Plan from any appropriate source.

(d) The Secretary of Defense is hereby authorized and directed to publish this memorandum in the Federal Register

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