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The Islamic state and its aims, a possible strategy for the fight against asymmetric warfare

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Abstract:

This article analyses the planning methods, the vision, the strategic and political goals of the Islamic State (IS). The author also recommends a possible strategy for the fight against the hybrid warfare of IS.

Keywords: *Islamic State, strategy, strategic planning, political aims, grand strategy.*

Motto:

*„O Muslims rush to your country! This is your state ... This is my advice. If you endure you may capture Rome, and if Allah is willing the whole world will be yours.”¹
Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi*

Introduction

8.45 a.m. on 11th September 2001 is the first minute of a new era in human history and this moment became an important milestone in the fight against terrorism. The most important consequence of this attack is that terrorism, especially terrorist acts committed by religious extremist groups, and more importantly the fight against these entities became more important than ever. Nobody would have ever believed then, that in 2015 a new wing of the terrorist organisation committing the 9/11 atrocity, the infamous, apocalyptic Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – or in a more simplified form the Islamic State, or IS, would be threatening the delicate balance of the whole Middle East.

5th July 2014 is another important milestone in history because on this day in Mosul² Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi openly declared himself, while wearing the black cloak of the Abbasid caliphs, as the leader of Islamic State. This declaration of leadership took place in the second largest city of Iraq where he called himself the leader of every Muslim or caliph whose aim is to rule this region. On the same day when the existence of the caliphate was proclaimed, the propaganda section of the IS published a video showing the demolition of some border posts between Iraq and Syria. This recording was a proof of their strength since they were able to abolish those artificial borders which were foisted upon the region by the great powers.³ This was the first occasion

¹ Napoleoni, Loretta: *Az iszlamista főnix* p. 127; Budapest, 2015.: HVG könyvek. ISBN 978-963.304-264-9, p. 124.

² Rainer Hermann: *Az Iszlám Állam – A világi állam kudarca az arab világban*; Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest 2015. p. 25.

³ *Ibid.*

since the First World War that an entity was able to do wholesale changes to the boundaries of countries in the region, which are defined by the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and the Treaty of Lausanne of 1923.

Az Iszlám Állam kialakulása. The birth of the Islamic State

IS was able to set up sizable armed forces and capture and control large swathes of territory very quickly. During the autumn of 2015 IS controlled 22 – 25000 square kilometres where, which is very important, it enjoys the support of the vast majority of the local population. There are 9 million Sunni Muslims in Iraq who became marginalised after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which is quite a stark contrast to their privileged position in pre-invasion Iraq.⁴ The situation is similar in Syria where 74% of the population is Sunni who have been oppressed for decades by the Assad regime.⁵

Changes to the combat strength (hard core members) of IS

2005: 1000 people⁶

2006: 1100 people⁷

2011: 1000-2000 people⁸,

2014: 11000 people (6000 in Iraq, 3000- 5000 in Syria) or 20000-31500 people⁹

IS is an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, the infamous international terrorist organisation. Originally it belonged to the Jama' alTawhid wal-Jihad¹⁰ network under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. However, as time passed IS became the preeminent terrorist power of the region and the most influential member of an umbrella organisation containing like minded groups. Similarly to Al-Qaeda IS have achieved the *primus inter pares* position amongst Islamist terrorist groups which means that now every other large terrorist entity pledges its loyalty to IS.¹¹

⁴ CIA The World Factbook: Iraq; accessible <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/iz.html> (downloaded : 2015. 09. 20.)

⁵ CIA The World Factbook: Syria accessible <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html> (downloaded: 2015. 09. 20.)

⁶ United States Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism: Country Reports on Terrorism; April 2006 p. 220 accessible <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/65462.pdf> (downloaded: 2015. 09. 20.)

⁷ Tilghman, Andrew: The Myth of AQI; in Washington Monthly, October 2007 <http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2007/0710.tilghman.html> (downloaded: 2015. 09. 20.)

⁸ U.S. Department of State: Country Reports on Terrorism 2011; July 31 2012 accessible <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2011/195553.htm#ig> (downloaded: 2015. 09. 20.)

⁹ The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria: Two Arab countires fall apart; in The Economist, June 13, 2014. accessible <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21604230-extreme-islamist-group-seeks-create-caliphate-and-spread-jihad-across> (downloaded: 2015. 09. 20.) YEGINSU, Ceylan: ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits From Turkey; in: The New York Times. 15 Sept. 2014. accessible http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/world/europe/turkey-is-a-steady-source-of-isis-recruits.html?_r=0 (downloaded: 2015. 09. 20.)

¹⁰ Hasim, Ahmed, S.: From Al Kaida affiliate to the rise of the Islamic Caliphate: The evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); RSIS Nanyang Technological University, 2015. p. 2.

¹¹ Boko Haram in Nigeria and al Shabaab in Somalia in March 2015, Islamic Youth Shura Council in Libya as early as 2014, the Afghan Taliban in 2015. cf., Hanna Ucko Neill: African insurgent groups look to ISIS as they face increasing pressure. <https://www.iiss.org/en/Topics/islamicstate/african-groups-isis-f2d1> (Letöltés ideje: 2015. 12. 11.) !

Aims and Plans

The Islamic State's operations are based upon long term plans which not only apply for its terrorist operations but also for its well operating cartel like business enterprises as well. When analysing the planning methods of IS, we find it includes grand strategic planning on a political level, military aims on the military strategic level and tactical level methods, operations and doctrines as well.

Political aims¹²

IS have the following grand strategic (political) aims which it want to achieve by applying hard power methods

- Achieving the collapse of the governments in Iraq and Syria and taking over these countries;
- Forming an Islamic State and protecting it from outside attack;
- Expanding the area under the control of IS and creating a great Muslim community (ummah)

I interpret the application of hard power by IS in the way that by their overt attacks they achieve the partial destruction of unbelievers and it prepares the ground for spreading the influence of IS further in the region and its settlements.

The IS grand strategy¹³

- abolishing the international frontiers in the region and creating a caliphate which has already been proposed by al-Qaeda;
- creating and stabilising the Islamic State
- convincing masses of Muslims to settle in the IS
- further expansion

The IS military strategy¹⁴

- controlling Sunni areas, key cities and resources in the Middle East
- creating a defensive zone in areas close to the boundaries of the Kurdish areas in Iraq and Syria to protect IS from Kurdish military attacks;
- continuing attacks against Syrian and Iraqi security forces to weaken their ability to resist and finally defeat them
- capturing more territory in Iraq in order to create a buffer zone against attacks launched from Shiite areas
- neutralising al-Nusra in Syria
- conquering more territory.

The medium term aims of IS include capturing and controlling the territory of Iraq and Syria. The next step for IS is to gain control over Sunni communities and territories in neighbouring countries like Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Their operations are led by the caliph and inside the IS life is regulated by Quranic regulations and the implementation of Shariah law. "Shariah for Muslims is a way to become a perfect man therefore it regulates every sphere of human existence. According to Shariah certain behaviours are ethically explicitly forbidden (haraam), others are compulsory (wajib), some actions are undesirable but not banned (makruh), others are recommended but not compulsory (mandub) and some are simply permissible (mubah). The number of actions which are explicitly forbidden or compulsory is quite small, most activities of everyday life belong

¹² Lewis, Jessica D.: *The Islamic State: a Counter-Strategy for a Counter-State* p. 9.

¹³ Lewis, Jessica D.: *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁴ Lewis, Jessica D.: *op. cit.*, pp. 11-12.

to the mubah category. Anything which is not haraam (explicitly forbidden) is permissible.”¹⁵

Those who are unable to flee from IS are forced to pay a tax or protection money. The houses where Christians live are marked by the letter n referring to word nasara which means Christians in Arabic. The homes of Shiites are marked by the letter R which is connected to the pejorative word raid used by extremist Sunnis to describe Shiites

The strategy of the Islamic State

IS operatives commit classical terrorist actions against certain groups of their enemies, their aim is to kill as many people as possible to ensure that maximise the fear of IS within these people. The aim of targeted killings and assassinations is to deter the opponents from attacking IS again. When IS enters a conquered town a subunit commits spontaneous executions at the main square which has two aims first it deters potential resisters from attacks and encourages a section of the population to flee the settlement. To enhance the deterrence effect IS propaganda units spread videos of these massacres so the conquered populations know what to expect when IS reach their homes.¹⁶ The other face of IS involves humanitarian actions which are designed to improve the welfare and health of the conquered population. An interesting example is that IS launched a campaign supporting polio vaccination. The military strategy of IS quite similar to the old American Shock and Awe approach.

IS soldiers lack empathy and grief and they revel in unlimited aggression which includes the beheading of women and children. Another reason for the success of IS is their ability to set up an efficient military structure. Their leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi started the recruitment of former Iraqi officers, when they were imprisoned together. These former military officers were trained in traditional warfare and in achieving surprise and subversion. (However, these men were only admitted to IS if they apologised for their actions and swore an oath of loyalty.) On the other hand the former al-Qaeda fighters of IS were experienced in guerilla warfare.¹⁷

When we examine their operational plans we can recognise the elements of previous Soviet/Russian strategic and tactical theories, the features of their subversive and deep operations and experience derived from operations in the Afghan, Iraqi and other theatres. IS uses every possible element in their hybrid warfare, this includes conventional regular forces like infantry, armour or artillery, light and irregular units and information warfare. In the latter field they are especially adept at using the whole spectrum of social media to their advantage.¹⁸

A key element of IS strategy is that they always divide the areas where they operate into controlled, support and attacked zones. The Center of Gravity – CoG for IS includes the foreign fighters, the jihadis and the Sunni population. When they plan their operations they usually design Rommel-like quick, mobile thrusts towards highly valuable local spots like oil- and gas fields, dams, greater cities and other critical

¹⁵ Rostoványi Zsolt: Mit kell tudni az iszlámról? 66.

¹⁶ Rainer, *op. cit.*, 56.

¹⁷ U.o., pp. 58-60

¹⁸ Winter, Charlie: The Virtual ‘Caliphate’: Understanding Islamic State’s Propaganda Strategy pp. 18-21. <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf> (Letöltési idő: 2015. 11. 25.)

resources¹⁹. When the primary goal is achieved they apply the clear, build, hold method to solidify their position there. The strengths of IS include the use of light weaponry, good reconnaissance and communication skills²⁰, mobility, firepower, IEDs and support of the local populace. A basic tenet of their planning includes an active role through social media to gain the support of the local population.

For IS the final military aim is not a victory by its armed forces over its enemies, their final goal is the withdrawal of Western forces from its area of operations. This organisation wants to break, exhaust and bleed out our own forces by applying elements asymmetric and guerrilla warfare and terrorism against them. These armed operations are supported by a broad information operations campaign which targets the hearts and minds of our civilian population back home.

A possible strategy for the fight against hybrid warfare of IS

My aim is to focus attention on certain problems within military studies. Since the most important issues in military studies are about answering questions about armament, organisation and operational methods consequently I will focus my article on these issues too. My research method is based upon indicators, these are features which have an important and significant connection to the problem or researched issue and they clearly show the differences and abnormalities within military studies, so that I could find possible answers for and proposals and consequences of these problems within military sciences.

In this struggle against the all-encompassing hybrid or asymmetric warfare of IS²¹ we also have to create a broad and complex strategy. Asymmetric warfare is: "It is well defined combat style especially on the tactical level to achieve a well defined political goal which is often waged by the coalitions of multiple organisations which have a shared ideological, religious or ethnic background. Asymmetric warfare includes military and non-military operations, methods and procedures which have direct and indirect consequences and the intention of those waging such warfare is that the effects of these actions should strengthen each other and threaten multiple dimensions of security at the same time to achieve the end goal of forcing our will upon the our enemy."²² In this article I can not examine the economic, political, diplomatic, financial and IT issues of asymmetric warfare and even in the field of military studies I will only concentrate on the analysis of a few key area.

The first area of the military studies which I am going to examine is the appearance of new methods including asymmetric warfare and its indicators. Here I will deal with the question of asymmetry itself, suicide bombers, IEDs, child soldiers, female suicide bombers, internal attacks and the operational methods of IS.

Our answer to these questions should be that after scrutinising our experience about fighting IS we have recognise that we are somewhat behind on the tactical level while we have a large gap to close on the strategic level. This large gap includes

¹⁹ Barrett i.m. p. 52.

²⁰ In 2014 they had 50000 followers on Twitter, number of tweets per day between 17 September 2013 and 17 October 2013 was between 100000- 250000 cf., Barrett, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²¹ Resperger István - KIS Álmos Péter - Somkuti Bálint: Aszimmetrikus hadviselés a modern korban. Kis háborúk nagy hatással. Zrínyi Kiadó, 2013. Budapest. p. 25.

²² Resperger István - KIS Álmos Péter - Somkuti Bálint: Aszimmetrikus hadviselés a modern korban. Kis háborúk nagy hatással. Zrínyi Kiadó, 2013. Budapest. p. 25.

challenges connected to planning, training for and executing our operations during a complex conflict which contains cultural, historical and religious elements besides the purely military ones. While our Special Forces, CIMIC, Psyops and information operations propose plenty of new solutions we are still not doing enough to protect our own forces.

My second topic is about the international scene, including the various international organisations and about violence. The most important feature of contemporary conflicts is the lack of effective state participation because often the state lost its ability to enforce its laws and punish those who violated them besides it also lost the monopoly of power in these armed conflicts. As a consequence the nature and methods of warfare have been transformed and the amount of violence during these conflicts have become much larger than in earlier wars. Therefore, there are no longer any safe havens for soldiers, employees of international organisations, members of the media and staff of NGOs and civilians, the situation is even more dire for women. Most experts agree that the root cause of the problem lies in fact that the state lost the monopoly of power, because this made it possible for separatists, guerillas and warlords to use and misuse, often with unlimited brutality, the power they managed to grab.

According to military science the indicators for the weaponry used by IS include the simple equipment, large amount of explosives for their IEDs and suicide bombers, quick light vehicles and anti-tank weapons.²³ There are not any suitable solutions for this problem because adaptation to the new challenges is very slow, which leads to very high casualties.²⁴

Probably the most quickly changing area of contemporary military science is how to apply certain methods and procedures in a flexible way. This is one of the reasons for the varied interpretation of the concept asymmetry in military studies since "the methods define an organisation". The most important feature of asymmetry lies in the fact that there are multiple direct and indirect effects which influence on the outcome of an ongoing situation. This is also true for any military, economic, cyber, psychological, financial or any other type of operations. The quick Romell-like thrusts, the constant threats, the apocalyptic behaviour, enforcing their economic interests by any possible way and the way to preserve or regain popular support are the most important indicators for our analysis. The answer in this field is that we should start evaluating the lessons of our operations in theatre, but it takes time to incorporate these lessons into our training protocols which reduces our losses. This process leads to a delay for countries which have a western military culture.

²³ Cf., the Iraq war in 2003. We collected information about the size and nature of Iraqi resistance from the war diary of Task Force 2-7 of the US 3rd Infantry Division (Mech.) This TF acted as the forward element of the division. The most frequently mentioned type of attack against the TF was committed by RPG-7 anti-tank grenade launchers. (11 times) The largest percentage of KIAs of the division (15%) was caused by this type of weapon. Factfile. Effective range, against a stationary target: 500 metres, against a moving target: 300 metres. Maximum range 1100 m, antipersonnel range 920 m. The flight time of the grenade at 100 metres: 4,5 second. Armor penetration against homogenous armour: 600 mm. The weapon can be equipped by 3 different warheads. PG-7, PG-7M, PG7-N, PG-7NV grenades against homogenous armour. PG-7VR dual cumulative grenade against slat and reactive armour. OG-7, OG-7M antipersonnel grenade. cf., MORDICA, G., J.: Phase Four Operations in Iraq and the RPG-7 In: www.globalsecurity.org/iraq/operation (downloaded: 2015. 12. 04.) quoted by: Kőszegvári Tibor - Resperger István: A nemzetközi terrorizmus elleni küzdelem katonai tapasztalatai p. 17. egyetemi jegyzet, ZMNE, Budapest, 2013.

²⁴ Lásd még: Islamic State Weapons In Iraq And Syria pp. 7-12. http://conflictarm.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Dispatch_IS_Iraq_Syria_Weapons.pdf (downloaded: 2015. 12. 07.)

When we examine our procedures we also have to be aware of scientific results which can influence and transform organisations. Small units, lightly armed quick vehicles, constantly changing situations and tactics and finally the quick adoption by of more and more efficient lights weapons by large groups of combatants have a collective transformative effect on the operational culture of the armed forces. We can choose any indicator we want we will find a correct answer for the problem because the Western military science always changes methods when it is faced by guerrilla, resistance fighter, insurgent or terrorist activity on the battlefield, although there will be some casualties during the learning process.

It is essential to examine the question about the use of authority, violence, unlimited violence or the phenomenon Clausewitz calls almost extreme violence in contemporary conflicts. In most cases decisions about the highest acceptable level of violence is determined not just by military, political or higher strategic circumstances but also by the religious, social and cultural background of a conflict zone. The Islamic State is a good example for the proposition that extreme and shocking violence, which no Western force would dare to apply in any situation, can lead to quick victories. However, this statement is only applicable in that given social and religious sphere.

Victorious strategy in military science

"We have to defeat the enemy's army, capture its territory and break the will of the local population."²⁵ is the answer provided by Clausewitz for when he was asked for a victorious strategy?

However, in recent conflicts in Lybia, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan the enemy have had a different military end goal in mind, their wanted to force us to retreat from their country. To achieve this they want to tire and bleed out our soldiers by the tools of asymmetric warfare.

What can our possible strategy be?

The 5 – 10 year interval after a military end state, which is usually allocated for achieving a political end state is sadly inadequate for the enormous task of reconstructing a failed state. Realising this, even in a normal state, is challenging enough and in an underdeveloped country the chance of success within this time limit is extremely slim. The greatest challenge is guaranteeing security to enable successful humanitarian and military operations. Therefore our most important aims should be ensuring security and forcing our will upon the enemy. We have to defeat and capture the insurgents which will break their resistance. The best tool for this mission is modern, network centric warfare. Using modern concepts and up-to-date equipment will lead to a quick victory on the open battlefield but it will also cause high casualty rates during the occupation phase amongst our personnel and the local population alike.

Although past experiences prove that we cannot directly plan and run our operations according to NATO planning systems like GOP (Guidelines for Operational Planning) and COPD (Comprehensive Operational Planning Directive). Nevertheless, modified versions of these procedures are suitable for use during high strategic planning process. The gist of changes lies in the fact that these resistance and other

²⁵ Clausewitz Carl von: A háborúról Zrínyi Kiadó, 2013. Budapest. p. 171.

armed forces do not have a clearly defined Centre of Gravity instead they possess a number of very efficient partial skills like reconnaissance, fire control, leadership, communication and last but definitely not least they enjoy the support of the local population. Therefore our strategy must focus on containment and control.

In the area of reconnaissance we have to introduce such procedures which makes it more difficult for our opponents to identify our own units, bases and patrol routes.

To limit the mobility of hostile forces we have to enact fuel control systems and set up remote number plate identification technology.

The best way to hinder the efficiency of hostile commanders is linked to the improvement of our own intelligence gathering operations so we have to expand the scope of our HUMINT, SIGINT and UAV operations.

We have to limit the use of firepower yet we can not leave our forces unprotected so we must follow the applicable regulations and we must also ensure that military personnel wear their own equipment correctly and they are ready to engage the enemy as quickly as possible. The use of counter-IED procedures is also essential to protect us from explosion related casualties. For offensive operations we must prefer the use high precision solutions like UAVs.²⁶

During the planning process we must prevent the enemy from acquiring reliable information about our movements and activities via any dimension of security.

At the strategic planning level we have to set realistic political and military end goals which must be fulfilled in a judicious way. In order to gain support of the local population we must not behave as conquerors. We have respect local traditions, religions and history because this may earn us the support of the inhabitants of our theatre of operations. Finally we must cooperate with the international organisations and the NGOs which are active in the conflict zone.

Summary

An important feature of asymmetric conflicts is that events play out on a hexagonal chessboard. The actors include the Islamic State and their sympathisers, the members of the anti-IS coalition and their supporters, international organisations like the UN, OSCE, EU, African Union and various NGOs. Sadly the centre of the board is filled by internally displaced people and the local population. Only those forces can win such a conflict who are not only capable of achieving a military victory but who can also win the peace after the end of the armed conflict by providing better living conditions for the long suffering local population and refugees.

After examining the planning procedures of the Islamic State we can conclude that they have a thought through, efficiently structured and operated planning system which is used on every planning level (political strategy, military strategy, tactical methods).

In this game which involves a large number of actors including some active geopolitical players like the USA, Russia, Saudi-Arabia, Turkey and Iran. Furthermore these conflicts take place in geopolitical pillars like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq where the numerous ethnic and religious tensions, which existed in the region long before the eruption of the current asymmetric conflict, may play a much more critical role in the final outcome than we usually imagine.

²⁶ Haskologlu, İsa – EKER, A. Alparslan – ADANA, Şaban: A Perspective of Applications of Unmanned Systems in Asymmetric Warfare <http://www.ijiet.org/papers/356-K3004.pdf> (downloaded: 2015. 11. 14.).

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