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To Defeat IS We Must Destroy It?

By Bernard Fook Weng Loo

Synopsis

The US and its NATO allies have vowed to defeat Islamic State and ultimately destroy it. While at odds with global norms, such a proposed destruction campaign may be strategically necessary. It remains to be seen, however, if there will be any political resolve to undertake such a long and costly campaign against IS.

Commentary

THE United States, together with its principal NATO partners, has decided that the IS must be defeated. The barbarism evinced by IS militants towards their captives – irrespective of race, religion or nationality – certainly suggests that the IS cannot be accommodated.

Defeating it, however, will not come easily. Indeed, as Steven Metz argued recently, in his weekly column in *World Politics Review*, defeating ISIS will require that the organisation be destroyed; it will be “the beginning of a costly, bloody strategic cycle.”

The Case Against Destruction

In the age of precision warfare through ‘smart’ weapons, however, can such calls for an intensive and extensive campaign of destruction be justified? After all, precision-guided munitions have been touted as promising an increasingly precise and efficient way of waging war. The Gulf War in 1991 had some of the most asymmetric casualty rates: the United States and its Coalition partners lost 240 people, Iraq suffered at least 10,000 battle deaths.

For William Owens, former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and one of the principal proponents of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs, Information Age technologies – and in particular, computing, communications and satellite technologies – would bring about a smaller but stronger military organisation that would finally lift the “fog of war” that had bedeviled military commanders throughout history.

Secondly, despite its claims to statehood, the IS is not a state. It does have a de facto capital, the Syrian town of Raqqah. By controlling the Raqqah dam, it does have an infrastructure and institutions that provides basic services to the people living under its apparent aegis. That being said, the states

of Iraq and Syria, in which the territories currently controlled by the IS reside, will dispute IS sovereignty over these territories. This makes any military attack on IS-controlled infrastructure politically problematic.

Thirdly, the IS is not a monolithic entity, but rather a polyglot mix of disparate individuals; as Metz depicts it, “fat-cat Gulf funders, angry young Western Muslims struggling with inner demons, local Sunni Arabs angered by repression from the governments in Damascus and Baghdad, violence-obsessed jihadists from across the Islamic world and former Baathists still bitter over losing power.”

Defeating the IS will require defeating the disparate motivations that these various groups bring to their membership of the IS. A counter-IS strategy will have to, in other words, convince each group of actors within ISIS that their resort to force is going to be futile, that their various political motivations will remain unrealised. All it takes therefore is for just one group within ISIS to continue to believe that their use of force can be successful, however long it takes and however many lives it costs.

Finally, it is possible that international norms might work against such a campaign of destruction. In the 1991 Gulf War, Coalition air forces prosecuted a destruction campaign against Iraqi forces fleeing Kuwait along Highway 80, which connects Kuwait and Iraq; it subsequently came to be known as the Highway of Death. Norman Schwarzkopf justified this action on the basis that “there was a great deal of military equipment” and that the Iraqi soldiers fleeing were not “a bunch of innocent people just trying to make their way back across the border to Iraq [but rather] rapists, murderers and thugs who were trying to get out of the country before they were caught.” Nevertheless, the Coalition ceased prosecuting this campaign, in large part because opinion, both within the United States and internationally, started to turn against the images of death and destruction.

The Strategic Case for Destruction

How, then, can President Obama’s decision to “degrade and ultimately destroy” the IS be justified strategically? This is where destruction comes in – as much as “destruction” conveys images that are politically incorrect and unpalatable. The actions of IS combatants to their captives demonstrates that these are not, in the words of Wolfgang Schivelbusch in *The Culture of Defeat*, “mutually respectful warrior castes” but rather manifestations of “unconstrained popular wills of opposing nations, which see the adversary as the incarnation of evil, an archenemy with whom there can be no common ground or compromise. The only option is to destroy ... the enemy.”

This IS “nation” is, of course, not a nation as might be traditionally understood. However disparate their individual interests might be, the various groups that have gravitated towards the IS have at least one common denominator: ostensibly they adhere to the geopolitical vision of the IS. Certainly their actions towards their captives suggests a visceral hatred of all those who oppose them; it certainly does not suggest that a compromise or a middle ground can be reached.

What therefore cannot happen, if the United States wants to “destroy” the IS, is for those IS supporters to feel that their geopolitical vision can still be realised, that they have not been “defeated” in any way. At the end of World War One, when German troops returned from the frontlines, the Weimar President Friedrich Ebert had said to them “No enemy has defeated you. Only when the enemy’s superiority in numbers and resources became suffocating did you relinquish the fight.”

To defeat the IS probably requires its destruction. ISIS leaders and its sympathisers must not have the opportunity to make similar claims to its followers. They must not be allowed to say, as Weimar Germany was able to, “You do not return defeated and beaten. You have defended our homeland against a world of enemies.” They will have to recognise that they have been defeated, and that almost certainly requires a destruction that does not allow for alternative narratives to be constructed in the aftermath.

But it is doubtful if anyone has the fortitude to wage such a campaign.

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