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Abstract:

The Islamic State has not been significantly damaged since the establishment of the International Coalition. Time is on its side as evidenced by the success of its propaganda and the continuous accessions of numerous jihadist groups. Therefore, it is urgent to accelerate and intensify actions against it to stop such advantage, in order for time to run against it.

Keywords:

Islamic State, Daesh, ISIS, ISIL, Iraq, Syria, International Coalition.

Conflict dynamics: time factor

Violent and brief wars with a clear result are a thing of the past, though the question is whether this is good or bad. However, one of the most outstanding features of nowadays conflicts, or at least a great part thereof, is their long duration. This specifically applies to asymmetric conflicts, which are characterized by three main features. The first one is that its beginning is not well-defined, as usually they result from a phase change of a preexisting conflict rather than having a definite starting point, (e.g. a war declaration or a preventive or surprise unilateral attack). The second one is a long prolonged development phase that seems to be endless. The third and final one is the partial end of the conflict. As at the beginning, most of the times this results in a new phase of unrest instead of a real conclusion of the war and the ceasing of violence.

We can find numerous examples of this type of war in recent history, for example the Iraq or Afghanistan conflicts. The latter had an initial phase characterized by the intervention of Western forces after the 9/11¹ attacks. This disruption led to the increase of the military pressure as it supported the local forces opposing the Taliban –all this in the framework of a long lasting civil war – until their defeat, at least as a “conventional” force.

Afterwards, a lengthy development phase resulted from clearly identifiable subphases. This period of time can be delimited between the already mentioned “conventional” defeat of the Taliban and the consequent seizure of Kabul and withdrawal of a great part of the deployed foreign contingent; that is, between the beginning of 2002 and the end of 2014. Since this date, an ongoing conflict has been taking place, a new phase with no clear final result, in which the departure of the NATO and other nationalities’ forces² has led to a weary state and a desire of concluding once and for all an endless war that has become the longest conflict in the prolific list of wars waged by the US. However, with the achievement of a clear military victory and entering the already mentioned new phase at the beginning of January 2015, this current conflict is now characterized by an acceptable level of violence within a general framework of higher stability, which will probably be the best situation that could have been reached in the Afghan scenario.

In essence, current wars are generally endless despite the long list of adjectives they can be known for – latent, hybrid, asymmetric, with low intensity, etc. They do not

¹ Francisco José Berenguer Hernández, *Afganistán: el principio del fin*, in *Panorama Geopolítico de los Conflictos 2011*, p.173 and following, IEEE, Ministry of Defense, Madrid, 2011

² Francisco José Berenguer Hernández, *ISAF, Resolute Support y Daesh*, IEEE, 14th January 2015, http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2015/DIEEEA03-2015_ISAF_ResoluteSupport_DAESH_FJBH.pdf

have a clear conclusion and, in most cases, they end up overlapping with other conflicts that begin or intensify in the same or different geopolitical region.

Nevertheless, the truth is that, considering what was mentioned above as the result of the analysis of the recent fights from a historical perspective, the different phases of each conflict are rather different, when comparing several parameters or indicators – number of victims, intensity of the fight, impact on domestic economies, implication of the international community, among others – and comprise phases of different deadliness, from those with lower intensity to others with considerable material and personal damages.

Therefore, it appears logical to consider the apparent impossibility of ending a large amount of conflicts, in which the signing of a truce, cessation of hostilities or treaties are pure utopias in presence of non-state actors and factions contrary to the basic law principles and good international customs. Nevertheless, the efforts of the international community should focus on transitioning as fast as possible the ongoing conflicts, from a stage of confrontation with a high level of hostility to another of latent conflict or one with lower intensity.

This does not extinguish the urgent need to carry out all the adequate preventive and corrective actions to end the conflicts, involving the diplomatic, financial³, cooperation or police areas, among others. Unfortunately, a military solution is sooner or later needed, mainly when the time factor increases the pressure and the war in question has entered a highly lethal phase. In this case, it is extremely urgent to mitigate and drive the conflict to a different, less intense phase that has a lower capacity to damage the local, regional and global triple dimension.

The Islamic State and the time factor

Moving on, the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS) or Daesh has gone through the already mentioned phases. Without doubt, IS has now entered a highly deadly phase that started at the beginning of 2014 with a group's attack in Iraq, overflowing the limits of their participation in the Syrian war. The Iraqi civil war began during the response to the 2003 military invasion of the country and, since then, has been exhibiting hybrid political-sectarian characteristics.

Indeed, the military victories of IS and of their Iraqi allies have been significant, as they have managed to control vast northern and central areas of the country in a short period of time, giving them access to a wide territorial base⁴.

³ Resolution 2199 (2015) of UN Security Council, which main purpose is to fight IS external financing.

⁴ Source: <http://notas.org.ar/2014/10/21/estado-islamico-complejo-militar-industrial-imperialismo/>



Nevertheless, the response of the international community has been slow. Despite the clear threat a jihadist group like IS represents for regional and international security, it is the urgent help petition from Bagdad's government, cornered since the summer of 2014⁵ and, above all, the cruel public assassinations of Western citizens – especially journalists and voluntary workers – that led the international community to consider the need to fight Daesh with determination and lots of resources.

Napoleon once said, not wrote, that among all factors that intervene in a war, the most important one is time, as it is the only factor that cannot be regained or reconstructed. In the present case, this key principle was demonstrated once again, as the IS strategy against the international community has allowed the group to have the time factor on its side during 2014 as well as during the already passed months of 2015.

The analysis regarding Daesh's achievements during this period shows that the group has enjoyed a positive outcome. Without intending to be exhaustive and without mentioning the most significant advantages obtained by the group, it can be useful to highlight the three most important ones related to the correct or wrong management of the time factor:

Propaganda impact

⁵ Ignacio Fuente Cobo, *La inacabable guerra de Iraq*, IEEE, 2nd July 2014, http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2014/DIEEEA35-2014_InacabableGuerraIRAQ_IFC.pdf

Usually, the purpose of this section is to provide a summary of the modern, effective or even the advertising⁶ techniques Daesh is using with the double objective of instilling terror among its enemies, which eases the field action of their motivated yet few forces, and recruitment of numerous volunteers from all over the world, who travel to the Middle East to fight on their behalf.

However, there is a reality that is less mentioned but can be seen in several areas, from advertising to politics and, of course, in the level of voluntary adhesion to the different parties involved in the conflict. That reality is no other than the huge impact a victory or success dynamic has or, on the contrary, a defeat or failure for the same candidate, product or, in case of the conflicts, party to the fight.

In such way and until this date, the practically non-interrupted series of IS victories, or at least absence of clear and decisive defeats, have provided them with a first-level propaganda element. It is difficult to imagine the existence of a comparable flow of international volunteers to fight with Daesh if the group were immerse in a situation of continuous defeats, prosecution, withdrawal and destruction, at least as a pseudo-state.

Nevertheless, on 9th March 2015, a Spanish newspaper published an article in which the author wrote his thoughts about the Ceuta barricade in *El Príncipe*, a well-known focus of fundamentalism turmoil and sometimes volunteer recruitment site for Middle Eastern conflicts, or even refuge of jihadist cells ready to attack⁷. Muñoz talks about the regretful ones, those who send discouragement messages from Syria and Iraq when saying the alleged paradise is “only war, devastation and death.”⁸

It is easy to foresee a similar effect of a larger scale among the potential jihadist volunteers throughout the world – we shall not forget that there is an undeniable occupational or labor-related jihad at a local scale – if the pseudo-state led by Al Baghdadi turns out to be an undeniable and evident horizon of the cited “devastation and death” for those who enter its ranks. Moreover, it should be noted that the more than likely dissuasive effect exerted on local tribes allied to IS mainly results from a coincidence of shared interests rather than from a broad ideological identification. This does not happen through the forced imposition of men and resources as

⁶ David Barrancos Larráyoz, *Los Community Managers del terror: la propaganda online e ISIS y su ofensiva sobre Irak*, IEEE, 29th July 2014, http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2014/DIEEEO82bis-2014_ISS_DavidBarrancos.pdf

⁷ *Agencies, Detenidos dos presuntos yihadistas en Ceuta "preparados para atentar" en España*, informativostelecinco.com, 10th March 2015, http://www.telecinco.es/informativos/nacional/Policia-Nacional-presuntos-yihadistas-Ceuta_0_1953000021.html

⁸ Pablo Muñoz, *El Príncipe descubre la gran mentira de la yihad*, ABC, 9th March 2015

tributes, as recent reprisals by the IS against some of these tribes and local clans⁹ seem to evidence.

Territoriality advantages

This section will address the financial resources IS has achieved through money and financial assets seizure after taking control of several important cities like Mosul¹⁰, fact that has already been discussed in several analysis. Most importantly, it will mention the advantages of having a big territorial base and population similar to that of a real country. This advantage allows them to carry out actions such as tax collection, exploitation of natural resources or the control of economic activities taking place in their territory.

Obviously, Daesh's efficiency in this field is relatively small¹¹, but having the control of the territory-population pairing gives the group an advantageous strategy in comparison to any other terrorist group – mainly Al Qaeda –allowing them to pose a much larger threat for regional stability than what it would due only to “classic” terrorist attacks.

Therefore, in a dynamic where the main objective is very similar to the one already explained, it is essential to eliminate any advantage resulting from such territoriality, ending with any possibility of a pseudo-state and communicating this unequivocal will to international media. The perception of the potential volunteers, as well as the different states of the region, regarding the unequivocal destruction of the jihadist entity built in Iraq and Syria is key in the fight against IS and its allies.

Competitive success against Al Qaeda

Though the ideology underlining the two organizations is very similar, as well as the ethical and legal classification of their actions, there is a perception that the appearance of IS in the international strategic landscape has led to a global reactivation of the jihadist cause. The strategy adopted by Daesh, which is different from Al Qaeda's more traditional one, has made more dynamic the underlying ideology and, especially, the implementation method.

⁹ Reuters, *El Estado Islámico secuestra a 100 miembros de tribus suníes*, Europa Press Internacional, 25th February 2015, <http://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-estado-islamico-secuestra-100-miembros-tribus-sunies-inminente-ofensiva-liberar-tikrit-20150225184838.html>

¹⁰ Europa Press, *Estado Islámico exige el pago de impuesto a los comerciantes de oro de Mosul*, Europa Press Internacional, 21st October 2014, <http://www.europapress.es/internacional/noticia-estado-islamico-exige-pago-impuesto-comerciantes-oro-mosul-20141021075518.html>

¹¹ EFE, *El Estado Islámico “contrata” profesionales para su califato del terror*, 14th September 2014, <http://www.abc.com.py/internacionales/el-estado-islamico-contrata-profesionales-para-su-califato-del-terror-1285811.html>

As months go by it is clear that, nowadays, the rivalry between both conceptions of jihadism is real and that IS is the one climbing positions. However, their cooperation capacity when facing specific situations remains the same, which is something they could take advantage of if IS is defeated or weakened in the future.

For some months now, preexisting jihadist groups have suffered several breakups. Many factions have split from Al Qaeda and now obey the self-proclaimed caliph and current IS leader Ibrahim. The most relevant dissents are those happened within Al Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQMI), which resulted in the creation of the Caliphate Soldiers in Algeria¹². The latter is important to our country due to its geographic and interest proximity, especially in the energy sector and in all areas related with human trafficking from North Africa to our peninsula.

Moreover, we cannot overlook the recent events that took place in Libya. The Libyan or external preexisting factions are involved in the country's civil war, which resulted from the failed international intervention that put an end to Gaddafi's regime, as they fight with the different parties involved in the conflict. Within this framework, there is a great concern regarding actions carried out by groups related to IS, which have voluntarily and publicly showed their support to the self-proclaimed Caliph Ibrahim. These acts, such as the barbaric murder of a group of Coptic Christians¹³, only serve to increase the riskiness of the Libyan scenario as they raise the always-high sectarian war factor at the same time they cause the active implication of more and more international actors in the war, as Egypt¹⁴.

Even more recently, on March 7th, the leader of the African terrorist group Boko Haram, Abubakar Shekau, also voluntarily joined IS. The leader did so by recording his vassalage to the Caliph Ibrahim¹⁵. This implies that the most lethal African terrorist group (quantitatively speaking) – though African victims do not have the same international impact as those from other locations – is now part of the international jihadism “mother house” formed by Daesh and its creation, IS.

The real level of operative cooperation that actually exists between IS and Boko Haram, Caliphate Soldiers, Ansar al Sharia, or even Hamas factions' leadership, among others, compared with the central Al Qaeda traditional ways of acting is highly

¹² Javier Casqueiro, *Soldados del califato son otra escisión de Al Qaeda en Argelia*, El País, 23rd September 2014, http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2014/09/23/actualidad/1411469781_657399.html

¹³ Joanna Paraszczuk, *Lavrov: IS Committing 'Genocide' Against Christians*, Radio Free Europe, 10th March 2015, <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-genocide-accusation-isis-christians-egypt/26879905.html>

¹⁴ Ignacio Fuente Cobo, *Libia, la guerra de todos contra todos*, IEEE, 10th September 2014, http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2014/DIEEEA46-2014_Libia_Guerratodos_Contratodos_IFC._doc_final.pdf

¹⁵ Ignacio Cembrero, *Cuando el mayor grupo terrorista de África se une al mayor grupo terrorista del mundo*, El Mundo, 9th March 2015

questionable. Nevertheless, by the moment, if we do nothing to tackle and break IS's dynamic of expansion and success, it could absorb the great number of groups spread across the world. In this way IS would be able to carry out highly dangerous coordinated actions at a global level, although it could just be due to the scaling effect, outstripping by far its current ability to inspire isolated cells and lone wolves.

In a scenario in which international jihadism reaches a critical mass, the grave nature of their actions could be such that the international community will then have to implement measures of unimaginable scale, though it might be already too late.

Anyways, far from what would be desirable – despite the first but timid military setbacks suffered in Iraq and with the great amount of accessions and sympathy that have taken place this year – IS is still strong. The group is still capable of showing strength, success and expansion to the international public opinion and to its potential supporters; an expansion that should not be so large if we want to protect the world's security interests.

The International Coalition and the time factor

It is obvious that a military solution should be the very last one, or *ultima ratio regis*, as our fellow artillerymen say. This argument is the last solution that nations should resort to in order to extinguish or soften the crises or emergency situations. However, in certain circumstances, and mainly due to the inclusion of the already mentioned urgency factor of the crisis, the order of use of the military tool will have to be reversed. It now has to be a shield that shelters the other different actions being carried out – such as economic, social, humanitarian and political. Without any doubt, these actions are more efficient than the military ones when stopping or redirecting the problem; despite their dilated, as they stand more in the medium- and long-term.

The fight against IS is, obviously, one of those occasions in which military action is essential. Six months have already passed since the beginning of the military campaign started by the International Coalition against Daesh forces, as well as against other actors that should not be forgotten such as Al Nusra Front and other smaller terrorist groups, all acting in Iraq and Syria. For this reason, last February, the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) published a series of data that summarized the main military actions that have taken place¹⁶. Those figures are revealing and make a brief analysis of the campaign's development from the same point of view this article has, which is no other than the impact of the time factor in the conflict at hand.

¹⁶ A daily monitoring of the Syria and Iraq operations can be carried out through the CENTCOM official webpage, <http://www.centcom.mil/>

Firstly, the bilateral military assistance US provided the Baghdad government with and the creation of the International Coalition on September 2014 sought to answer the challenges posed by Daesh, mainly in Iraq and, as far as possible, in Syria.

The strategy adopted by the coalition was based on three essential lines of action:

- a) The execution of selective air strikes, which were reasonably managed to contain IS's advances and paved the way for later attacks of the local forces in the field. At this moment, March 2015, these actions are starting to show results, though these are still very limited¹⁷.
- b) The participation of Arab and Muslim countries in the coalition¹⁸, which destroys one of Daesh's most repeated propaganda arguments, i.e. the alleged existence of a religious conflict between Christians and Muslims.
- c) The training of military forces and local armed groups by highly qualified and professional contingents of foreign troops first in Iraq and later extending to neighboring countries through a process similar to the creation of the Afghan Security Forces during the campaign that took place in the country.

As already mentioned above, these three military lines of action, are complemented by other equally necessary ones, which have different focuses, mainly diplomacy, finance or police.

There is no way to ensure that such adopted lines of action are going to be successful or have the desired effect. Firstly, because it is still early to assess the result of the outlined strategy; and secondly and most importantly because such strategy is backed by previous similar situations given in other scenarios. This judgement can be accompanied by the perception that the plan is adequate to what can be required of countries that typically lead the Western military answer to difficult situations of international crisis. In short, it is an expert, achievable and pragmatic approach to the problem.

Nevertheless, the truth is that, at this moment, the adopted measures seem not to be enough, or at least to have the required intensity, when looking from a temporal analysis. In other words, actions carried out against IS are, undoubtedly, efficient but of slow implementation and effect. This way, if we analyze the addressed three lines of actions from the time factor point of view, the result is the following:

- a) Statistical data from CENTCOM presents very different figures regarding the objectives taken down by targeted air strikes. The data showed there is a mix between relevant objectives, such as destroyed vehicles (even armored ones),

¹⁷ IHS, *OSINT Summary: US airstrike in Afghanistan kills senior Islamic State-appointed commander*, Jane's Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor, 11th February 2015

¹⁸ IHS, *Arab countries co-operate to fight Islamic State*, Jane's Intelligence Review, 6th February 2015

and irrelevant ones, such as heavy weaponry or fighters gatherings. In total, the analysis exhibits something that was already known: the relative low vulnerability of these types of enemies when only faced with air actions.

The lack of relevant strategic objectives, their location, since they are often found in urban environment populated by a large number of civilians, and the erroneous execution of the air strikes conducted by the ground forces present in the enemy's friction line, together with the increasing enemy's ability to smuggle legitimate objectives to forces that respect international legislation and are determined to avoid possible collateral damages, makes the number of programmed actions not equal to the real damage made to the opponent. The consequence is that, after long months of air strikes, IS has been largely contained. Nevertheless, the group has not been as hurt and neutralized as expected or needed.

The upcoming Iraqi attacks that will be carried out in Tikrit¹⁹ and those programmed for Mosul and other locations will be a great opportunity to make a better identification and a more efficient action of the allied air strikes. These attacks are similar to those executed in the Syrian city of Kobane some months ago²⁰, where there was a direct contact between the defense local forces and the jihadist militias.

- b) The Arab and Muslim participation in the International Coalition is a very positive aspect of the alliance. However, the hesitant attitude of countries such as United Arab Emirates^{21 22} underscore that, after more than six months of the creation of the coalition, the alliance is not still well-defined and well-structured. This problem resulted in undeniable coordination difficulties, both political and operative, which decreases the coalition's efficiency.

It would be necessary to go beyond the voluntary motives of the coalition, which has relevant deficiencies regarding the disparity between the commitment and the performance of many of its members. In face of an action that is set to be long and difficult, it would be necessary to move towards a greater cohesion, for which it would be convenient to use the already established international cooperation mechanisms, either within the United Nations or the NATO.

¹⁹ EFE, *Fuerzas iraquíes lanzan una potente ofensiva para recuperar Tikrit*, El Mundo, 2nd March 2015, <http://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2015/03/02/54f4256422601de7518b456e.html>

²⁰ Aljazeera America, *ISIL reportedly attacks Syrian town Kobane from Turkey*, 29th November 2014, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/11/29/isil-reportedly-attackssyriantownkobanifromturkey.html>

²¹ Rosa Meneses, *Emiratos Árabes suspende los bombardeos contra Estado Islámico*, El Mundo, 5th February 2015, <http://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2015/02/05/54d2818d22601db91f8b456e.html>

²² Ángeles Espinosa, *Emiratos reanuda los bombardeos sobre posiciones yihadistas en Siria*, El País, 10th February 2015, http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2015/02/10/actualidad/1423574056_119814.html

- c) Training and instruction of the Iraqi regular forces is the third pillar of the Coalition's strategy. Nowadays, this training is taking place in four different sites located in Iraq territory and each one under the rule of US, Germany, Australia and Spain. In the next months, each of these Building Partner Capability (BCP) centers will train three Iraqi brigades in order to instruct twelve brigades, which will have to be prepared to fight and defeat IS in a six month period. Additionally, Spain, among other countries, is training special operation troops in Baghdad. Certainly, this constitutes a solid plan with potential positive perspectives. Nevertheless, its main disadvantage is the long period needed for these "rookies" to have a certain impact in the battlefield.

Meanwhile, sectarian cleansing continues in areas controlled by Daesh. In addition to this, the plundering and smuggling of the rich regional artistic and archeological heritage²³ carried out by IS, which has provided a significant financial resource since the first occupation of the territory, have now been substituted by the continuous destruction of the ancient ruins, meticulously brought to light and dated by generations of archeologists in emblematic and important sites such as Nineveh, Hatra or Dur Sharrukin²⁴, all these essential for the understanding of the civilizations' development, and even of Humanity itself.

The destruction of the pre-Islamic historical heritage, together with the forced alteration of the pacific coexistence of the different historical communities of the region, may be one of the main consequences of IS brutality in the long-term. Many other damages caused by the group could be repaired or marred as time goes by. Nevertheless, these are already irreversible and the situation will just worsen if the group keeps controlling areas in Syria and Iraq.

Conclusion

It seems like time is in favor of IS, as the advantage deriving from a significant territory and population, either willingly or by force, is added to the image of sustainability and possibility of such pseudo-state. This fact gives IS great advantages as a matter of resources, finances, propaganda and, above all, dynamic leadership of the international jihadism.

Despite the right actions carried out by the International Coalition, the advantages IS enjoys of have not yet been diminished. What is more, the mere observation of the

²³ BBC Mundo, *Así es el contrabando de los botines saqueados que financia a Estado Islámico*, 23th February 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/mundo/noticias/2015/02/150217_contrabando_antiguedades_financiamiento_ei_wbm

²⁴ Francisco Carrión, *El IS destruye la antigua ciudad iraquí de Dur Sharrukin*, El Mundo, 8th March 2015, <http://www.elmundo.es/internacional/2015/03/08/54fc8517e2704e67108b4589.html>

terrorism internal dynamics and its reflection in specific groups and sites since the creation of the Coalition show a growing success of IS, rather than its failure. Consequently, the slow response against the extremist group at the international level is allowing an escalation of human and material damages that seems to have no limit, as well as the reinforcement of the jihadist ideas at a global scale.

Nevertheless, we are starting to see the first signs of weakness in IS, which derive both from a change in momentum on the battlefield, as well as from the testimonies of returning and disillusioned jihadists. Moreover, we should not forget about the increasingly successful diplomatic measures and police operations against the Daesh's material, financial and human resources.

Hence, we are now facing a situation where the International Coalition and Daesh's times are different. In such way, the jihadist group appears to be at the beginning of its decline, while the Coalition is clearly gaining momentum.

History taught us that all great military leaders share something in common, a factor that has been key in a great part of their victories: the ability to detect the pivotal moment of the operations, in a mix of rational analysis and intuition, in which the introduction of a blend of power, opportunity and boldness led them to memorable and decisive victories. Alexander, Frederic the Great or Napoleon are great examples of leaders who possessed this quality.

There are several signs that show us we are reaching this exact moment in our fight against IS, which is why it is essential to accelerate, to the extent possible, the dimension scale and intensity of the measures introduced in order to weaken, defeat and, if possible, destroy IS, at least in its pseudo-state dimension. All this should be done without dismissing the punctual and temporary intervention of international field troops, especially when supporting the local brigades engaged in combat and as a key element to ensure the efficacy of the air operations launched against jihadist militias.

By not doing so, we will probably have to face another war without a defined beginning or ending, but with a vast intermediate phase that can last for decades. Due to their duration and even from an economic point of view, these types of wars end up being more exhausting than other brief, violent and decisive conflicts from the past.

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