

Global Security Briefing – December 2015

Looking Beyond Stalemate in the Middle East

Paul Rogers

Summary

There have been significant recent developments in the war against the Islamic State (IS) relating to the status of the Syria-based militias opposing the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, the expanding role of Russia in the conflict, and the growth of the IS power base in Libya. Together they point to a long-drawn-out war unless the wider diplomatic process can be revitalised.

Introduction

Three recent briefings in this [series](#) have tracked the expansion of the war against IS, with a particular emphasis on the [Russian entry](#) into the war, the development of [IS activity in western countries](#), and the decision in the UK parliament to participate in the air war against IS in Syria. This briefing provides an updated analysis in the light of many developments since November, but does so while placing these in the wider context of the two-year period since IS (then still calling itself the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant: ISIL) first came to prominence when it gained control of the Iraqi city of Fallujah at the start of 2014.

Context

As outlined in the [last briefing](#), the US-led coalition air war against IS in Iraq and Syria since August 2014 has been far more intense than generally reported in the western media, involving 57,000 sorties and 8,300 airstrikes hitting 16,075 targets as of mid-November. US reports indicated that 20,000 IS supporters had been killed, but there were separate indications that the estimates for the number of young people joining IS from abroad had risen from 15,000 to 30,000. While IS has undoubtedly experienced serious losses, it has not only survived but has thrived, not least in Syria where it has actually expanded its territorial control.

In Iraq there has been some retrenchment, but the situation in Ramadi, the politically important capital of Anbar Province is indicative. The Iraqi government started an operation to retake the city in August in anticipation of a short campaign but as of mid-December the whole of the city had still not fallen to government forces. Moreover, when the Pentagon offered the use of US-operated helicopter gunships and Special Forces units, the Iraqi government declined to accept.

Ramadi may well fall in the coming days or weeks but, if previous experience is a guide, this will be because IS will have taken the strategic decision to withdraw the several hundred paramilitaries currently resisting more than ten times that number of government forces. Moreover, the Iraqi government is very heavily dependent on Iranian aid and support from Shi'a militias. This alone means that most of the largely Sunni

population of Anbar Province are likely to oppose any increase in government control of the province.

Most independent US analysts now regard the war against IS as a stalemate, and it is in this respect that three recent developments are particularly relevant.

The Free Syrian Army

When David Cameron argued the case for the UK extending its role in the air war to Syria he did so by emphasising that this would be very much in the context of helping to weaken IS in order to allow Syrian militias to take on and ultimately defeat the movement. Many questions were raised about this stance, not least that these militias were far from united and were also primarily concerned with opposing the Assad regime in Damascus rather than IS in the north and east of the country. Even so, if Cameron could argue this case then much depended on the effectiveness of the largest militia component, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) numbering 35,000 paramilitaries, about half of the 70,000 combatants Cameron reported to be available.

It is now clear, however, that the FSA is in a severely weakened state, with the Pentagon's own publication, [Stars and Stripes](#), describing it as on the verge of collapse. Not only is it suffering from very low morale, lack of equipment and frequent desertions, but it is also seeing a seepage of fighters away to join the avowedly Islamist al-Nusra Front, a large militia group linked to the al-Qaida movement. This collapse effectively means that IS will not be contained, let alone defeated, in Syria by western air action alone.

Russian Involvement

The second development, indirectly linked to the first, is the increase in intensity and extent of the Russian military role in Syria. An [earlier briefing](#) reported on the start of the Russian involvement, suggesting that it was relatively limited in military terms but of considerable political significance in that it demonstrated that Russia was not prepared to see the Assad regime collapse.

In the past month the Russian involvement in the air war has [expanded considerably](#), while still directed primarily at supporting the regime against opposing militias rather than attacking IS. It now has 35 combat aircraft at its main base at Humaymin Air Base near Latakia and additional aircraft, mainly helicopters, at Al-Shayrat Air Base and, reportedly, two other bases in Homs province. It has also launched cruise missiles from surface warships in the Caspian Sea and a submarine in the eastern Mediterranean and has staged attacks by long-range strategic bombers operating from Russia itself.

The level of the Russian involvement is still small compared with the larger US forces operating in both Iraq and Syria, but it is now a significant factor, leading to a renewed optimism among the supporters of the Assad regime that it has a long-term future. Indeed, there are now [indications](#) that the Obama administration is accepting this and is making efforts to develop a compromise with Moscow that puts more emphasis on the control and defeat of IS.

This does, though, raise the issue of the impact of the survival of the Assad regime on the Turkish and Saudi governments, both bitterly opposed to Assad. The likelihood is that

they will be far less inclined to focus on the defeat of IS, particularly as this would mean working more closely with Russia and Iran.

IS in Libya

Finally, in the past month IS has consolidated its hold over the coastal city of Sirte in Libya, while expanding its influence in a number of towns to the east of Benghazi. It is reportedly preparing to expand towards some of the oil and gas fields and export infrastructure in the Sahara southeast of Sirte. There are reports that IS has encouraged at least 2,000 paramilitaries to locate to Syria to reinforce its forces there.

Meetings in Malta facilitated by UN diplomats have worked hard to bring together the rival governments - the weak yet internationally recognised government in the east in Tobruk and the unrecognised government that controls Tripoli and the west of Libya. While some kind of agreement may be completed there are few signs that there will be sufficient unity to have an impact on the expanding IS-controlled territory.

There is therefore a strong possibility that western states, encouraged by France, will next year become involved once more in military actions in Libya. Whatever the impact on the ground, this will greatly aid IS propagandists in their determination to enhance the narrative of the “crusader assault on Islam”.

Conclusion

At the end of 2015, IS remains strong and militarily effective, even if experiencing an intense air war. It appears to have achieved a robust status and to have gained sufficient support for it to survive anything bar a dedicated ground assault, yet there is no support among western states at present for such an assault, not least as it would require many tens of thousands of troops and would get little or no active support from regional Sunni states. There may be an intensification of the air war and the selective use of Special Forces, but nothing beyond that.

Three diplomatic developments in recent weeks are more encouraging but are only the start of processes that will take far greater efforts to yield peace. The first is the inclusion of Iran for the first time alongside Turkey, Russia, Saudi Arabia and many other Arab states, the US and various western states in the Vienna talks on peace in Syria. The second is the Saudi-led effort to generate greater political cohesion between the disparate Syrian opposition factions (excluding IS and al-Nusra) ahead of their inclusion in peace talks. The third is the reconciliation agreement brokered between Libya’s parallel governments towards forming a national unity government.

Countering these developments, to considerable extent, is the escalation in direct military involvement in Syria in the final months of 2015 by so many states, including Russia, Turkey, the US, France and the UK, the heightened tensions between Russia and Turkey over their involvement in Syria, the escalating war in Yemen, as well as the growing likelihood of European military intervention in Libya in 2016. None of this suggests that the world is on the verge of ready solutions to Middle Eastern conflict.

Apart from the crucial need to provide copious humanitarian support for the millions of refugees in countries surrounding Syria, the diplomatic priority has to be a focus on the proxy element that lies behind the survival of the Assad regime, a priority that is the focus of Gabrielle Rifkind’s recent [briefing](#) for ORG. Without that focus and a serious

rethinking of the failing military operation, there is little sign that IS will be much weaker by the end of 2016.

About the Author

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