



U.S. Army Capt. Mark G. Zwirgzdas, deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR), assigned to 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, discusses operations during the offensive to liberate West Mosul from Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) with 9th Iraqi Army Division leaders near Al Tarab, Iraq, March 19, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jason Hull)

Defeating ISIS in Iraq

A Race Against Time

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One of the qualities that makes America a world superpower is our military's ability to quickly mobilize and rapidly deploy anywhere in the world. Yet, during the 2014 to 2016 Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) conflict, former President Barack Obama's policy to use the military as an instrument of last resort was a true testament to his aversion of employing large-scale military interventions overseas after the long wars of Iraq and Afghanistan (Bentley, Holland, Quinn, & Fuller, 2017).

Obama's strategy to support Iraqi forces in their fight against ISIS, rather than sending American ground troops, was a fundamental shift in American policy that exercised

restraint and set new boundaries on the limits of American responsibilities in Iraq and the Middle East.

For the Iraqi people, this meant their government and its army must regroup, prepare, and lead the fight against ISIS to re-liberate their country. However, for Obama's most ardent critics, even though this strategy would result in the most cost-effective method with the least number of American casualties, his restraint was seen as a sign of weakness that further encouraged America's adversaries to challenge the political and military influence of the United States on the world stage (Aftandilian, 2016; West, 2016).



An Iraqi security force member speaks with U.S. Army Lt. Col. Elizabeth Curtis, deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve and commanding officer of the 407th Brigade Support Battalion, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division, at an Iraqi army supply and maintenance area near Qayyarah West Airfield, Iraq, July 23, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Cpl. Rachel Diehm)

Iraq fell short in demanding direct American military intervention (Sharp, 2014; Dalton, 2017). Instead, critics were eager to highlight Obama's failing foreign policies, particularly, the US military's abrupt withdrawal from Iraq – Obama's campaign promise – as the reason for a defeated Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in 2009 to rise to a more potent and powerful insurgent force in ISIS (Bentley et al., 2017).

The hesitation of the American public to demand ground forces to enter Iraq, again, gave the Obama administration the political latitude to execute a more prudent strategy to defeat ISIS in Iraq. A strategy that forced the Iraqi leadership and its military to take responsibility, and one that was less costly to American lives and resources (Jones, 2014). Under Obama's strategy, the Iraqi army would take the lead in the ground campaign against ISIS and spearhead the recovery of their homeland.

The Operating Environment

When U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq in 2011, no one could have predicted the rise of ISIS and its campaign of terror that unleashed three years later. It was not until early 2014, when ISIS defeated a numerically superior Iraqi army in Mosul, that the U.S. acknowledged ISIS as a threat and began targeting their positions in Syria and Iraq (Mosul Study Group, 2017).

ISIS' overwhelming victory in Mosul exposed the failures of Nuri al-Maliki's (Iraq's Prime Minister from 2006-2014) government to convince the Sunni minority to embrace the Shia-led government in Baghdad. Mosul's predominantly Sunni population of two million, long-frustrated with Maliki's vengeful policies against them, openly supported the ISIS advance and greatly contributed to the stunning collapse of the Iraqi army defenses in the city (Robinson et al., 2017). Soon after, the northern cities of Tikrit, Ramadi, Samarra, and Fallujah also fell to ISIS. It took American intervention in the form of sustained air strikes against ISIS positions to halt their advance.

As Americans watched the defeats of the Iraqi army against the brutal ISIS onslaught, the pressure for the Obama administration to respond with swift military action was immense. For lawmakers and the military, there was an inherent drive to protect the financial (over \$800 billion spent in the reconstruction of Iraq) and personal (over 5,000 lives lost during Operation Iraqi Freedom) investments made in Iraq (Mausner & Cordesman, 2011).

To many, losing Iraq to insurgents just three years after the American withdrawal was simply unacceptable, and they demanded Obama to act immediately. Fortunately for the Obama administration, the public outcry to act in

The Light Footprint Strategy

The *light footprint strategy* required a combination of air power, intelligence enablers, special operations forces, and contractors, often leveraging relationships with allies and partnered militaries to take the active role of engaging insurgent threats (Lujan, 2013). For Obama, this strategy was beneficial considering his reluctance to commit the American military to another conflict in the Middle East (Bentley et al., 2017). Additionally, the strategy would not entail a high financial cost and did not totally discount the competence and reliability of the Iraqi forces. Relying on the Iraqi military was a priority because it supported his previous narrative that the Iraqis were ready to be an autonomous country (Office of the Press Secretary, 2014).

The following sections are an examination of Obama's *light footprint strategy* using Lykke's model of ends, ways, and means (Meiser, 2017).

Ends

Obama's *end state* was the total ISIS defeat in Iraq by, with, and through the coordinated actions of trained and capable Iraqi Security Forces under the strategic control of a new Iraqi government under Haider al-Abadi (Iraqi Prime Minister who succeeded Maliki) (Bentley et al., 2017). This was a particularly important end state because it clearly restricted the direct combat involvement of American troops. American forces would only be able to accompany, advise, assist, and enable the Iraqi Security Forces' combined arms operations in the campaign against ISIS.

Since the force required to execute the strategy was minimal compared to a large-scale deployment, the

strategy not only provided a cost-effective response in terms of manpower and equipment, but also maintained the U.S. military's operational reach in the region.

Additionally, with American and coalition partners' support, the strategy limited the possibility of stirring up local resentments, bolstering ISIS propaganda and recruitment in the region (McManus, 2014). To achieve the desired end state, coalition forces would utilize air and ground assets in support of the Iraqi ground offensive.

Ways and Means

The *light footprint strategy* required the employment of coalition air and ground assets (means) to enable three critical efforts (ways):

1. Attack and degrade ISIS command nodes and high-value targets in Iraq and Syria.
2. Support the Iraqi Security Forces assault with close air support and indirect fires.
3. Disrupt ISIS financial and recruitment networks to reduce the influx of cash flow and foreign fighters into Iraq (Morrissette, 2015).

Degrading ISIS capabilities was a top priority following the fall of Mosul. At its height in 2014, ISIS controlled over 100,000 square kilometers of territory and was rapidly expanding (Department of the Army, 2017). Fortunately, coalition air strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria helped halt the rapid advance inside of Iraq. Although not a preferred method to win back territories lost to ISIS, the air campaign nevertheless succeeded in containing the ISIS advance and degrading its fighters. By 2015, just a year after their impressive victory in Mosul, ISIS was clearly on the defensive.

The damage of the air campaign against ISIS was immense. Data collected from the start of the air campaign until the end of 2016 shows that coalition forces conducted over 17,000 air strikes against 31,900 ISIS targets, killing an approximate 23,000 ISIS fighters (Dalton, 2017; Nance, 2016).

The air campaign also succeeded in providing the ISF the valuable time needed to reorganize, train, equip, and prepare its forces in the upcoming offensive. With the support of coalition air and integrated fires, Iraqi Army units, augmented by Shia militias and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, took the offensive against ISIS in Iraq. From Volesky and Noble (2017):

This time, the ISF was unequivocally in the lead, and only the Iraqis had the means and authority to close with and destroy the enemy on the ground in close combat, arguably the priority requirement for campaign success. This time, coalition forces could not do it themselves; they had neither the force nor the authority to do so. Therefore, the coalition advise-and-assist purpose was, at its heart, designed to assist the Iraqis to grow and field the levels of organizational confidence, trust, and respect necessary to win against this enemy on this ground. (p. 3).

ISIS lost over 25 percent of its territory and its poorly executed offensive strategy to capture Palmyra in Syria resulted in a stunning defeat (Nance, 2016).

Back in Iraq, the push to recover Iraqi territory was progressing, albeit slowly. Iraqi forces liberated Tikrit (April 2015), Ramadi (March 2016), and Fallujah (June 2016). Mosul, ISIS' previous major strategic victory, was back in Iraqi control by July 2017 after an intense and bloody campaign that lasted nine months (Department of the Army, 2017).

But success against ISIS required more than just overwhelming troop numbers. It also required a multi-faceted strategy that disrupted its financial reserves and recruitment activities while the ground campaign raged on. The strategy involved both an operational and strategic approach.



A U.S. Army paratrooper and Iraqi federal policeman guard the entrance to the Combined Joint Operations Center during an operational brief for the offensive into western Mosul at Hamam al-Alil, Iraq, Feb. 16, 2017. The breadth and diversity of partners supporting the coalition demonstrate the global and unified nature of the endeavor to defeat ISIS. CJTF-OIR is the global coalition to defeat ISIS. (U.S. Army photo by Staff Sgt. Jason Hull)



An Iraqi Security Forces member provides security near a patrol base in Mosul, Iraq, June 22, 2017. A global coalition of more than 60 regional and international nations have joined together to enable partner forces to defeat ISIS and restore stability and security. Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve is the global coalition to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria. (U.S. Army photo by Cpl. Rachel Diehm.)

The operational approach included targeting of personnel and infrastructure in Iraq and Syria to disrupt cash flows and revenues ("Coalition Forces Kill ISIS," 2017). Destroying oil refineries and related infrastructures in ISIS-controlled areas helped obstruct a \$500 million a year revenue-stream for ISIS (Lister, 2014).

The strategic approach involved employing financial intelligence and law enforcement capabilities to assist partner nations in identifying and disrupting monetary transactions that fed directly into ISIS coffers. Other sources of ISIS revenue included: selling antiquities on the black market, robbery, extortion, and kidnapping activities (Department of Homeland Security, 2016).

Additionally, coalition forces leveraged unilateral and partner-sponsored information operations to counter ISIS propaganda. Close cooperation through coordinated law enforcement and intelligence sharing also hindered the flow of foreign fighters both to and from the conflict areas (Government Accountability Office, 2017). Restrictions on foreign travel and border enforcement helped mitigate the flow of foreign fighters in the region, limiting ISIS' ability to recoup fighters they lost on the ground.

The successful campaign to liberate ISIS-held territories in Iraq took an estimated two years to complete. As Iraqi and American forces celebrated the tactical vic-

tories in Iraq, Abadi's government in Baghdad followed these military victories with needed political reforms to rebuild a battered nation and bring a disenfranchised Sunni minority into the democratic process. Only through political, social and economic reforms can a young and newly democratic Iraq fend off the threats of other future insurgencies inside and outside its borders.

Additionally, initial ISIS successes mobilized Islamic radicals from all over the world to travel to Syria and fight under the ISIS flag. It demonstrated to the world the effectiveness the ISIS ideology was in recruiting the Muslim youth to their cause. As Iraq hoped to find reconciliation with the Sunnis, world leaders also had to find socio-economic solutions that addressed the root cause of the radicalization of the world's young Muslim populace.

Aftermath

Obama's *light footprint strategy* achieved its economic and military objectives. Yet, some critics still measured the strategy's success against the opportunities it missed and the threats it underwrote throughout the campaign. Particularly sensitive, was the two years it took Iraqi and coalition forces to defeat ISIS in Iraq. In those two years, even outside the Middle East, ISIS was able to orchestrate terrorist act, spreading fear and brutality from the Mid-

dle East to the west. From January 2015 to March 2016 alone, 84 ISIS-directed and inspired attacks occurred globally, taking over 1,010 lives and wounding countless others (Yourish, Watkins, & Giratikanon, 2016). This death toll does not include the tens of thousands that perished under direct ISIS rule.

Furthermore, Obama's reluctance to commit a full-scale military mobilization in the fight against ISIS solidified his aversion to starting another war in the Middle East – a position that appeared to weaken American resolve throughout the region and the world (Shear & Baker, 2015). As a result, adversaries continue to challenge American power and influence on the world stage. Russian aircraft buzz over American warships, Iran captures American sailors, and China's military expansions continue unchallenged in the South China Sea (West, 2016).

Throughout the conflict, as pressure mounted for direct intervention with a ground offensive, Obama moved to reassure the American public and the world that the *light footprint strategy* was working (Dombrowski & Alpher, 2015). In fact, Holland (2015) argued that ISIS' shift to attack overseas was actually a sign of desperation, not strength, as these attacks were designed

to incite violence against Muslim communities in the west that would feed into their propaganda and recruitment objectives—yet would ultimately fail in bolstering their numbers enough to stop the Iraqi military ground campaign.

The resulting tactical victories helped regain the pride of the Iraqi army and perhaps equally important, earned the confidence of the Iraqi people.

Conclusion

The Obama administration's strategy, albeit slower than a traditional ground campaign, presents a suitable alternative to the traditional large-scale military operations of the past. Eliminating the substantial military requirements in the Middle East provides the U.S. administration with the opportunity to exercise fiscal reforms, strengthening the American economy.

A reengagement in Iraq would undoubtedly have cost American lives and billions of dollars that would have further strained America's economy and fed into ISIS' propaganda and recruiting strategies, which would have fueled further resentment against the west and continued the traditional cycle of violence in the region.

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