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The Rise of the Islamic State: The Strategic Surprise

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It was only a matter of time before the debate began about who was responsible for the failed strategic assessment about the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Less than a year ago, few people knew about ISIS and the risks it represented. Suddenly, within just a few months, ISIS leads the list of threats of a long line of nations, beginning with the United States, and is considered a threat so severe that exceptional steps must be taken in order to confront it. ISIS' dramatic rise to success, the threat it emanates, the shock aroused by its cruelty, and the sense that fighting it is liable to take a long time have all led to the inevitable accusations, especially in the United States, about why ISIS' capabilities were not properly assessed and who is to blame.

President Obama contributed his share to the debate by placing the blame on the US intelligence community. Obama claimed that Gen. James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, and as such, the most senior figure of the intelligence community, confirmed that intelligence underestimated the importance of the developments in Syria, which had created a governing vacuum attracting jihadists from all over the world, ultimately resulting in Iraq's disintegration. The President added that the Iraqi army's ability to fight Sunni extremists had been exaggerated.

The US intelligence community did not take this lying down. Current and veteran senior unidentified figures within the intelligence community asserted that since the end of 2013 warnings were issued indicating the rising threat posed by jihadists, but these warnings commanded insufficient attention from the administration, which believed this was a local, containable problem. According to intelligence sources, since early 2014, especially after ISIS assumed control of Fallujah, 40 km west of Baghdad, growing numbers of warnings pointed to ISIS as an increasingly powerful force in Iraq's north and west that was liable to expand its influence over the country as a whole, with Iraqi forces hard pressed to cope with the threat. According to these sources, the administration avoided taking any serious action other than increasing aid to the Iraqi army, because it didn't want to be drawn into another war in Iraq. Some say that the administration was more concerned with the risk to Western nations posed by jihadists' return to Europe than

with the situation in Iraq itself. Some politicians also claimed that ISIS' growing strength was not the result of an intelligence failure but rather a policy failure, specifically, a lack of understanding of the connection between the situations in Syria and in Iraq and the failure to take action against jihadists in Syria and prevent their progress in Iraq.

Absent credible documents and other evidence, the debate cannot be settled at this time, but the truth is likely to be found somewhere in the middle. In February 2014, in unclassified testimony before the Senate Armed Forces Committee, Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn, Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, said that in 2014 ISIS would in all likelihood try to seize control of additional Iraqi and Syrian territory, as in fact occurred in Fallujah, and maintain strongholds in Syria. But, Flynn said, ISIS' ability to control the area would depend on its resources, local support, and the response of the Iraqi security forces and Syrian opposition groups. Flynn also estimated that most Sunnis apparently oppose ISIS actions and ideology, but some Sunni tribes are cooperating with ISIS in response to the Iraqi government's hostile attitude toward them.

In other words, at least four months before ISIS' major breakthrough in Iraq and its capture of Mosul in June 2014, the DIA did warn that ISIS would try to seize control of more Iraqi areas. Nonetheless, the assessment also seemed to show that the DIA did not foresee the collapse of the Iraqi army or the speed with which ISIS would sweep through Iraq, and may not have properly understood the connection between ISIS strongholds in Syria and Iraq, which helped ISIS succeed in Iraq.

Beyond finger-pointing, several reasons can be cited for the flawed assessment. First, intelligence gathering was severely hampered. While US forces were on Iraqi soil, starting in 2003, US intelligence agencies built an outstanding intelligence structure, based mostly on SIGINT, visual intelligence, and a large network of HUMINT. Once the US left Iraqi soil at the end of 2011, many of these capabilities were lost. The Iraqi government did not sign an agreement with the United States that would have allowed US forces to maintain a physical army presence in Iraq, helpful also in terms of intelligence gathering. Consequently, the intelligence community had no way of providing credible, detailed information about ISIS' planned attacks, targets, and timing. Even after ISIS' successes, when the severity of the threat posed by the organization was clear, the intelligence community found it difficult to provide high quality intelligence about the organization's manpower, military and financial capabilities, leadership, and planned targets for attack.

Second, a significant portion of ISIS' success stemmed from the Iraqi security forces' weakness and lack of determination, qualities not sufficiently appreciated in time. The common assessment was that the Iraqi security forces couldn't defend Iraq against an external hostile army but could be relied on to confront internal threats, including armed militias. At the basis of this expectation lay the assumption that the size of the Iraqi

forces – some 650,000 military and police personnel – and the serious efforts made by the United States in constructing them over some six years would be enough to maintain internal security. It is unclear whether the intelligence community or any other party in the United States was placed in charge of reviewing the effectiveness of these forces' performance; in any case, the United States seems not to have had a clear idea how they would function when push came to shove.

Finally, assessing developments in Iraq and ISIS successes was by definition extremely difficult. Intelligence researchers and decision makers try to use their country's and region's history and personal experience as touchstones for assessing new phenomena. But in the case of ISIS, history does not help. There is no precedent, at least in the Middle East, of a relatively small terrorist organization seizing control of vast tracts of land while quickly crushing a military force built and trained to confront it. And history can be misleading. When US forces left Iraq in 2011, al-Qaeda in Iraq was in dire straits thanks to the serious damage wrought by the coalition since 2007; one might assume this would be the fate also of its successor. Moreover, despite the difficult internal situations of both Iraq and Syria and their territorial contiguity, the two nations had been separate entities for decades, and it was hard to predict the relationship that would form among jihadist organizations operating in both, a relationship that played a key role in moving ISIS forces from one to the other while in effect obliterating the shared border.

Information is likewise not always useful. Even had there not been a loss of intelligence sources in Iraq, it would have been difficult to arrive at a correct assessment on ISIS' rapid success. In such cases there is no hard evidence that could predict what was likely to happen. At best, the intelligence community may have attained high quality intelligence on ISIS' intentions, but that would hardly have been enough to determine the extent and speed with which the organization realized its goals, if at all, because these depended on the capabilities and determination of its enemies, material resources on hand, and backing from potential supporters.

The US intelligence community will likely continue to find it difficult to confront ISIS. It will presumably learn from its mistakes and improve its intelligence coverage, but ISIS will remain a tough nut to crack. It is hard to penetrate an ideologically motivated organization like ISIS because of the compartmentalization characteristic of such a sealed outfit. It melts in with the population, making it difficult to identify operatives, and leaves a very low signature and few discernible targets. Moreover, the US intelligence community is concerned that the revelations by Edward Snowden, the former NSA agent, disclosed some of the agency's eavesdropping abilities and therefore terrorist organizations such as ISIS are more on guard than ever against intelligence penetration.