



Hybrid tactics: ISIL & Co.

by Florence Gaub

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), hybrid warfare differs somewhat from that of state actors like Russia. In this region, it is non-state actors (which often harbour state-like ambitions) that employ hybrid tactics to target governments they deem illegitimate. And, more often than not, their use is determined by resource constraints rather than tactical considerations.

Though hybrid tactics have long been present in the MENA, it was in the summer of 2006 during Hizbullah's conflict with Israel that they really came to the fore. Over the course of several weeks, the Shia organisation displayed a remarkable capacity to blend guerrilla methods with more conventional ones in the face of a substantial military assault by the Israeli Defence Forces.

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which gained notoriety in the summer of 2014 following its rapid expansion, is taking this regional hybrid trend to the next level of territoriality. Although not the first non-state actor with aspirations to govern (others include the Palestinian Liberation Organisation, al-Shabab in Somalia, and Lebanese militias during the country's civil war), ISIL has succeeded in conquering and holding a territory roughly the size of the UK. The group now manages a population of some 8 million and remains on the offensive in spite of a concerted international effort to neutralise it.

Although it is debatable how much of this largely depopulated desert area is fully under ISIL's jurisdiction,

the organisation nevertheless controls oil infrastructure, a number of major urban settlements and network of roads – and has therefore been described as a 'proto-state' (i.e. an entity in the early stages of statehood).

From terror to governance

To a large extent, it was the adoption of hybrid tactics which allowed ISIL to evolve from a terrorist organisation to the political-military entity it is today. This can be traced back to 2010 when the group exclusively tasked former Baathist officers (who possessed the necessary tactical know-how) with military decision-making. From that point on, ISIL was able to employ conventional military tactics, acquire and learn to use sophisticated heavy military equipment, and develop ways to demoralise Iraqi military personnel. ISIL, however, has not given up on 'asymmetric' tactics altogether: when required, it still uses improvised explosive devices, for example. It is therefore a quintessential hybrid organisation in military terms.

ISIL's troop strength ranges somewhere between 20,000 and 60,000 – a number which places it closer to militias than terrorist groups. However, in contrast to militias which tend to have a national or even local agenda, ISIL has 'franchised' into Egypt and Libya through resident terrorist organisations which have sworn allegiance to the so-called caliphate. Its territorial ambitions are therefore regional or even global, whereas its military stance is always determined by the local strategic environment.



Just like Hizbullah, ISIL has displayed the capacity to adapt to its local context: its strategy consists of the sum of its tactics – essentially a bottom-up approach in military terms. Wherever it cannot employ conventional forces, it resorts to ‘classical’ terrorist methods, such as planting bombs. Yet it was also able to conquer areas in Syria and Iraq using armoured vehicles and coordinated movements of several teams of eight to ten men carrying out building-by-building, block-by-block ‘clear and hold’ operations in urban terrain. Its command-and-control structures are flexible and it makes use of social networking tools such as WhatsApp and Facebook to communicate orders.

ISIL has also managed to develop a powerful propaganda machine, mostly through social media. In addition to being a tool for recruitment and fundraising, it is also used to demoralise its opponents before an attack is launched. The same machinery is then used following a battle to convey a message of invincibility to Western and Arab audiences alike. Its messaging is carefully crafted: execution videos are not only digitally enhanced and highly dramatic, but they also omit the goriest parts in order to ensure they are aired on TV.

Unfortunately, blocking ISIL propaganda is virtually impossible. Although Twitter shut down its main account, some 55,000 sympathisers are still actively promoting the group or going on the offensive on its behalf. Earlier in 2015, ISIL-linked hackers managed to access the account of US Central Command and send threatening messages to US soldiers. A few months later, they took control of the Twitter account of French television network TV5Monde and released the personal details of French military personnel.

Perhaps most worryingly, ISIL is not only an efficient military hybrid organisation, but has also managed to hold the territory under its control thanks to its governance capacity. The organisation has taken on mundane tasks ranging from waste, water, and electricity management to traffic and customs controls. Moreover, it keeps the population firmly in line with a tough – and gruesome – judicial system. An insurgency from within its territory would therefore be difficult to organise, regardless of whether it is an entirely internal-driven process or whether it receives financial or material support from outsiders.

Western responses

The challenge posed by entities operating in a hybrid manner is that defeating them requires an equally hybrid approach. Defeating ISIL or similar groups will therefore require not only ‘classical’ military means

such as the use of airpower, but also elements drawn from counterinsurgency operations. For the time being, the international community has fought ISIL mainly with aerial strikes, whereas the Iraqi military and Shia or Kurdish militias have conducted ground operations.

Since strikes against its positions (mainly in Iraq) began in 2014, ISIL has lost 9.4% of its territory and suffered around 10,000 casualties. However, it has made up for these losses with spectacular gains (such as the cities of Ramadi and Palmyra), and therefore regained momentum. Furthermore, ISIL’s recruitment drive targeting disillusioned or radicalised individuals continues unabated.

It has successfully adapted to the international aerial campaign by reducing its teams to two or three vehicles or eight to ten men, thereby making them more difficult to spot. Its troops continue to show superior levels of morale compared to the Iraqi infantry, and any attempts to resist or desert in its territories have been met with brutal force. By and large, attempts to weaken the political support or acquiescence ISIL enjoys amongst Iraqi Sunnis have failed because Baghdad has dragged its feet on major reforms such as repealing all remaining elements of de-Baathification measures. To make matters more complicated, in contrast to Russia, ISIL is not seen by any state as a potential interlocutor for political negotiations.

Europe has treated ISIL as a conventional military force in Iraq and to some extent in Syria, but as a terrorist organisation back home. Consequently, ISIL is being fought with conventional military means in the MENA, and with counter-terrorist measures in Europe. However, in Syria and Iraq, ISIL needs to also be battled with typical counter-terrorist measures such as increased intelligence gathering, political measures targeting the population under the group’s control, and tailored incentives to defect and collaborate (similar to ‘crown witness’-type schemes).

In Europe, ISIL is likely to go beyond al-Qaeda-style hit-and-run or suicide attacks. In fact, the organisation’s ambition and capacity for territorial control might indeed lead to a hypothetical scenario in which ISIL seizes key infrastructure in European cities, even for a short period of time. As well as causing severe disruption, this would be a boon to its narrative of invincibility. Treating ISIL as the hybrid organisation it is – and responding to it regardless of the terrain – is, therefore, the first step in defeating it.

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