Unanswered War: Evaluating U.S. Military Operations Against the ‘Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)’

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Introduction

On 10 September 2014, President Barak H. Obama, in a speech to the American people, explained his Administration’s policy of greatly expanding military strikes against the ‘Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS)’. The United States had already begun launching air strikes against ISIS on 8 August, but through an extremely rare primetime speech delivered on the eve of the thirteenth anniversary of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, President Obama once again emphasised the increased threat posed by ISIS. According to CENTCOM officials, ‘the name INHERENT RESOLVE is intended to reflect the unwavering resolve and deep commitment of the U.S. and its partner nations in the region and around the globe to eliminate the terrorist group ISIL and the threat they pose to Iraq, the region, and the wider international community. It also symbolises the willingness and dedication of coalition members to work closely with our friends in the region and apply all available dimensions of national power necessary—diplomatic, informational, military, economic—to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL’.

However, as became clear soon after this speech, when the Obama Administration began embarking in earnest on military operations against ISIS, it had set only extremely ambiguous policy goals and strategies, and had merely vaguely start the war, pushed by public opinion. Hence, at the time this paper was written (April 2015), U.S. military operations had not brought about any change to the strategic conditions in Syria and Iraq, and these conditions are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future as long as the United States does not significantly shift its policy.

Based on the above, the objective of this paper is, after investigating the political and strategic background of the U.S. military operations against ISIS, to analyse the validity

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and extent to which the goals of these operations have been achieved, as well as to consider the prospects for the future.

Generally, in the context of war and strategy, there exist three hierarchical levels: the political/strategic level, the operational/theatre level, and the battle level. These levels constitute interdependent links: the political level is ranked the highest, and the lower levels provide a foundation for the higher level. If tactics signifies the guidelines for force employment at the operational/theatre level and battle signifies the specific actions taken when executing military operations, strategy signifies the broad policy at the political level to plan and execute military operations and connect them to achieving the ultimate political goal.

Below, this paper first points out, through an analysis of the political/strategic level, the ‘absence of strategy’ in the Obama Administration. Next, under the constraint of this ‘absence of strategy’, the tactics actually carried out at the operational/theatre level and their results are considered. Finally, the findings obtained from this analysis are integrated and an evaluation of the U.S. military operations against ISIS (at the time of writing) is considered.

I. An investigation of the political/strategic level: the ‘absence of strategy’ in the Obama Administration

‘No one starts a war—or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so—without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it’. Clausewitz stated this in the past, but in actuality politicians from time to time, or even quite frequently, start wars while being vague on these aspects.

The point made in this section is that: the Obama Administration embarked on the

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2 While each respective category is further sub-divided according to the commentator, there is broad agreement on the concept of ‘the hierarchy of strategy’. For example, John Collins defines the levels of strategy as: National Strategies; National Security Strategies; National Military Strategies; Regional Strategies; Theater Military Strategies; Operational Art and Tactics. And he concludes that: ‘Weakness anywhere could be ruinous, but requirements for sound strategies come first’. John M. Collins, Military Strategy: Principles, Practices, and Historical Perspectives (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 2002), p. 5. See also, Colin S. Gray, Modern Strategy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Edward N. Luttwak, Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace, revised and enlarged edition (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2001).

3 Carl von Clausewitz, On War, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 579. Continuing from this sentence, Clausewitz added the explanation that, 'the former is its political purpose; the latter its operational objective'. 
use of military force against ISIS without having any achievable political goals or a clear strategy for reaching them. This was because of the deep-rooted concerns that had been smouldering within the Administration regarding the following two facts. The first was the fact that American society could endure no more human and financial burdens beyond those it was currently carrying, and the second was the fact that ISIS is not a threat to the United States’ vital interests. Below, we will look at these facts in order.

The resources available for military operations against ISIS were limited

The first point that should be confirmed is the curse of the ‘legacy’ to be left before the close of President Obama’s term of office at the end of 2016. Obama had taken the office of the presidency by publically pledging to ‘end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq’, and the President himself was aware more than anyone of the war weariness of the American people. In this context, starting a new war, especially one in the Middle East, was something that Obama could not let happen. In fact, in November 2014, Former Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel advised him that the dispatch of a small number of ground troops would be necessary to defeat ISIS, and he was unceremoniously replaced by Obama because of his disagreement with the Administration. This was because the dispatch of ground troops raised the possibility of the United States being dragged into the quagmire of a new war and the sense of crisis that this could ruin Obama’s public pledge (or, his ‘political legacy’) to ‘end the two wars’.

In addition, in order to meet its vast debt obligations through economic measures after the Lehman shock of 2008, the United States is implementing ‘sequestration’ to reduce government spending by $1.2 trillion from fiscal 2013 to fiscal 2021, and of this amount, $500 billion must be cut from defence spending alone. On the other hand, according to provisional calculations announced by the U.S. Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments at the end of September 2014, the cost of U.S. military operations against ISIS through September 24 is likely between $780 and $930 million. The cost of future operations depends primarily on how long operations continue, the intensity of air operations, and whether additional ground forces are deployed beyond what is already planned. Assuming a moderate level of air operations and 2,000 deployed ground forces,

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the costs would likely run between $200 and $320 million per month: if air operations are conducted at a higher pace and 5,000 ground forces are deployed, the costs would be between $350 and $570 million per month: if operations expand significantly to include the deployment of 25,000 U.S. troops on the ground, as some have recommended, costs would likely reach $1.1 to $1.8 billion per month. On an annualized basis, the lower-intensity air operations could cost $2.4 to $3.8 billion per year, the higher-intensity air operations could cost $4.2 to $6.8 billion per year, and deployment of a larger ground contingent could drive annual costs as high as $13 to $22 billion.7

In February 2015, the Department of Defense submitted a $585 billion fiscal 2016 funding request to Congress, reversing a five-year decline in military spending and blowing past mandatory spending caps imposed by Congress. The plan would give the Pentagon a base budget of $534 billion in fiscal 2016; about $38 billion more than fiscal 2015, with an additional $51 billion for the expanding U.S. military operations against ISIS; but placing even more pressure on a federal budget already showing signs of being in dire financial straits.8 It is difficult to assume the U.S. economy withstanding such enormous military spending over a long period. In other words, the resources that the United States can invest into military operations against ISIS are very limited, and the more its military spending swells, the greater the pressure placed on the federal budget.

ISIS does not threaten the United States’ vital interests

The second point that should be confirmed is that ISIS does not threaten the United States’ vital interests. Up to the present time, the Obama Administration has given the following three broad reasons for embarking on military operations against ISIS. The first is the possibility that the threat of global terrorism will spread across the world; the second is the threat posed to the U.S. economy by ISIS strikes against Iraq, particularly its oil sector; and the third is that a serious humanitarian crisis is occurring because of ISIS. However, leaving aside the period around the end of the 20 century when the United

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States boasted overwhelming national power, do these factors really pose such a pressing problem that the United States, which is currently facing serious financial instability, stirs itself and takes action?

First, let us consider the fear that if ISIS is left unchecked, global terrorism will spread across the world and the safety of the American people will be threatened. Simply stated, this claim is extremely dubious. According to the logic of ISIS, the ‘near enemy (al-’aduw al-qarib)’ poses a greater ‘existential threat’ than the ‘far enemy (al-’aduw al-ba’id)’, and attacks on Israel and the United States—it is ‘familiar enemies’ for radical Islamist movements—should not be the top priority. Rather, attacking those who are considered the ‘near enemy’, ‘infidels (kafir)’, or ‘apostate (murtadd)’, such as Shiites in Iraq and al-Asad regime in Syria are the priorities for ISIS. In actuality, even when more than 1,000 civilians were killed in Gaza following the air strikes against Gaza by Israel on July 2014, ISIS still did not denounce Israel.

Moreover, John Mueller and Mark Stewart point out that, to begin with, even the threat of global terrorism is only a ‘delusion’: anxiety from within the media and among the people is in fact invented only after the 9.11 terrorist attacks in 2001. According to their investigation, ‘in all, extremist Islamist terrorism—whether associated with al-Qa’ida or not—has claimed 200 to 400 lives yearly worldwide outside war zones. That is 200 to 400 too many, of course, but it is about the same number as bathtub drownings every year in the United States’. Further, ‘applying the extensive datasets on terrorism that have been generated over the last decades, we conclude that the chances of an American perishing at the hands of a terrorist at present rates is one in 3.5 million per year—well within the range of what risk analysts hold to be ‘acceptable risk’.”

Actuary, this point is a clear-cut difference between ISIS and al-Qa’ida: from 1998 to 2003, Usama bin Laden argued repeatedly that Jerusalem could only be liberated by a direct attack on the far enemy, the ‘alliance’ between Jews and their superpower patron, the United States. For more details, see Fawaz A. Gerges, The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Steven Brooke, ‘The Near and Far Enemy Debate’, in Assaf Moghadam and Brian Fishman, eds., Fault Lines in Global Jihad: Organizational, Strategic and Ideological Fissures (New York: Routledge, 2011).


John Mueller and Mark G. Stuart, ‘The Terrorism Delusion: America’s Overwrought Response to September 11’, International Security, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Summer 2012), pp. 91, 95-96. The ratio of Americans who are murdered, or who die due to traffic accidents and cancer, are one person in every 22,000 people, 8,000 people, and 500 people respectively.

For the detail discussions on goals and strategies of terrorism, see Louise Richardson, What Terrorists
Certainly, at the time of writing this paper, a few Americans have been murdered in a brutal manner by ISIS. However, ultimately, all of these murders occurred in Syria or Iraq and there have been no terrorist acts carried out on U.S. soil. When considering the military costs of destroying ISIS, which has stated that the United States is not a direct target, the threat posed by ISIS on the U.S. mainland can be considered to be an ‘acceptable risk’.

Next, what about the concern that Iraq’s oil sector will lose its ability to function due to ISIS attacks, striking a major blow to the U.S. economy? It can be concluded that this is also a very dubious claim. Since the summer of 2014, the crude oil price has been trending downward, and by December 2014, it had fallen as far as around $60 per barrel. While this ultimately is the result of the market principle, with the main factor being the easing of supply and demand, the decline of so-called ‘geopolitical risks’ in Iraq is also having an effect. Certainly, following the fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014, the crude oil price temporarily rose. But after that, at the very least by September, when Obama announced a major expansion in military strikes against ISIS, it was clear that the possibility of full-fledged ISIS attack against the southern part of Iraq, which is where the oil fields are concentrated and where many Shiite Iraqis live, was extremely small. Moreover, even if Iraq’s export of crude oil (about 300 million barrels per day) was temporarily halved, the impact on the international oil market and the U.S. economy is expected to be only very slight. What can be said here is that even when viewed from an economic aspect, there are no rational grounds to invest significant funds into eradicating ISIS from Iraq.

Finally are the concerns over a serious humanitarian crisis, which is an undeniable fact. However, up to the present time, the Western countries, including the United States, have repeatedly pretended not to see the serious humanitarian crises occurring in various regions around the world as long as they posed no threat to their vital interests. As Alex Bellamy and Nicholas Wheeler argue: ‘States almost always have mixed motives for intervening and are rarely prepared to sacrifice their own soldiers overseas unless they have self-interested reasons for doing so. For realist, this means that genuine humanitarian intervention is imprudent because it does not serve the national interests’.13 In other words, in the current international political environment, a humanitarian crisis is


not a decisive reason for a superpower to embark on military intervention.\(^{14}\)

The 'absence of strategy' in the Obama Administration

As is evident from that we have discussed so far, for the Obama Administration, the rational grounds that would justify military operations against ISIS are very weak, whether discussing ‘methods’ or ‘objectives’.

Conversely, the war weariness of the American people, which became the driving force pushing Obama to the presidency in 2008, changed gradually, because there were reports on a seemingly daily basis of American journalists being murdered by brutal methods and other inhumane acts carried out by ISIS. According to an opinion poll from the Pew Research Center, in October 2014 the percentage of American people who supported military operations against ISIS was more than half (57%), and those who supported the dispatch of ground troops rose to nearly 40%. Moreover, as of February 2015, these percentages rose to 63% and 47% respectively, so, while only gradually, the American people’s support for military operations is increasing.\(^{15}\)

It is often noted that among recent presidents, Obama has shown that he is particularly sensitive to trends in public opinion. In other words, it seems as if he was pushed to military action by this trend in public opinion and reports by the mass media that fanned the flames and exaggerated the threat ISIS actually poses. While remaining ambiguous on the answer to the question of ‘why are we going to war’, Obama started a war against ISIS vaguely.

Now since the answer to the question ‘why are we going to war’ is vague, inevitably, the answer to the question on the political objective of ‘what will we achieve by the war’ is also going to be vague. For example, the Obama Administration has set a target for the military operations to ‘degrade and ultimately destroy’ ISIS: in order to achieve this, it is inevitable to dispatch ground troops at any stage and gain control in some vital areas. However, it is clear, at the beginning, that United States does not possess the human and financial resources to dispatch ground troops: as an alternative proposal it came up with a plan for military operations, which will be discussed in the next section, called the ‘Afghan Model’. This is a tactical guideline whereby indigenous allies replace American conventional ground troops by exploiting U.S. airpower and small numbers of American


special operations forces (SOF).

However, regarding these indigenous allies, even if there are some candidates in Iraq, what about Syria, where there are no local ground forces that can be trusted? Since March 2011, the United States has been searching within Syria for ‘moderate’ anti-regime forces that can be trusted. But as of 10 October, as Vice President Joe Biden admitted frankly, ‘there was no moderate middle, because the moderate middle are made up of shopkeepers, not soldiers’. Within this context, is it possible to pursue both two goals that removal of the al-Assad regime and destruction of ISIS simultaneously? Is it even actually desirable, for the time being, to eliminate ISIS from Iraq? There has been no change to the Administration’s ‘absence of strategy’ for Syria since September 2014, when Obama confessed honestly that ‘we don’t have a strategy yet for Islamic State’, and October 2014, when Hagel sent National Security Advisor Susan Rice a fiercely critical memo on this point.

Also, even in Iraq, replacing U.S. ground troops with principally Shiite-majority Iraqi armed forces and Shiite militia can be, at the beginning, expected to result in a relapse of sectarian violence. It is also possible that a military intervention by U.S. forces could oppositely fan the flames of sectarian conflict. Even supposing that ISIS is eliminated, if there is a danger of Iraq once again being plunged into civil war and becoming a failed state, then everything would end up right back where it started. If Clausewitz was alive today, it is not hard to imagine that he would be strongly critical of this approach by the Obama Administration.

II. Investigation of the operations/tactics level: a re-investigation of the ‘Afghan Model’

As was discussed above, the Obama Administration, while continuing to have no clear political goals or strategy, has embarked on vague military operations after being pushed in that direction by public opinion and the media. However, realistically, it is impossible for them to invest a huge amount of resources in these operations; moreover,

the grounds for these operations are extremely weak. Therefore, the Obama Administration had to execute military operations that achieved a certain level of results at the absolute minimum cost.

The ‘Afghan Model’

To achieve this, the Obama Administration sought hints from the 2001 Afghanistan war. During this war, in November 2011, in order to overthrow the Taliban regime that had not met demands to extradite key al-Qa’ida personnel, a U.S.-led coalition and the Northern Alliance co-operated to deploy military operations against the Taliban. At this time, to achieve the war objective, a small number of U.S. SOF that had infiltrated local sites identified targets to attack and supplied information on these targets to the air forces of the coalition, which then carried out air strikes using precision-guided munitions (PGMs): in addition, the ground combat was carried out by the local forces in the alliance (the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, or the ‘Northern Alliance’). This tactics, of air strikes supported by indigenous allies on the ground, proved to be a big success.19 As this strategy was first implemented in Afghanistan, it came to be called the ‘Afghan Model’ and it was used again in 2011 in Libya as the tactical guideline to overthrow Mu’ammar al-Qadhafi regime.20

If this operational model could be widely adapted to a variety of wars, the benefits are clear. The first, of course, is that military operations can be executed at a very low cost because it is not necessary to send U.S. ground troops; and, by avoiding a direct ground combat, the enemy can be eliminated without endangering the lives of U.S. infantrymen. In addition, as it avoids directly intervening in the wars of other countries and having ‘boots on the ground’ in their territories, it reduces the risk of U.S. forces becoming embroiled in a counter insurgency (COIN), which is ‘the source of endless frustration’.21 Moreover, by the United States showing to other countries that it is capable of executing military operations in this manner, it increases the credibility of its ‘threat’ of military force, which in turn strengthens U.S. influence over other countries.22

However, a debate has been going on for a long time on the versatility of this ‘Afghan Model’. For example, Stephen Biddle noted the following: ‘Afghanistan was neither a revolution nor a fluke. The Afghan Model will not always work as it did in Afghanistan. ... It can work under some important preconditions, but those preconditions will not always be present’.23 Regarding these ‘preconditions’, he argued that: ‘even with precision air support, indigenous allies thus need a combination of skill, motivation, and equipment at least broadly comparable to their enemies to prevail’.24

The equipment can probably be provided comparatively easily, but the problem is the other two preconditions; namely, whether the indigenous allies have sufficient ‘military skill’, and whether their ‘motivation’ or ‘intention’ can be maintained at the same level as that of U.S. forces. Regarding the former, Biddle explains that ‘to take defended ground requires either that attackers be able to exploit cover, concealment, and suppression to reduce their exposure to the defenders, or that the defenders be destroyed pre-emptively’. However, as it is extremely difficult to destroy a defending force through air strikes alone, it is essential that the indigenous allies that are responsible for the ground combat have learned modern force employment to exploit cover, concealment, and suppression.25 Yet serious doubts remain about whether this modern force employment is feasible for a patchwork of armed groups and ‘the accidental guerrilla’.26

For the precondition of motivation, it can be safely assumed that it is unlikely that the intentions and interests of the indigenous allies will completely match those of the United States. It is not necessarily the case that areas or targets of vital importance to the United States will also be of vital importance to the indigenous allies. Conversely, if the United States is not in control of the indigenous allies, it can be imagined that they will advance into areas where the United States does not need them to be, or attack targets that should not be attacked.27

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For these reasons, although there is no room for doubt about the military effectiveness of the ‘Afghan Model’, it has been emphasised that when applying it to other wars, close attention to detail and an analysis of the theatre of war is essential. In the following, the results of the military operations against ISIS in which this ‘Afghan Model’ is actually being applied will be investigated. In order to clarify the points of discussion for this analysis, we will focus on two battles that developed into comparatively large-scale hostilities and that also are considered of great strategic importance; the battle to defend Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) (13 September 2014 to 27 January 2015) and the battle to recapture Tikrit (2 March to 4 April 2015).

The battle to defend Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) (13 September 2014 to 27 January 2015)

Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) is located near the Turkish border in northern Syria and is a small Kurdish town with a population of about 45,000 (with between 70,000 to 80,000 people in the surrounding villages). It was occupied by the Kurdish People’s Defense Units (YPG) since July 2012, when Syrian government forces had withdrawn from Ayn al-Arab. However, when viewed from a strategic perspective, the value of Ayn al-Arab was certainly not high, and the Obama Administration therefore initially paid little attention to it at the beginning. However, ISIS continued to expand its sphere of influence in northern Syria and eventually, by September 2014, it had surrounded Ayn al-Arab. This led to growing fears that if this town, which had become a ‘small isolated island’ within the territory of ISIS forces, should fall to ISIS, it could result in a major humanitarian crisis. Based on this situation, international interest in Ayn al-Arab steadily grew and the town gradually began to change from a battlefield having symbolic value to one having strategic value.\(^\text{28}\)

Robin Wright stated that ‘Kobani has been the test case for American power against the jihadi onslaught’,\(^\text{29}\) and for this reason Ayn al-Arab began to attract increasing international attention. Although initially it was not at all its plan to do so, the United States began to concentrate its military forces on that area. In fact, out of the 900 times that air strikes were carried out in Syria by the end of January 2015, 70% of them targeted objectives in the Ayn al-Arab town area (2,300 km\(^2\)). On the other hand, the ground combat against ISIS, while being supported by the air strikes of the coalition forces (mainly by the U.S.), was mainly the responsibility of YPG until the end of October: after the military forces of Iraqi Kurdistan (Peshmerga) arrived at Ayn al-Arab at the end of

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\(^{28}\) Ziyad Haydar, 'Hal Taghayyal Ma’raka ‘Ayn al-‘Arab Tahalufat’? al-Safir (28 October 2014).

October 2015, Peshmerga took over YPG’s responsibility. As a result, on 15 January 2015, following the decision by ISIS to strategically withdraw (ISIS did not actually have a vital interest in the Ayn al-Arab siege), the complete liberation of Ayn al-Arab was declared. In this battle, approximately 80% of the buildings in the town were destroyed, and up until now, most of the residents who had fled to Turkish territory were still not able to return to their homes.

So what lessons can be learned from the battle of Ayn al-Arab? First, limited to after the joining of the Iraq Peshmerga troops at the end of October in 2014, it can be said that the ‘Afghan Model’ did function effectively to some extent. This was because the Peshmerga combatants had sufficient training, equipment, and morale, and co-operated smoothly with the U.S. Air Force.\(^{30}\) In addition, it was successful on the following points; that the ISIS side had to adopt a conventional force employment rather than guerrilla tactics (in other words, its forces were not dispersed but concentrated, which made it easier to identify bombing targets); that the majority of residents had already evacuated to Turkish territory (keeping collateral damage to a minimum); and that the military operations were blessed with good weather throughout the campaign period, which meant the air strikes had a tremendous effect and became a major factor. In actuality, one ISIS combatant describing the effects of the air strikes said that the warplanes ‘destroyed everything, so we had to withdraw and the rats advanced’.\(^{31}\)

Conversely, prior to the end of October, even when there was supporting fire from U.S. air strikes, the YPG, which possessed inferior skills and equipment, far from being able to defend its own territory: to say nothing of recapture and control ISIS territory. This was the result of the dark shadow that had fallen over the future military operation in Syrian territory. As will be described later, in April to May 2015, ISIS is re-concentrating its military forces on Syria and further expanding the territory it controls within that country. However, as it has become clear that it is practically impossible to deliver a fatal blow to ISIS solely by air strikes; and as no ground combat troops exist that are more reliable than the YPG in terms of skill, motivation, and equipment in Syria; in the future, just as Biden and Hegal had greatly feared, the Obama Administration will find itself in an extremely difficult situation in terms of what military operations it can undertake against ISIS within Syrian territory.


The second lesson to be learned is that geographical elements are extremely important in the theatre of war. First of all, an extremely important question is how and to what extent do the United States and local alliance forces have a stake in the relevant theatre of war? In this battle, since it was recognised that ‘the Kurds had a life-or-death stake’ in this theatre of war, it was possible to maintain a high level of morale of the Kurdish forces. Another important point is how easy it is for international society to actually see the relevant theatre of war and how easily it can be accessed by journalists. Speaking of this battle, Ayn al-Arab was located at a distance that could be seen from within Turkish territory, and the development of the battle could be overseen from the high ground on the Turkish side. Due to this, a framework for recognising ‘the humanitarian crisis facing the Kurds’ was formed via the media, which raised the strategic importance of this theatre of war. If we imagine that the site of this battle had been far from the country border, and that the battle had taken place in a form that could not be seen by international society, its outcome is likely to have been completely different.

*The battle to recapture Tikrit (2 March to 4 April 2015)*

Tikrit is the administrative centre of the Salah al-Din Governorate in Iraq and has a population of around 250,000 people. It is located in a strategic hub connecting the capital Baghdad, Iraq’s second largest city of Mosul, and Kirkuk, which is the main city of the petroleum industry (170 km north of Baghdad, 210 km south of Mosul). Majority of its residents are Sunni and it is famous for being the birthplace of Saddam Husayn. Tikrit fell under ISIS control in June 2014 and the battle to recapture it came to be positioned as the first step toward the recapture of Mosul, which also came under the control of ISIS in June 2014.

The full-fledged battle to recapture Tikrit began on 2 March 2015. A total of 30,000 Iraqi coalition forces participated in this strategy, the breakdown of which is considered to be as follows: Iraqi Armed Forces, 3,000 to 4,000 troops; the People’s Mobilization Forces (Shiite militia), 20,000 troops; Sunni tribal forces, about 1,000 to 2,000 troops. Furthermore, 40 officers from Iran participated in the battle as ‘military advisers’, and Iran government ‘unconditionally’ donated $10 billion for arms and other purposes. Qasim Sulaymani, the commander of the elite Iranian Quds Force, is thought to have taken direct control of

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military operations. Although the U.S. military did not participate in these military operations at the beginning, on 25 March, it began air strikes on Tikrit ‘after a request from Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi on the condition that Iranian-backed Shiite militias move aside to allow a larger role for Iraqi government counterterrorism forces that have worked most closely with United States troops’.

In contrast, the ISIS troops defending Tikrit numbered around 400 to 1,000: the difference between the respective military forces was overwhelming. Based on this situation, inevitably the ISIS side decided that rather than engaging conventional battle to defend their territory, it would adopt guerrilla tactics of hiding in the city and waiting to ambush the enemy. The Iraqi coalition forces utilised their overwhelming superiority in numbers and in the first ten days, by 12 March, succeeded in recapturing about 75% of Tikrit City. However, the problems occurred after this, when the ISIS combatants were cornered into the centre of the city. Generally, the most difficult phase in urban warfare is said to be this ‘clearance phase’. The ISIS side had planted a large number of improvised explosive devices (IED) and booby traps, or its combatants became suicide bombers: it continued to resist in order to be the battle to a war of attrition. The objective of ISIS was to destroy the city by prolonging the battle. Due to that, Sunni residents plunged into a state of unease, got the impression that the Iraqi coalition forces were vulnerable. In addition, by dragging Iran more deeply into the battle, sectarian tension was created and fanned violently. This was because it was highly likely that this manner would enable ISIS to capture the support of Sunni Iraqis (even if it was not using assertiveness) by heightening their unease and sectarian feelings.

On the other hand, the Iraqi coalition forces, which had not been sufficiently trained for urban warfare, found it difficult to respond to this development. According to one report, at the very least an average of 60 people per day were killed. Based on this situation, on 26 March, the U.S. military began participating in the battle in the form of air strikes. The air strikes on Tikrit benefited from highly accurate information on the enemy

37 Youssef, ‘The Big Offensive Against ISIS in Tikrit Has Stalled’.
obtained by a small number of SOF that was active on the ground (in addition to the U.S. Delta Force, EU countries' SOF also participated), and Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs) achieved important results.\textsuperscript{38} On receiving this air support, the Iraqi coalition forces were gradually able to rally, and finally on 4 April, they were able to eradicate ISIS forces from the city.

So what lessons can be learned from the battle to recapture Tikrit? The first is that, currently, ISIS is being faced a hard battle in Iraqi territory. The initial problem it faces is logistics. Since the Iraq-Turkey border has been closed by Kurdish forces, it must carry out its logistical activities through Syrian territory and not directly from Turkey. Also, although each have a different objective, the United States, Iran, the Iraq coalition forces, and the Kurdish forces share the short-term benefit of eliminating ISIS from Iraq. On the other hand, the morale of ISIS combatants within Iraqi territory is low compared to the combatants fighting within Syrian territory: actually, incidents of infighting, desertion, and surrender have been frequently reported.\textsuperscript{39}

However, as the co-operation between the United States, Iran, Iraqi coalition forces, and the Kurdish forces is temporary, this alliance remains extremely vulnerable. In fact, after 25 March, when the U.S. began participating in the form of air strikes, a number of Shiite militia organisations refused to take part in joint operations with the U.S., and boycotted the battle.\textsuperscript{40} Moreover, the relationship between the Shiite militia and Kurdish forces is extremely unstable, and it would not at all be surprising if they grew hostile towards each other. This sort of situation is casting a dark shadow over the next step in military operations: the battle to recapture Mosul. Based on the battle at Tikrit, it will be extremely difficult to recapture Mosul without precision-guided bombing by the U.S. air power. But the fact that various Shiite militias are not marching in step is creating a difficult situation in the ground combat.

Second, and related to the above point, the United States is not necessarily able to move the indigenous allies on the ground in the direction it wants them to go. This problem was exposed in 2001 at the Battle of Tora Bora in the Afghanistan War as one that


\textsuperscript{39} For example, please refer to ‘Former ISIS Fighter Reveals why He Left Group after Being Asked to Execute Prisoners’, al-Alam (17 March 2015).

cannot be avoided through the ‘Afghan Model’.\textsuperscript{41} In Sunni regions of Iraq liberated from ISIS, there have been frequent reports of looting, arson, prisoner abuse, and retaliatory massacres by some of the Iraqi coalition forces that the U.S. military trained and supplied with equipment. For example, \textit{Reuters} reported that ‘a convoy of Shiite paramilitary fighters—the government’s partners in liberating the city—dragged a corpse through the streets behind their car’.\textsuperscript{42} According to \textit{al-Hayat}, such a reality is not particularly new in Iraq and is a development that was fully predictable in advance, arguing that ‘this kind of culture in war is embedded deeply in Iraqi society’.\textsuperscript{43}

On the other hand, this situation is advantageous for ISIS, which, as described above, has been facing a hard battle in Iraq. Based on the current situation within Iraq, the only way for ISIS to win the support of Iraqi citizens is by fanning the flames of sectarian feelings. Therefore, by prolonging the war of attrition for as long as possible and increasing the damage to infrastructure and local residents, it seems likely that it is reinforcing a framework of ‘attacks on the Sunni Iraqis by Shiite forces’. This situation is one the United States wants to avoid by any means, but as mentioned before, it has indicated no clear strategy for doing this.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Up to this point in this paper, after having investigated the political and strategic background and implications of U.S. military operations against ISIS to May 2015, the validity of these operations and the extent to which their objectives have been achieved were analysed, and a few considerations about future prospects were added. But as has been so far made clear, the Obama Administration, when embarking on its full-fledged military operations against ISIS, set only extremely vague policy objectives and strategies, was pushed to action by public opinion, and plunged into the war with no clear sense of what it wanted to achieve or how.

Moreover, while the ‘Afghan Model’ that was created under the constraint of this

\textsuperscript{41} O’Hanlon, ‘A Flawed Masterpiece’.
\textsuperscript{42} ‘Special Report: After Iraqi Forces Take Tikrit, A Wave of Looting and Lynching’, \textit{Reuters} (6 April 2015). Reuters Iraq Bureau Chief Ned Parker, who wrote this article, was threatened through the media and left the country on 11 April. Please also refer to Michael Williams and Simon Robinson, ‘Reuters Iraq Bureau Chief Threatened, Denounced over Story’, \textit{Reuter} (11 April 2015). Human Rights Watch, ‘After Liberation Came Destruction: Iraqi Militias and the Aftermath of Ameri’ (March 2015), etc.
‘absence of strategy’ has been successful in the short term in achieving a certain level of military success, there is no guarantee that the model will deliver a similar level of results in the conflict in the future. Rather, as was made clear by the analysis in this paper, the ‘Afghan Model’—just as every other type of military operation—can only fully demonstrate its effectiveness when a variety of preconditions are in place. If we ask whether these preconditions will still be in place in the conflict in the future, the answer has to be that it is extremely doubtful. In particular, in Syria, where there are insufficient reliable ground forces, it is impossible to see how the Obama Administration intends to advance its military strategy in the future. In Iraq also, problems will be encountered in the future on the issue of co-operation with indigenous allies. Even if ISIS is eliminated from within Iraqi territory, it does not seem as if the Obama Administration has envisaged a way to subsequently eradicate sectarian feelings to the greatest possible extent and comprehensively reconstruct the nation in order to bring together all of its political factions. It can be said that all of these issues have been caused by the Obama Administration’s lack of a clear strategy to connect military results to political results.

‘What do you intend to achieve by the war? And how do you intend to conduct it’? These questions posed by Clausewitz still need to be answered.

The trend in these military operations against ISIS will not be limited to the next military strategy: it will likely provide a major hint to the question of ‘How will the United States participate in the world in the future’? In a phase of relative U.S. decline, what strategy will it need to take in the future? It seems that discussion on the answers to these questions urgently needs to be deepened.