

ISIS'S OFFENSIVE IN SYRIA SHOWS THAT U.S. AIRSTRIKES HAVE NOT BLUNTED MOMENTUM

By Isabel Nassief and Jennifer Cafarella

Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel told reporters that U.S. airstrikes “have stalled ISIL’s momentum” after two weeks of bombarding ISIS positions in Northern Iraq. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham has not stalled under U.S. pressure. Rather, since the fall of Mosul and despite U.S. airstrikes, the insurgent army has continued a successful and spectacular offensive in Syria. Their gains nearly equal in scale the seizure of northern Iraq in June. The insurgent army’s latest triumph is the capture of Assad’s Tabqa air base in Eastern Syria.

ISIS is one armed force fighting on multiple fronts in two theaters of operation, Iraq and Syria, across a border that the group does not recognize. It aims to establish and consolidate a cross-border Caliphate and has sought to fuse its lines of communication across the border region, while also seizing control of populated urban areas in both countries. ISIS has sought to expel armed forces of both states from positions within ISIS’s desired “borders” in order to preserve the Caliphate’s territorial integrity.

ISIS operations in Syria have centered on five main objectives: control of the Euphrates River Valley; seizure of critical oil infrastructure; freedom of maneuver through Kurdish areas of Syria; expulsion of remaining regime forces from bases in Eastern Syria; and seizure of critical supply lines along the Turkish border. ISIS thereby seeks to merge its Iraq and Syria fronts by consolidating lines of communication between the two. ISIS has continued to pursue these objectives in Syria despite U.S. airstrikes in Northern Iraq and the Syrian regime’s sustained air strikes in North-Eastern Syria. ISIS’s campaign has proceeded in Syria along four main fronts: the Euphrates River Valley in Deir ez-Zour province; Hasaka province; North-Western Aleppo province; and the Syrian regime airbase in Raqqa province.

ISIS needs to control the Euphrates in Syria’s Deir ez-Zour province in order to link its de facto capital in Raqqa to its gains in Iraq’s Anbar province. After Iraq’s upper Euphrates towns fell swiftly in June, ISIS secured the surrender of local rebel and tribal groups in Deir ez-Zour, allowing ISIS forces to establish territorial control throughout July without expending resources in a military offensive. The She’tat tribe in southeastern Deir ez-Zour province initiated a small-scale tribal rebellion, threatening ISIS’s hold on the province. ISIS swiftly moved to regain control, even as U.S. airstrikes commenced. ISIS is not stopping at controlling the tribal areas, but rather seeks to remove the regime from its remaining strongholds in the province, as indicated by an SVBIED against the regime base within the province on August 15.

Hasaka Province is a predominantly Kurdish area in Syria. ISIS aims to gain logistical routes and freedom of movement through Hasaka to connect ar-Raqqa to its captured cities in Iraq’s Ninewa province. ISIS As U.S. airstrikes were initiated in Iraq, ISIS continued to shell YPG-controlled neighborhoods in Hasaka city in order to maintain its own operational mobility in the surrounding countryside. ISIS has also clashed with the YPG in neighborhoods south and southeast of the city, as well as on the Turkish border. ISIS seized the town of Jazaa, located southeast of Tel Hamis near the Iraqi border, on August 19 following heavy clashes with the YPG, possibly in preparation to cut the YPG’s access to Sinjar and the Yaroubiya border crossing.

ISIS is fighting in Syria’s Northern Aleppo Province, which is also contested by the Regime, the moderate opposition, and al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Nusra. ISIS forces have worked since the fall of Mosul to seize, control, and retain areas northwest of their stronghold of al-Bab near the Turkish border in pursuit of three objectives: to establish freedom of movement and a supply line from Turkey into ar-Raqqa province; to pressure the regime and the Syrian opposition simultaneously on alternating fronts within Syria by acting in multiple provinces; and to expand their governance in Syria’s urban areas. ISIS forces in Syria have made a number of critical gains since the start of U.S. airstrikes in Iraq. On August 13 ISIS seized the town of Akhtarín from JN and rebel forces in addition to five other villages, including the historically significant town of Dabiq, where ISIS English-language propaganda states it plans to fight its climactic battle with the West. ISIS continues to advance against JN and rebel forces from both the north and the south. Rebel groups face the risk of collapse within the province as ISIS advances and the regime attempts to encircle and besiege rebels within Aleppo city.

In response to the ISIS threat, the Islamic Front, an alliance of Syrian rebel groups, released a statement declaring the battle against ISIS as important as the battle against the regime and calling for renewed unity among rebel groups. Rebels from the Islamic Front and other groups sent convoys to reinforce some of the threatened areas. In addition, SMC-affiliated rebels in Marea announced the formation of a new group on August 19 in attempt to consolidate their combined ability to defend the city.

ISIS is maneuvering aggressively against the Assad regime. The Syrian regime has focused resources in key terrain in western Syria but has projected power in Eastern Syria by maintaining isolated military bases in Raqqa, Hasaka, and Deir ez-Zour provinces. ISIS has launched operations to seize a number of the regime's remaining bases in order to gain freedom of maneuver. ISIS seized the Tabqa military air base on August 24, just over two weeks after beginning its initial forays, gaining heavy equipment there. This battle was hard fought. ISIS attacked regime checkpoints surrounding the base along lines of advance from both the west and southeast and then massed its forces and artillery against the base, despite significant regime airstrikes and two Scud missiles.

ISIS's campaign in Syria escalated after the fall of Mosul and has continued to unfold despite U.S. airstrikes in Iraq. The fusion between the Syrian and Iraqi fronts in the ISIS campaign makes it essential to address ISIS in both theaters, requiring a strategy that fully engages the reality of the ISIS threat as it exists. The successful pursuit of a territorially contiguous state presents a threat that can no-longer be parsed into country bins. As chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey stated, however, "To your question, can they be defeated without addressing that part of their organization which resides in Syria? The answer is no. That will have to be addressed on both sides of what is essentially at this point a nonexistent border."

Gen. Dempsey also stated that ultimately, ISIS must be defeated. Defeat is a military term of art requiring breaking the enemy's will or capability to fight. ISIS's will to fight is unquestionable and likely unbreakable, as it is an ideological enemy. As the progression of ISIS's Syria campaign demonstrates, defeating ISIS will require a strategy which seeks to address ISIS in Iraq and Syria, of which U.S. airstrikes can be only one component. Proposals to target ISIS leadership in Syria in order to degrade the organization underestimate its capabilities, in addition to assuming incorrectly that targeted strikes have been effective in other campaigns in Yemen and elsewhere. ISIS's maneuver campaign along multiple fronts is typical of its tactical proficiency and its ability to function like an army. It also suggests that targeting ISIS's top leadership will not suffice to remove its military capabilities. True and rapid training and assistance to the Syrian moderate opposition and to Kurdish forces, the only ground forces that can retake territory from ISIS, are required. Other military and diplomatic instruments must also be on the table, because it is essential to regain the ground that ISIS has seized without empowering the Assad regime or al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra. It is time for the Obama administration's policy to reflect the requirements of defeating ISIS.

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