



IS ISIS GAINING OR NOT?

The attacks in Paris last Friday have brought to the fore the question of whether multilateral efforts against ISIS in Syria and Iraq are making progress. Interdiction efforts seem to be having some impact on ISIS on the ground in Syria and Iraq by squeezing oil supplies and revenues and reclaiming territory. Even so, it is not clear what that means for potential terror attacks outside the region.

As the world reflects on last Friday's attacks in Paris, it is useful to examine the international community's campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Daesh. The United States, after multiple quixotic attempts to find and arm the perfect rebel group or groups fighting both the Assad regime and ISIS, has shifted its funding and training back to programs run by the CIA and regional states which focus on the most effective fighters regardless of other potential political issues associated with them. In addition, the U.S. air campaign, supplemented now by Special Forces on the ground, has begun to focus more systematically on the oil production and distribution network controlled by ISIS – a key source of the terrorist groups operating revenue. In addition, Kurdish groups – PKK, YPG, and Kurdish Peshmerga of the Kurdish autonomous government in Iraq – have begun a series of ground offensives against key lines of communication in northern Iraq and Syria as well as strongholds of ISIS such as the Iraqi city of Sinjar.

ISIS has also adopted new, or at least newly successful tactics over the past several weeks largely outside of the area of more conventional fighting in Iraq and Syria. This has included claims of downing a Russian aircraft flying out of Sharm al Sheik Egypt, suicide bombings against Shiite targets in Lebanon, and now the terrorist massacres in Paris. It is not clear whether the recent attacks by ISIS outside of Iraq and Syria represent a response by the group to losses on the ground in the more conventional aspects of the war or whether those attacks are simply the result of the group's growth in reach and capabilities.

Meanwhile, the recent shifts in emphasis by the international community (both fighting forces on the ground such as Kurdish groups and the Iraqi army as well as extra-regional states providing airpower and arms support) and by ISIS, however, have their limits.

The U.S. continues to look for and support an effective ground force against ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. It has given up on its efforts to somehow either find or create a Syrian opposition group that would pass all of its political tests and would effectively oppose both ISIS and the Assad regime. It is now returned to funding and supporting militarily effective groups – largely Syrian and/or Iraqi Kurdish groups – as well as attempting to knit together – yet again – an effective Iraqi national army that will be effective against ISIS forces in Iraq. Separately, the United States has begun doing what it does best – applying rigorous analytic techniques in designing an air campaign against ISIS's oil production and distribution network. This improved air campaign is designed to destroy ISIS's ability to generate revenue using oil production it controls largely in Syria. Moreover, the air campaign is completely under Washington's control and is not reliant on ground forces not under its command and control. Over time, this cam-

paign is likely to be successful in significantly reducing ISIS's revenues from this resource. This, in and of itself, will not defeat ISIS nor will it change the balance of forces on the ground. However, if effective counter-ISIS forces are fielded by Kurdish groups or the Iraqi government, an ISIS with fewer resources will be harder pressed to draw in fighters, buy weapons, and control territory.

Kurdish forces have, supported by Western airstrikes, been more successful in pushing ISIS out of Sinjar and off of a major communications route running from Syria to Iraq. However, there are limits to the Kurds' successes. Those limits are both self-induced and are likely to be subject to pressures from interested local governments in both Ankara and Baghdad. First, the Kurds are fighting largely for areas that have traditionally been occupied by ethnic Kurds or, in some limited cases, Yazidis or other small minority groups. Kurdish forces are unlikely to lead offensives to free Mosul, for example, if only because that city is majority Arab in its population. Kurds are fighting for their own autonomy as they have been for decades – whether that is Syrian Kurds, Turkish Kurds, or Iraqi Kurds. This autonomy drive by the Kurds – whether it has been against local governments in Damascus, Ankara, or Baghdad or now against ISIS – is what animates Kurdish fighters and politicians. However, that same autonomy is also what is feared by governments in the region – none of which want an independent Kurdish state nor even autonomous regions that begin to look like a sovereign state. Therefore Kurdish success on the battlefield against ISIS is likely to create efforts by the Assad government, the hawkish and newly-elected Erdogan government, and even the fractious and largely ineffective Baghdad government to keep the Kurds in check. This may be open hostility such as Turkish army raids against PKK forces in northern Iraq or attempts to limit arms and or funds from getting through to Kurdish-controlled areas. In sum, Kurdish forces supported by Western airpower will likely continue to push ISIS back, but they will unlikely be able to seize and hold all of the territory ISIS holds in both Iraq and Syria absent larger and more capable ground forces fielded by a more competent and capable Iraqi government or some non-Assad-controlled Syrian government.

Similarly, ISIS has not so far shown the capability to overthrow the governments of either Baghdad or Damascus and set itself up unopposed throughout all of Iraq or Syria. ISIS's ability to conduct, or inspire, terrorist attacks outside of the main theater of combat appears to be growing, but those attacks are not going to have a significant impact on the forces fighting ISIS on the ground – Kurds, Iraqis or even Assad government forces with Russian support (to the degree that Moscow is actually focusing on ISIS). Nor will the terrorist attacks drive off extra-regional states such as the United States, France, or Russia. In fact, in the short-run, those attacks are likely to result in increased military use by those governments with possibly looser rules of engagement and a greater willingness to take risks in order to damage ISIS capabilities, leadership, and command and control.