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Collection of Information about ISIS: Opportunities and Challenges¹



Quality intelligence as a basis for effective airstrikes by the US-led international coalition against ISIS: ISIS vehicles destroyed in an airstrike in the area of Fallujah on June 30, 2016 (Al-Hurra, June 30, 2016). According to American information, 250 ISIS operatives were killed in the airstrike.

Overview

1. The situation of the campaign against ISIS, as of the summer of 2016, is **complex**: on the one hand, ISIS is sustaining losses from the coalition airstrikes. It is also losing some of the territories under its control in Syria, Iraq, and Libya, as a result of ground attacks carried out by local armies and militias. On the other hand, ISIS and its supporters responded to pressures against it with a series of deadly terrorist attacks around the world, including in Europe, proving that its operational-terrorist capabilities and motivation have not been compromised as a result of the blows in its core countries.
2. Although ISIS has lost considerable territory, it still controls vast areas in Syria and Iraq. **This provides the coalitions fighting against it with several advantages when it comes to intelligence collection:**

¹ Presentation delivered by Brigadier General (Ret.) Amnon Sofrin, member of the Israel Intelligence Commemoration Center, former chief combat intelligence officer in the IDF and director of the Mossad's intelligence directorate. The presentation was delivered at the second International Intelligence & Special Forces Conference (July 19, 2016).

- a) The fact **that ISIS controls territory** with defined government institutions and with military and economic infrastructure (oil and gas facilities) makes it relatively easy to collect information and turn it into a target list for attacks against ISIS.
 - b) In its battles against the Iraqi and Syrian armies, **ISIS seized large quantities of weapons: tanks, APCs, artillery and additional high-signature weapons systems**. This makes it easier to locate ISIS's weapons, which is easier than locating operatives and soft-skinned vehicles.
 - c) **The permanent and continuous presence of aircraft in Iraq and Syria** provides the coalitions fighting against ISIS with **continuous visual coverage** of the territories that it holds, which means a good ability to collect up-to-date information and translate it into targets for attack.
 - d) **The large civilian population** in the areas controlled by ISIS, along with the **large number of foreign fighters from around the world** going to the battlefields in Syria and Iraq, constitute a diverse potential of HUMINT sources.
 - e) **ISIS operates a large number of websites**, which have considerable potential for information. Good mining capability may yield valuable information about ISIS.
3. The effective tools for collecting information about ISIS, with an emphasis on the offensive aspect:
- a) **SIGINT**: monitoring key figures in order to monitor conversations of value, locate senior operatives and regularly update the list of ISIS targets.
 - b) **WEBINT**: collecting information from ISIS's many sites (texting, data transmission, operating methods).
 - c) **Visual information from observation satellites**: identifying infrastructure, compiling a list of targets, identifying damage in the targets that have been hit, information about the construction of new facilities, training facilities etc.
 - d) **Information from drones**: such information can be used to monitor individuals and networks of ISIS units. Such information, transmitted to the forces in real time, helps them carry out attacks or preventive activity within a short timeframe.

e) **HUMINT**: such information can be used to locate targets for attack and to obtain information about the deployment of ISIS's units, operatives and planned operations.

4. Along with these benefits, ISIS's current situation also **poses limitations for the collection activity against it**:

a) **The broad geographic spread of the Islamic State**: the geographical area controlled by ISIS is very large and its forces are spread out over extensive territories. This makes it difficult to monitor ISIS and to carry out effective and targeted intelligence collection.

b) **The frequent changes in the situation on the ground**: Due to the dynamic nature of the situation on the ground, there are frequent changes in ISIS's targets, leadership and physical infrastructure. This makes it hard to monitor ISIS and collect information about it on an ongoing basis.

c) **The large number of countries and organizations fighting against ISIS**: Due to the various (and sometimes contradictory) interests of the coalitions, countries and organizations fighting against ISIS, there is a fundamental difficulty in intelligence coordination between them.

5. **When it comes to foiling terrorist attacks by ISIS, security services around the world**, and especially in the West, **are finding it hard to provide an appropriate response**. There are fundamental problems in Western countries that **make it difficult to monitor the radicalization of individuals and networks** in local Muslim communities. Security services in the West **find it especially difficult to prevent so-called ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks**. This stems not only from a lack of experience in dealing with the type of terrorist attack encouraged by ISIS, but also from **fundamental social, political and legal problems that make it hard to collect internal intelligence in Western countries**.

6. **At present, the main gap in information collection about ISIS is between the coalitions' offensive successes and their defensive failures**. This is reflected especially in **Western Europe and Turkey**, which have been ISIS's preferred targets for terrorist attacks over the past year. Some of the terrorist attacks in Western Europe are carried out by local networks based on ISIS operatives, who take advantage of the open borders policy to move people and weapons between countries (such as the terrorist attacks in Paris that were based on a logistics base in Belgium).

7. To the terrorist attacks initiated by ISIS's headquarters and its various provinces we can add **ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks. They are generally carried out on the initiative of individuals who have undergone a (long or short) process of radicalization or have been influenced by ISIS's preachings.** These terrorist attacks are carried out without the involvement of ISIS's headquarters or local ISIS networks. **When it comes to intelligence, coping with ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks requires the formulation of new methodologies and skills, in terms of collection and research. In this regard, Western countries have apparently not yet found adequate solutions to the challenge that they face.**

8. Another area where improvement must be made is **sharing information, with an emphasis on prevention.** The intelligence services in each country monitor suspects, but the transfer of information to other countries is still deficient. As a result, there is no continuous monitoring of suspects, monitoring that could lead to early detection and possibly prevent planned terrorist attacks.

9. In order to achieve significant improvement in sharing, **a policy for the creation of a central intelligence network** must be established. Each intelligence agency will send this network all the information in its possession about the suspects and networks in its country (while making an effort to overcome constitutional, political and social inhibitions and constraints). This will enable each local intelligence and security service to improve its monitoring and early warning quality, and consequently its preventive capability. The rationale behind this is that it takes a net to fight a net.

10. Expanding the intelligence cooperation between the countries fighting against ISIS, and jihadi terrorism as a whole, **must also include coordinating the various countries' information collection activity.** This will lead to better utilization of resources and the creation of collection synergy as part of the vision of expanding intelligence cooperation in the campaign against jihadi terrorism. In this context, establishment of collaborative intelligence center may also be considered. Such a center would display the updated intelligence picture on an ongoing basis, and representatives of the various countries would be able to coordinate joint intelligence activities.