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Down but not out

Is the end nigh for ISIL?

by *Thomas Martinez Perez*

The so-called Islamic State has not yet been defeated. Despite the premature cheers, the terrorist militia still has thousands of fighters occupying parts of Syria. But the fight against ISIL has stalled. What are the causes of this and what are the consequences of ISIL's continuing control of territory in Syria? What is the impact on Iraq, where German soldiers are also supporting the anti-ISIL coalition on the ground and the mission is to be extended? And what can be done to put a permanent end to the threat posed by the terrorist militia?

Out of sight, out of mind

The international coalition (Operation Inherent Resolve, OIR) against the so-called Islamic State (ISIL), to which Germany also belongs, has made considerable progress and has taken the terrorist militia to the brink of defeat. Just a few months ago, troops of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a broad coalition composed of Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) and Arab militias, fought with OIR support for the ISIL stronghold of Raqqa, while the Syrian government managed to relieve the people in the city of Deir ez-Zor, which had been under siege for years. This reduced the ISIL dominion to the Euphrates valley and a number of minor exclaves in the rest of Syria. But then the fight began to stall. Syrian troops and allies were deployed to other fronts, while opposition groups supported by Turkish troops stormed the Kurdish enclave of Afrin. The YPG, that provides the majority of the SDF, withdrew fighters from the ISIL frontline to fight the new enemy. Media attention shifted to Afrin and East Ghouta, and was even reinforced by the suspected use of poison gas by the Syrian government. While the eyes of the world were on the geopolitical developments in the Turkish border area, the down but not out ISIL slowly but surely recovered.

While the West had reliable and politically accepted partners in the fight against ISIL in Iraq in the Iraqi armed forces and the Peshmerga, another strategy was needed for Syria. Anti-ISIL operations may have been supported by Western armed forces, especially from the air, but most of the fighting (and dying) was left to the SDF, and so to the YPG. The assignment of the central role to the YPG units, which were initially trained and finally also equipped by America, also revealed a weakness in the US strategy, since the strengthening of the Kurdish forces led to an ever-growing rift with Turkey that is rooted in the closeness of the YPG to the PKK. This eventually led to the Turkish attack on Afrin. The YPG withdrew elements of its troops and commanders in key roles from the south to defend Afrin. The US was now left without enough ground forces to seize the remaining ISIL-controlled territory in eastern Syria, and so was finally forced to announce an "operational break" in the fight against ISIL. It may be tempting to put the blame for this on Turkey; the country and its president after all pose a welcome target, especially as Turkey's critics can be sure of applause from multiple political camps. But the fight against ISIL, which is the official legitimation for the US troop presence in Syria, actually bogged down months before the start of Turkey's "Operation Olive Branch". US interest in a rapid advance in eastern Syria seemed to abate significantly as Syrian and allied troops succeeded in seizing the city of Al Bukamal on the Iraqi border and establishing a land link to

Iran. This land link had long been the objective of Iran's commitment as it allows the country to deliver arms to the Lebanese Hezbollah by land, bypassing the sea surveillance conducted by the United Nations UNIFIL mission. Blocking this land route would have been in the interest of both America and Israel. The SDF, however, lost the race against the Syrian army to the Iraqi border. Since then, there has been no major offensive action on the part of the SDF. Against this backdrop, it is difficult to completely dismiss Russia's repeated allegations that the US did not deal ISIL the deathblow in the Euphrates valley in order to further justify its presence in Syria. One thing that is clear is this: The mission is not accomplished, and ISIL now has a reprieve. How it uses it remains to be seen.

ISIL is living off remaining territory under its control

ISIL is far from its one-time peak. OIR succeeded in eroding its combat power and reducing the territory under its control, which once comprised large parts of Syria and Iraq, to the Euphrates valley and minor exclaves. This remaining territory it controls gives ISIL the possibility to go on producing propaganda videos, some of which document atrocities committed by the Islamists and glorify the armed struggle for the organization. ISIL propaganda also goes on projecting images of a "caliphate" that still exists and an administration that still functions. Series of pictures presenting the ISIL bureaucracy in the Euphrates valley or its "education system" in the Yarmouk valley are meant to suggest to the supporters that the organization still exists and is far from defeat. To expose this propaganda and also to win the fight against the "Cyber Caliphate", it is indispensable for the territory controlled by the terrorist militia in Syria to be taken apart for good.

The fact that ISIL is still being enabled to retain control of territory increases the effect of this propaganda and gives it a certain basis of legitimacy that probably also facilitates the recruitment of new supporters around the world. ISIL is also far from its peak in military terms, but still has enough personnel and materiel for isolated minor offensives. The British BBC revealed that the SDF enabled ISIL to evacuate thousands of fighters southward from the encircled city of Raqqa. This step is understandable from the SDF's point of view, since the alternative would have been tough fighting in urban terrain against a surrounded opponent. These ISIL fighters are now in the Euphrates valley, where they pose a constant threat. If ISIL succeeds in reorganizing its forces and conducting a lightning offensive yielding major territorial gains – albeit only temporary ones – due to the reprieve it has been granted, this could become a propaganda coup for the terrorist militia now in difficulties.

ISIL in Iraq: "Back to the roots"

A look at the history of the origins of ISIL reveals that the current situation must be seen as a regression. ISIL started out as one of many insurgent groups in Iraq that engaged in small-scale warfare against the Iraqi government and the US armed forces for years.¹ Deprived of the territory that it had for a while gained and controlled, it has begun a development that is taking it back to these roots. Open fighting is giving way to guerrilla tactics, terrorist attacks and the avoidance of open confrontation with the Iraqi security forces. The Iraqi province of Ninawa, which borders on the remaining ISIL areas in Syria, is particularly vulnerable, being an area of limited statehood. As such areas are important catalysts for ISIL activities in Iraq, their liberation is a core interest of the Iraqi government.

But continuing unrest and insurgencies are also preventing a return to normal in other provinces of Iraq. The mountainous area around Kirkuk in northern Iraq, for example, offers ideal conditions for a lengthy guerrilla war. Iraqi armed forces took control of the city of Kirkuk and the surrounding area after the referendum on independence held by the government of the autonomous region of Kurdistan. Taking advantage of the weakness of the Iraqi central government in the fight against ISIL, the autonomous region had previously taken over control of the city from the terrorist organization. There are allegations that the Kurds re-

¹ See also [Security Policy Working Paper No. 21/2016](#) by the Federal Academy for Security Policy.

leased captured ISIL fighters before the arrival of the Iraqi armed forces, and these fighters are now suspected of terrorizing the area under other Islamist banners. One motive for this would be an attempt by the regional government to defame the central government by claiming that the security situation had deteriorated and to contrast it with the situation beforehand under Kurdish rule.

But the Iraqi security forces have already taken up the fight against the Islamists and have reported initial successes – the Iraqi army is no longer the same as the one that gave up Mosul in 2014 almost without a fight. Although the years of fighting against ISIL have taken a heavy toll, the Iraqi security forces are now battle-hardened and far better equipped than four years ago. However, long-term peace in the country will not be achieved by military means alone. Much will depend on Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. He is faced with the monumental task not only of mediating between Sunnites and Shiites, but also of building bridges to the autonomous Kurdish region. Only if all the population groups in Iraq have equal economic and political rights will it be possible to put an end to ISIL activities and so to establish an important prerequisite for lasting peace.

Winning the war

ISIL has not yet been defeated. The recapture of the Euphrates valley has low priority for the Syrian government and an offensive could be years away. It is up to the coalition to finish its task and to seize all the territory ISIL controls. But the US-Turkish dispute over the role of the YPG is preventing further progress being made. All the signs are that the US will abide by its partnership with the SDF, while Turkey will continue to regard it as a terrorist group. This is why Germany will probably be unable to settle this dispute. If the SDF will not be won over to continue offensive actions, an alternative must be found. A cooperation agreement with the Syrian government would be very tricky from the political point of view, especially in the light of the renewed allegations concerning the use of chemical weapons. If, contrary to all expectations, the coalition did decide to cooperate with Assad, the Syrian government could, for example, be offered a lifting or easing of sanctions in exchange for the deployment of troops in the Euphrates valley.

The Iraqi government and some of the Shiite militias in the Popular Mobilization Units operating in Iraq are close partners of the coalition and largely free of the stigmata attached to Syrian troops. In addition, Syrian-Iraqi relations are very stable. These factors could allow the Shiite militias or the Iraqi army to operate on Syrian soil. President Assad would not have to fear any loss of face in this case, especially since the Iraqis would probably be willing to hand over control of the Euphrates valley to Syria after the dislodgement of ISIL because they have no territorial ambitions in that area. With numerous Iraqi militiamen operating, as it is, on Assad's side, it should furthermore be politically easy to convey the presence of Iraqi forces in the Euphrates valley. This is where Germany could come in, offering the Iraqi government increased reconstruction aid, equipment for the Iraqi army or the like in return for its cooperation. Despite everything, Iraq is a comparatively functioning democracy that cannot be expected to launch wars of aggression and that is in the midst of a massive military build-up, for which it is momentarily receiving increasing support from Russia. Here, Russia's influence could be forced back by the Iraqi army being supplied with European or US weapon systems. The Iraqis' infantry fighting vehicles in particular are out-dated.

If Germany succeeded in launching a corresponding initiative, it would be up to the US to support it and to prove that the fight against ISIL is its real motive for its presence in Syria. Although the territory controlled by ISIL is east of the Euphrates and thus on the "US side" of the de-escalation line formed by the river, the fight against the terrorist militia must have top priority.

Winning the peace

A lasting stabilization of the region can only be achieved if it is embedded in a political solution. Regardless of a possible deployment of Iraqi forces in Syria, Iraq must not be left alone with the mammoth task of overcoming the legacy of ISIL and preventing a permanent erosion of its state structures. The Sunnite areas in particular have been severely devastated by the war, but the central government is not always motivated to rebuild them, so even a year after the end of the fighting, many dead bodies are still lying under the rubble in Mosul. In such an environment, no normality can arise, despite being urgently needed. However, the Sunnite areas play a key role in the stability of both the country and the entire region, as they could be recruitment pools for future terrorist groups.

Here, Germany can and must help Mesopotamia out. The Federal Republic has the means and the expertise to both ensure that basic needs of the people concerned are met in the short term and to offer the Iraqis true prospects in the long term. The success of any kind of development measure, however, depends on the security situation in the country being stable. The extension of the training programme for Iraqi security forces is an important first step, but more should follow. A greater German commitment would also send a clear signal to the Trump administration, which has recently toyed with the idea of withdrawing US troops from the region. It would not only show that the US is not being left alone with the costs of the missions, but also underpin Germany's ambition to be a formative power. It would be short-sighted and dangerous to leave Iraq on its own with the enormous challenges it faces.

Foreign assistance alone, however, cannot patch up the divisions within Iraqi society. It is up to Iraq's Sunnites to finally acknowledge that the days of Saddam's brutal rule over the Shiite majority are over for good. After 15 years of war and violence, the Sunnite elites must show a willingness to work out a political solution. At the same time, the Shiites must not repeat the mistakes made by former rulers and respond to dissent with violence. The basis for reconciling the denominations must be a fair review of the events of recent years. Sexual slavery, torture and mass murder would not have been possible without the collaboration of parts of the Sunnite community. The concern now is to identify the perpetrators instead of inflicting collective punishment and to punish them justly. Here again, Germany can lend the Iraqi judiciary support by providing it with expertise and financial resources. Economic recovery combined with equal political rights for the denominations would give the stricken country at least a chance to end the violence. The clergymen, above all Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, play a key role in chastening the Shiite community. Sistani already proved that he was willing to cooperate with the West as long as he was convinced of its intentions in the years following Saddam's fall.

The prevention of an escalation of the conflict with Iran is essential both for this and for the peace process in Iraq. If the US or Israel attacked Iran directly, there is a high probability that Iranian forces would attack US targets in Iraq. This would result in a renewed escalation of the spiral of violence and a reprieve for ISIL. Germany and Europe must not sacrifice stability in the Middle East for short-term economic interests. The nuclear agreement with Iran is an important part of the peace puzzle.

Aid for Syria will be even more important. There are certainly some who strictly reject the idea of reconstruction aid being provided for Syria, pointing out that it would help Assad retain power. But a refusal to provide support for the reconstruction of the country would not affect Assad or the Syrian elites. The true victims of such a policy would be the common people of Syria, who would be left on their own with the heap of rubble that was once their homes. Likewise, it would not be in Germany's interest if Syria were in the near future to become a hotbed of instability and poverty or if Russia, Iran and China were to be able to further expand their influence. Any plan that involves possibilities for exerting influence being left to these countries voluntarily would also jeopardize the interests of Germany's allies, above all Israel.

The war against ISIL in Iraq seems almost won and the violence is subsiding. What needs to be done now is to ensure that the cycle of violence that has been haunting Iraq for years is finally broken and that peace returns to Mesopotamia. The pacification of Iraq, the country in the centre, would be more than just a positive signal. It would be a core prerequisite for lasting stability in the region. In Syria (and in cyberspace), the final battle against ISIL is yet to come. A final diplomatic and military effort is needed before the coalition's task can be considered accomplished. In Syria as in Iraq, Germany should act as a civilian power and increase its commitment to reconstruction in order to compensate for its indecisive and more than hesitant stance on military participation – and not least to send out a signal to the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who have found protection in Germany.

But even that will not end the fight against ISIL. In the classic console game "Whac-A-Mole", the player must drive moles back into the ground by hitting them. But after each hit, the mole pops up elsewhere. The situation is similar with ISIL in particular and Salafist jihadism in general. Even if ISIL is repeatedly hit by precise strikes, it pops up again in places where precarious economic conditions meet limited statehood. Whether Sinai, Afghanistan, Somalia or Indonesia, the list of regions with an ISIL presence is steadily growing and this growth is generating a new need for action.

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