

NEWS FROM THE FRONT



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Insights from the Liberation of Mosul: Revisiting Counterinsurgency Strategy

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Key Insights from Senior Leaders

The “conventional” fight for Mosul By, With and Through our Iraqi Security Force (ISF) partners has partially invalidated the counter insurgency (COIN) doctrine.

U.S. and Coalition Advise and Assist Teams train the ISF on decisive operations and combat arms maneuver

The term Iraqi Security Forces includes the Iraqi Army, the Counter-Terrorism Services or CTS and the Federal Police (FedPol).

Background

The *Surge*, the linchpin strategy of the counterinsurgency operation in Iraq was in full swing, and by the fall of 2007 Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and most of its offshoots were defeated in Baghdad, cities around Baghdad’s belts and in Al Anbar Province. The surge of U.S. forces, by all accounts, was a success. Coupled with strong support from the Sunni Awakening or *Sahwa* and the Sons of Iraq (SOI), hundreds of AQI fighters were killed, while many fled north and west into Syria and Jordan.¹ What was not clear however, was the number fighters who fled north to the neighboring of provinces of Salah Ad Din, Ninewa, and Kirkuk. U.S. and Coalition commanders were concerned that AQI may regroup and rejoin *Jaysh Rijāl at-Ṭarīqa an-Naqshabandiya* or the Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order (JRTN) in places like Mosul, Samarra, Tikrit, Hawija and into the Hamrin Mountains. And, despite the increased surge of American troops and success of the COIN strategy, U.S. concerns would become reality in June of 2014, when the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Da’esh (its Arabic acronym) (aka, AQI 2.0), overran Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in Mosul in just 6 days. Da’esh would go on to claim large swaths of land in Northern Iraq and much of the Western Province of *Al Anbar* and the Jazeera Desert.

Front Cover. Iraqi soldiers with 2nd Battalion, Commando Brigade, Anbar Operations Command, practice their marksmanship skills during training with Task Force Al-Taqaddum, Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, in Iraq, April 17, 2017. (Photographer Ali Hujazy @alihujazy) Courtesy DVIDS.

A New Strategy – 2014 and beyond

Desperate to slow Da'esh's momentum, a beleaguered Government of Iraq (GOI) sought assistance from the U.S. The U.S. along with its coalition partners from Europe and the Middle East, began an aerial campaign against Da'esh targets in Iraq. The reasons for failure of the ISF's ability to stop the ISIL advancement are many, including poor leadership and dilapidated or inadequate.² Following the US withdrawal of forces in December of 2011, Malaki quickly went to work, replacing competent division commanders who were skilled in both COIN and basic conventional operations with his own cronies and political hacks. There is another reason for the ISF's failure that contributed to the collapse of forces in Mosul. The United States military spent billions of dollars and years of effort to train the ISF under the counterinsurgency doctrine, only to realize that what was required to defeat Da'esh was a conventional army capable of conducting full spectrum offensive and defensive operations.

According to Field Manual (FM) 3-24, the Counterinsurgency Manual, stability operations focus on security and control of areas, resources, and populations. Civil security and civil control³ are types of stability operations. Army commanders expect a mission of protecting and providing security for a population to be expressed in terms of civil security or civil control.¹²

Learning from the lessons of AQI's defeat, Da'esh consolidated its base, obtained supplies and heavy weapon systems, often using these weapons to harass or attack remote Iraqi units in their path. Finally, Da'esh was able to capitalize on the power vacuum left by the central government by courting disenfranchised Sunni Arabs neglected by Baghdad.⁴ The speed at which Da'esh forces overran police and security checkpoints and segregated the local population from government forces, negated any attempts by the ISF to regain civil security and civil control over the local population.

This transformation of the Da'esh from an insurgency to a conventional force is consistent with Mao Tse-tung's teachings on the Three Phase Theory of Revolutionary War (see callout box, previous page). As noted, Mao Tse-tung's use and theory of Guerrilla Warfare was used and adapted (Vietnam) by General Vo Nguyen Giap who through the patient application of the basic Guerrilla principles became the victor over two great countries with nothing more than an ill-equipped insurgent army and the will to fight and resist. Furthermore, this "visible wind of revolution" which started its major debut in the mid- twentieth century is in fact used in a score of countries from Afghanistan to Iraq and is here to stay as a political phenomenon rather than a military one. (Mao Tse-tung and General Vo Nguyen Giap On Guerrilla Warfare by Florian Waitl, MilitaryHistoryOnline.com).



Mao Tse-tung's Three Phase Theory of Revolutionary War

- 1. Organization, consolidation and preservation of base areas, usually in difficult and isolated terrain.**
- 2. Progressive expansion by terror and attacks on isolated enemy units to obtain arms, supplies and political support.**
- 3. Decision, or destruction of the enemy in battle.**

When Major General (MG) Gary Volesky, Commanding General of the 101st Airborne Division arrived in Baghdad in the fall of 2015, his initial impression of the operational environment was that he would help train the Iraqi Army to fight an insurgency. But, that quickly changed. “We thought we might need a hybrid warfighter, and we found we really didn’t need that,” said MG Volesky.⁵ “Enabling Iraqi Security Forces through lethal fires, both air and ground delivery, that was a big focus during our warfighter in decisive action,” said Volesky⁶. The man that replaced him as the Combined Joint Forces Land Component Commander (CJFLCC), MG Joseph Martin, echoes MG Volesky’s observations. “We used the heck out of joint coalition fires,” Said Martin.⁷ He said that the Iraqis knew we had their back, and “joint fires was a part of that assurance that enabled the ISF to fight their fight.”⁸ During an interview for Center for Army Lessons Learned, MG Martin stressed that the ISF had to learn basic warfighting skills – how to proficiently maneuver forces at the squad, platoon, company and battalion to conduct operations in a rudimentary fashion with limited U.S. force presence.

The current training model in Iraq differs from a traditional COIN campaign design (focused on from 2007- 2011) which requires a large number of troops to clear, hold and build in contested territory.⁹ Rather, the training program of instruction (POI) at Al Asad, Taji, Bismayah, and Erbil is primarily focused on conventional military attack and counterattack techniques.

MG Martin said the revised POI “is a commitment to our Iraqi partners.” The Train, Advise and Assist teams across Iraq focus their training on the conventional fight, he said.

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Da'esh is a conventional force, employing some unconventional tactics such as unmanned aircraft systems (UASs) and suicide vehicle borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) employment, but for the most part, he is a conventional enemy.”¹⁰ There are also federal police and special operations POI variations at similar sites across Iraq.

From the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) perspective, having the ISF plan the operation, rehearse the plan and execute the plan with support from Joint fires is extremely satisfying, according to CJTF-OIR planners. Brigadier General (BG) Steven Smith, director of operations, CJTF-OIR CJ3 said that enabling artillery platforms to move about the battlefield, supporting offensive combined arms maneuver, rather than just establishing firebases on forward operating bases (FOB) as we have done in the COIN environment in Iraq, was one of the key ingredients to successfully defeating Da'esh.¹¹ As the former 82nd Airborne Division Artillery (DIVARTY), BG Smith said that our [field artillery] doctrine clearly implies that artillery batteries must be mobile, with the ability to move in smaller packages to avoid enemy counter-fire.¹² “The fact that we have lived in a risk adverse, defensive mindset for the past 15 years, detracts from our ability to train effectively as a warfighting enabler.” A successful force ought to be able to shoot and maneuver on the enemy, not just hold ground, said Smith.¹³

It could also be argued, that it is less about a counter insurgency mindset, as it is more of a defensive versus an offensive mindset. We are in FOB firebases to protect the FOB, a defensive role. We are out maneuvering because we are supporting offensive combined arms maneuver to destroy an enemy force.

The ISF successfully employed urban operation tactics through conventional application in Mosul and other Iraqi cities, by countering the enemy's ability to employ his

unconventional weapon systems of SVBIEDs and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). Further, the ISF employed a number of obstacles such as destroying bridges and tunnels, and effectively conducted complex and coordinated mounted and dismounted maneuvers throughout the dense urban terrain. The ISF's ability to retake the al-Nuri Mosque in a heavily fortified neighborhood of west Mosul in just 6 days, is a *mon œil* (familiar French expression *mon œil !* moment (pronounced [mo(n) neuy]) to express either incredulous/ironic disbelief, like the English expressions "my foot!" or "yeah, right!" ThoughtCo.com), a refute of the COIN strategy that has come to symbolize the Iraqi Military for more than a decade.

With the emphasis being on defeating Da'esh with current force manning level restrictions in place, implementing a holistic COIN strategy is simply unattainable. Taking the fight to Da'esh By, With and Through the Iraqi Security Forces has had its setbacks, but if the success of liberating Mosul is any indication, the U.S. and its allies would be hard pressed to commit an immoderate amount of resources necessary for a successful counterinsurgency campaign. Skeptics of the current strategy have said that had we had the right number of forces available, the outcome in Mosul would have been much different. The truth of the matter is that a total or even partial occupation of a country is neither politically attainable nor palatable to many Americans.¹⁴ One of MG Martin's biggest take-aways during his tenure as CJFLLC CDR is the way he saw his relationship with his Iraqi partners, "we had to get over the fact to quit trying to make the Iraqis something they are not. Take what they have and leverage it." "The way that they fight, is the way that they fight." "The way that they took east Mosul, the way they took west Mosul is not the way we would take east and west Mosul."¹⁵

Looking Forward

In a resource constrained environment precipitated by restrictive force management levels, with the known difficulties in implementing and sustaining long-term COIN operations, our preferred course of action should be to enable our partners building their capacity to adapt to a fluid operational environment. Providing direct security force assistance will be the way ahead for U.S. national and theater strategy.

Whether the By, With, Through approach is a branch or a sequel of the initial COIN strategy, or a separate approach altogether, remains to be determined. However, one thing is certain, if you only prepare a host nation force to primarily conduct counterinsurgency operations, then they will have a critical vulnerability by being ill prepared to adapt to the enemy's transitions. Training a COIN centric Iraqi Army in the early days of OIF is the under pinning of this vulnerability. The lesson learned is that a balanced approach is critical – in both tactical and ministerial advising senses. This, had the ISF been better prepared, they likely could have stopped ISIL earlier and decisively.

Endnotes

¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Congressional Testimony: Iraqi Status Report, 110th Cong., April 08, 2008, S110-666.

² Zaid Al-Ali. "How Maliki Ruined Iraq," June 14, 2014
<http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/06/19/how-maliki-ruined-iraq/> (accessed July 23, 2017).

³ U.S. Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual 3-24 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Army, December 16, 2006), 5-11.

⁴ Mao Tse-tung, "stages of protracted war," January 9, 1977,
<http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/Articles/1977/staudenmaier.pdf>
(accessed July 23, 2017).

⁵ MG Gary Volesky, Commanding General, 101st Airborne DIV/CJFLCC-OIR, on location interview by COL John Stevens, November 15, 2016.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ MG Joseph Martin, Commanding General, 1st Infantry DIV/CJFLCC-OIR, on location interview by COL Jason Awadi and LTC James Gill, July 12, 2017.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ David H. Ucko, "Clear-hold-build-fail? Rethinking Local-Level Counterinsurgency," November 7, 2013, <https://warontherocks.com/2013/11/clear-hold-build-fail-rethinking-local-level-counterinsurgency/> (accessed July 23, 2017).

¹⁰ MG Joseph Martin, Commanding General, 1st Infantry DIV/CJFLCC-OIR, on location interview by COL Jason Awadi and LTC James Gill, July 12, 2017.

¹¹ BG Steven Smith, director of operations, CJTF-OIR / CJ3, on location interview by COL Jason Awadi, July 7, 2017.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Kevin Baron, "How the U.S. Military Sees the Anti-ISIS Fight," January 18, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/01/obama-doctrine-military-trump/513470/> (accessed July 26, 2017).