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'Defeat into Victory': Arab Lessons for the Iraqi Security Forces

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To succeed against ISIS, the ISF should defeat the adversary's strategy, ensure that politics do not undermine the military effort, develop workarounds for persistent shortcomings, and patiently build on small victories.

The coalition effort to rebuild and retrain the Iraqi security forces (ISF) will have better odds of success if American advisors urge their counterparts to incorporate lessons from other Arab armies that have experienced defeat, learned from their failures, and eventually prevailed against their enemies. These armies -- Egypt in the 1973 war with Israel, Iraq in the latter phases of its 1980-1988 war with Iran, and even hybrid actors such as the "Islamic State"/ISIS -- succeeded by developing workarounds for persistent shortcomings exhibited by conventional Arab armies, and by adapting foreign concepts and practices to their specific needs.

The following lessons are particularly relevant to the ISF as it takes on ISIS. For more details, [see the accompanying PowerPoint briefing](#).

KNOW THE ENEMY, KNOW ONESELF

Developing an accurate assessment of one's own capabilities and limitations and those of the enemy is key to developing a viable strategy for success. Cairo's original plan for the 1973 war was developed with the Soviets and reflected their doctrine: the crossing of the Suez Canal was to be followed by a breakout and exploitation to retake all of the Sinai Peninsula. The Egyptians eventually deemed this plan unrealistic and abandoned it.

The plan that Egypt ultimately implemented was developed without Soviet input and embodied a limited-war approach that exploited the vulnerabilities and neutralized the strengths of the Israeli enemy. Specifically, it entailed a set-piece offensive to seize a bridgehead on the far side of the canal and impose heavy costs on counterattacking Israeli forces (exploiting the latter's vulnerability to casualties). It also made innovative use of antitank and air-defense systems to neutralize Israel's main strengths: armor and airpower. In addition to restoring Egyptian honor, the operation's goal was to discredit the Israeli assumption that the territorial status quo was sustainable and enable Cairo to regain the Sinai in postwar diplomacy. The concept worked pretty much as planned.

To succeed against ISIS, Iraq and the coalition need to base their actions on a similarly perceptive assessment of strengths and weaknesses. For example, they could do the following: conduct operations that overextend ISIS forces, rendering the group vulnerable to internal uprisings and external attack; encourage populations now chafing under its rule to rise up against it; and puncture the group's aura of invincibility through a series of coalition victories, creating the perception that its days are numbered (for more on these and other options, [see "Defeating ISIS: A Strategy for a Resilient Adversary and an Intractable Conflict," Policy Note 20](#)).

GET THE POLITICS RIGHT

If politics and civil-military relations are at odds with the requirements of a military campaign, success is much less likely. This is especially so in a counterinsurgency, a primarily political form of warfare.

Facing the possibility of defeat after losing al-Faw to Iran in February 1986, Saddam Hussein acceded to his generals' demand to conduct limited offensive operations instead of the static, attrition-based defensive strategy Iraq had followed since withdrawing from Iran in 1982. He also granted them greater operational control, accelerating a trend begun previously of depoliticizing the military, promoting officers based on merit, and giving commanders greater latitude. As a result, the general staff came up with a uniquely Iraqi approach involving extensively scripted set-piece offensives, which ultimately paved the way for the recapture of lost ground.

To succeed against ISIS, the ISF will need to shake the perception that they are serving a sectarian political agenda. Accomplishing this will likely prove difficult given the degree to which many prominent Iraqi politicians are perceived as unreconstructed sectarian actors, the key role that Shiite militias are playing in the campaign against

ISIS, and the extent of Iranian influence in Baghdad (for more on these issues, [see "The Long Haul: Rebooting U.S. Security Cooperation in Iraq," Policy Focus 137](#)).

DON'T TRY TO CLONE THE U.S. ARMY

The U.S. military should not try to remake the ISF in its own image -- i.e., a force capable of implementing mission-type orders, operating with little or no guidance, and improvising as needed in response to battlefield developments. Rather, it should train them to fight in a manner suited to their cultural preferences and operational requirements.

In his doctoral dissertation *The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996), Kenneth Pollack pointed out that conventional Arab armies often failed at maneuver warfare because tactical leaders were inflexible, did not show initiative, and were unwilling to report bad news. These tendencies are rooted in aspects of Arab culture, particularly a deference to group norms and authority, an emphasis on rote learning and cleaving to "school solutions" rather than developing critical reasoning skills, and a preoccupation with saving face, resulting in the suppression of unpalatable facts.

Egypt and Iraq arrived at similar solutions to these problems during their wars with Israel and Iran. As mentioned above, they conducted heavily scripted set-piece operations that obviated the need for initiative, improvisation, or coordination of combined arms. They also carried out exhaustive rehearsals on detailed mockups of objectives. Each soldier had only one task to accomplish, which he learned to perform by heart. Thus, Egyptian forces rehearsed the crossing of the Suez thirty-five times prior to the war. And Cairo relied on signals intelligence derived from Israeli tactical communications to assess the accuracy of situation reports submitted by its own forces. For its part, Iraq was able to regain lost ground during the final phases of its war with Iran thanks to a number of factors -- modest improvements in tactical performance due to detailed planning and extensive scripting, massive conventional and chemical artillery fires, and vast numerical superiority at the point of decision. These factors, combined with intensified bombardment of civilian and economic targets in Iran, finally forced Tehran to accept a ceasefire.

Accordingly, U.S. training of the ISF should emphasize painstakingly planned, heavily scripted set-piece operations, extensive rehearsals involving rote fulfillment of mission-essential tasks, and reliance on numbers, mass, and overwhelming firepower to defeat the enemy. This does not preclude the possibility of ad hoc, momentum-driven exploitation or pursuit operations when ISIS forces have been thrown off balance or scattered. In general, however, the Achilles' heel of scripted operations is that they hinder the ability to improvise when enemy action warrants it. Therefore, coalition air support will be needed to backstop ISF operations and prevent them from going awry.

As for the problem of inaccurate reporting by the ISF, U.S. military planners should explore the use of signals intelligence derived from ISIS communications as an alternative source of information concerning ISF performance. Finally, Washington should not exclude the possibility of creating a small number of more capable ISF units that can fight like American units do, since some ISF units -- such as the Iraqi Special Operations Forces -- have shown that they are capable of doing so.

BE PATIENT, BUILD ON SMALL VICTORIES

The Egyptian military took several years to rebuild after its debacle in the 1967 war, and it planned and rehearsed intensively for a year prior to crossing the Suez. Similarly, the Iraqi army spent two years planning and training for the final offensives that decided the war with Iran. And ISIS spent years preparing the battlespace in western and northern Iraq prior to its successful offensives in December 2013 and June 2014, respectively.

Given these precedents, U.S. advisors should urge their ISF counterparts to bide their time by planning and preparing intensively for operations to come. Meanwhile, they should work to restore ISF confidence through a series of small victories, building up to more ambitious offensives later on. Iraq's political leadership will likely push for a big operation before the ISF is ready, perhaps in Mosul; U.S. leaders should push back. It is better to prepare thoroughly to ensure success than rush to failure.

Baghdad might also be tempted by the prospect of quick victories that Iran's Shiite militia allies seem to offer. This option may be appealing because it appears to offer a quick fix and obviates the need to accommodate Iraq's Sunnis. But with its reliance on brutal tactics such as ethnic cleansing, it is unlikely to provide the basis for a sustainable peace.

THE CHALLENGE OF URBAN COMBAT

Efforts to retake northern and western Iraq will inevitably involve significant urban combat, since most of the population in ISIS-controlled territory lives in cities such as Fallujah, Tikrit, and Mosul. Urban fighting poses major challenges to even the best of armies, let alone a struggling force like the ISF. It is manpower- and material-intensive, and it compartmentalizes the battlespace by hindering visual and wireless communication. This is a disadvantage for forces like the ISF that have difficulty exercising initiative or operating in a decentralized manner.

Moreover, while many residents have already fled ISIS-held areas, urban warfare still carries the potential for

significant civilian casualties and massive infrastructure damage, which could complicate efforts to gain Sunni popular support against ISIS. For this reason, it would be best to avoid a fight that destroys major cities such as Mosul. The ISF should instead try to retake urban areas through a combination of psychological operations and urban uprisings, disrupting ISIS defenses and corralling the group's forces into pockets of resistance that can be reduced by massive firepower.

How Baghdad handles the effort to retake ISIS-held urban areas will have a major impact on the country's future. But military success alone will not be enough; if there is no credible effort to address Sunni grievances, Baghdad could once again win the battle but lose the war.

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