



What news from the Daesh front?

by Florence Gaub

It has been two years since Daesh (a term now increasingly used in order not to confer governmental or religious legitimacy to the group commonly referred to as ISIL/ISIS) declared its caliphate in Syria and Iraq, and the international campaign against it has lasted nearly as long. But what progress has been made in the war against the organisation?

The air front

The military campaign against Daesh is led by the US and supported by 65 other states. It currently consists of three components: air strikes, targeted special operations and the training and equipping of local security forces.

To date, 15 countries (including Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the UK) have carried out 12,685 airstrikes, 8,661 of which were in Iraq and 4,024 in Syria. 76% of these strikes were conducted by the US, and in Syria, this figure rises to 94%. Over 26,000 targets have been destroyed, including military equipment, oil infrastructure, command buildings, defensive positions and other elements crucial to Daesh's operations. In Syria, the strikes have primarily been aimed at Daesh's strongholds of Raqqa and Ayn Isa in the north, but they have also been directed at targets to the northeast of Aleppo.

In Iraq, the international coalition has targeted Mosul and provided air support to the Iraqi

military during its campaign to retake the city of Fallujah. In total, the air war against Daesh has cost more than \$7.4 billion, with an average daily cost of approximately \$11.8 million. Russian airstrikes are not included in this calculation since it is not part of the international campaign, and although Russia has conducted over 1,000 airstrikes in Syria this year, only 10-20% have targeted Daesh.

The ground front

There are also troops on the ground: around 2,750 US armed service members act as trainers or advisers in Iraq, 250 of which are thought to be special forces. Around 50 US special forces are also believed to be operating in Syria, where they carry out targeted killings of Daesh leaders, such as its governor of Syria, Abu Ali al-Anbari (also known as Abd al-Rahman Mustafa al-Qaduli). Targeted 'decapitation' strikes of this kind are, however of limited use in a bureaucratic organisation like Daesh, where one figurehead will simply be replaced with another.

The campaign has put Daesh on the defensive, although to a limited extent. Since the summer of 2014, the group has lost around 23% of its total territory, most of it in Iraq. Crucially, analysis shows that airstrikes work best when supported by troops on the ground, be they the Iraqi military or Kurdish militias. Although overall on the back foot, Daesh is still operationally capable

and has carried out several successful attacks in Baghdad, as well as in the Syrian city of Tartus, where Russia's naval base is located.

Libya, where Daesh now has 4,000-6,000 fighters, is not part of this campaign. The US is, however, conducting surveillance flights along the coast and has acknowledged sending special forces into the country – and rumours of British, French and Italian special forces in Libya also abound.

Training is now solely limited to Iraq; previous US efforts to train Syrian troops failed quite spectacularly. So far, Iraqi troops have been trained and equipped by 17 states, 13 of them European ones.

The personnel front

Perhaps more than in military terms, Daesh has been hurt in terms of human resources. According to one US official, airstrikes are said to have killed over 26,000 fighters – a number that seems somewhat exaggerated. Daesh has, however, probably lost between 20-25% of its fighters, and it now commands 19,000-25,000 troops.

But Daesh not only suffers from combat-related casualties; it also has seen an increase in desertions. In order to retain its troops, Daesh has imposed a travel ban for anyone living in the territories under its control, and applied harsh punitive measures against those caught attempting to escape. Public executions are used not only to punish but, more importantly, to deter. Daesh has also suffered from mutinies as living conditions began to deteriorate and perks rolled back: 75 Dutch foreign fighters were arrested in February after protesting against their treatment, and 8 of them were subsequently executed.

The coalition's campaign has helped significantly reduce the flow of fighters to Daesh to a trickle (from around 2,000 a month to 200). In addition, half to two-thirds of Europe's 5,500 fighters in Daesh are said to have returned to the continent – but whether this is the result of disillusionment or a deliberate ploy orchestrated by the leadership is hard to tell. Similar numbers of returnees have been observed in Tunisia (700 of its 6,000 fighters have returned), as well as to Libya.

The financial front

Airstrikes have also targeted Daesh's financial infrastructure. Daily oil production is down from 45,000 barrels to 34,000, a significant reduction

given that Daesh is estimated to earn \$450 million a year from selling oil on the black market (including to political rivals such as other militias). While the efforts to reduce Daesh's ability to extract and refine oil have been slow to take effect, they are now beginning to bite – in particular since US special forces killed Abu Sayyaf, a key figure in Daesh's oil and gas operations.

Air strikes have also targeted other material resources, such as the cash storage sites which house the more than half a billion dollars the group gained when it seized banks in areas under its control.

But while Daesh might have lost some sources of income, it is still able to squeeze taxes from the people living under its control. It also reportedly takes 10% of rain-fed crops from farmers, 5% of irrigated crops and demands 2.5% of capital from businesses.

The ideological front

While Daesh seems to be losing the ideological war in some ways – a recent survey found that 80% of Arabs aged 18-24 openly state their opposition to the group, up from 60% in 2015 – it has retained momentum and projected an illusion of expansion with 'provinces' declared in Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Moreover, it continues to inspire or coordinate attacks – such as those in Paris, Brussels and San Bernardino – and is still very active on social media. Despite the fact that Twitter announced an increase in the number of its content-review teams, as well as the deployment of new software in order to detect Daesh supporters in early 2016, the accounts of jihadists often just reappear with different names if they are suspended.

In order to maintain an illusion of being on the offensive, Daesh is likely to use the current month of Ramadan to announce more 'provinces', further promote its gory media campaign, and, most worryingly, conduct attacks in Iraq, Syria, and perhaps the West.

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