



Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) Reach Back Cell

Panel Discussion on Iraq and Syria

in Support of USCENTCOM

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This report represents the views and opinions of the participants. The report does not represent official USG policy or position.

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Overview (Mr. Sam Rhem, SRC)

At the request of United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), the Joint Staff (JS), the Deputy Director for Global Operations (DDGO), and jointly with other elements in the JS, Services, and US Government (USG) Agencies, the Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) team established a virtual Reach Back Cell. This initiative, based on the SMA global network of scholars and area experts, has provided USCENTCOM with population based and regional expertise in support of ongoing operations in the Iraq/Syria region. This Panel will discuss the main findings from the SMA Reach Back Cell.

Panel members:

- Ms. Sarah Canna (NSI), moderator
- Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois (NSI)
- Dr. Munqith M. Dagher (IIACSS)
- Dr. Jen Ziemke (John Carroll University)
- Dr. Ian McCulloh (Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory)
- Dr. Diane Maye (ERAU)
- Dr. Laura Steckman (MITRE)
- Ms. Tricia DeGennaro (TRADOC G-27)
- Dr. Jon Wilkenfeld (University of Maryland)

USCENTCOM Perspective (Mr. Marty Drake, USCENTCOM)

The SMA Reach Back Cell effort has been an invaluable resource to USCENTCOM, and has enriched USCENTCOM's future planning efforts. USCENTCOM has already used and incorporated many of the insights derived from the SMA Reach Back Cell effort.

Key Findings (Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois, NSI)

While the SMA Reach Back Cell effort has produced an array of reports in response to key USCENTCOM questions, all of the work from the effort has been combined into an executive summary. The executive summary addresses three key questions in particular:

1. Will military defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq eliminate the threat?
2. What are the implication of Daesh's defeat on regional stability?
3. What should the US do to stabilize the region?

Will military defeat of Daesh in Syria and Iraq fully eliminate the threat? The overwhelming response from the subject matter experts (SMEs) was simply, "no." As a military force, yes, eventually Daesh will be defeated; however, physical defeat alone will not fully eliminate the threat. The threat of Daesh will linger beyond simply physical force, and this threat will be spread primarily through two conduits: people and cyber space. The first conduit is people, who can easily spread Daesh's ideology and teachings across the globe. The second conduit is cyber space because, realistically, there is no way to fully eliminate Daesh's online presence and materials. It is important to also not forget that the group we now call Daesh has reinvented itself twice before, so we face a similar risk of group reinvention following physical defeat in Iraq in Syria.

What are the implications of Daesh's defeat on regional stability? Conflict in the region will continue following Daesh—Daesh's defeat will likely be just a blip on the radar. The defeat of Daesh will create gaps that other actors will certainly fill. Thus, we must ask ourselves: What comes after Daesh, and what do we do after the physical defeat of Daesh? Unfortunately, it seems that no one has the answer to these questions.

What should the US do to stabilize the region? SMEs emphasized that the US needs to deal with the many intra-state conflicts that can be found throughout the region. However, in many of these states, there is a hyper-localization of the conflict, so solutions must also be localized in approach (i.e., we must respond at the local level).

Recent Data From Surveys Conducted in Mosul and Iraq (Dr. Munqith M. Dagher, IIACSS)

The million dollar question that we must ask ourselves is: why are the bad guys in Iraq and Syria doing better than the good guys? Daesh has had clear success in Iraq. The US has been using advanced, sophisticated technology in the fight against Daesh, yet the fight has continued on for over two years. Despite having a clear disadvantage in resources, why it is that Daesh has had such success in Iraq, and, furthermore, why has the fight to eliminate this group taken so long?

The simple answer seems to be that Daesh knows much more about the environment in which they are living and operating in than we do—Daesh is much closer to the ground than we are. Daesh is not an ideology, it is a learning organization, and it is winning because we have not yet learned the lesson.

We face a significant problem when it comes to younger people (ages 17-20) whom have grown up in areas where Daesh has been in control of their cities and schools. Though sympathetic or loyal to ISIS, many of these young people are not fighters, so they cannot simply be fought, captured, and/or jailed. Despite living under control of Daesh, most of these young people just live their lives as normally as they can with their families. Some worry that these Daesh-radicalized young people could be consider “silent bombs” that will pose significant challenges in the future. These silent, Daesh-radicalized young people will likely represent the next movement following the physical defeat of Daesh.

Recent polling in Mosul, and throughout Iraq, has uncovered some interesting sentiment and findings.

- In general, Iraqis are pessimistic about the future, though it seems to be one of the rare moments when Iraqi Sunnis are more optimistic than others.
- Haider al-Abadi will determine Iraq's fate in the post-Daesh Iraq.
- The sectarian conflict narrative is not supported by the survey data.
- Iraqi Sunnis want to be part of the federal government going forward.
- The Iraqi Federal Forces are the most favored group with respect to providing security in previously Daesh-controlled areas.
- Iraqi Sunnis and many Iraqi Shia largely do not see any role for the PMF following defeat of Daesh.
- Concerns about Iraq's future remain serious.

The US currently has a golden opportunity in Iraq, and this opportunity should be capitalized upon as soon as possible. There is certainly concern that Iran and Russia will try and interfere in the upcoming Iraq

elections; however, if there is a role for the US to play, it is to show al-Abadi that there is an opportunity for him and that he can and should jump in and try and take advantage of this opportunity.

Panelist Insights

Panelists were asked to focus on addressing the following topic areas:

- Daesh/VEO evolution and virtual jihad.
- Options for mitigating Iran's malign impact on regional politics.
- Regional stability buffers and instability factors.

Dr. Jen Ziemke (John Carroll University)

We need to create a place that collects and presents new premonitions, hunches, and intuitions that arise. A lot of the times, we trend toward the side of presenting cautious predictions out of a desire to be correct, but this then trends us away from risk taking in our predictions and presenting seemingly more unlikely hunches. It would be great if there was a place where analysts and forecasters could go out on a limb and freely present various hunches that might arise.

Dr. Ian McCulloh (Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory)

We need to ensure that we have a model or theory of what we are trying to assess before we actually start in on our assessments. With respect to messaging and online influence, we must also not forget that 1) censorship is the best way to create virality online, 2) presenting facts and logic does not create effective messages, and 3) we can in fact have strategic success online. To effectively combat virtual jihad, we have to start by getting our measurements right. Unfortunately, there are currently problems with our trust in terms of data and assessment.

Dr. Diane Maye (ERAU)

We currently have a post-World War 2 system of nation states that now has non-state actors shaping things. We have to recognize this and start evolving how we frame the narrative.

The bottom line is all roads lead to Tehran. Iran is a nefarious actor that wants power and regional hegemony and uses non-state actors to weaken nation-states. They have acted as a station for Al Qaeda operatives and other terrorist organizations. They are responsible for trafficking weapons, narcotics, human beings, and human body parts across the Middle East.

Daesh is a symptom of poor governance, and poor governance in Iraq is in large part because of Iran's expansionist policies. If we want stability in the region, we have to go after Iran. Currently, Iran is winning on a few fronts in Iraq – namely in their “soft power” initiatives. For example, Iran is working to refurbish Iraqi mosques, and Iran is also targeting its messaging and influence operations toward less educated Iraqis. Iran is beating us in the region, and it is unlikely that we will be able to change this without a permanent US presence on the ground.

Dr. Laura Steckman (MITRE)

In the future, there will be some rendition of Daesh 2.0. Some of Daesh's fighters will leave to join groups like Al Qaeda, some fighters will form new groups, and many foreign fighters will return home, but, ultimately, these Daesh fighters have to go somewhere, and this is the real threat.

Daesh has created a transmedia narrative. Daesh's narrative and ideology is provided across cultures and platforms in many different languages throughout the world. This is the first time a group has utilized multiple technologies simultaneously to promote its narrative, and the strategy has been persuasive for an unprecedented number of individuals worldwide. Transmedia narratives may offer opportunities for our messaging and influence operations.

Ms. Tricia DeGennaro (TRADOC G-27)

The problem is more complicated than "all roads lead to Tehran." Saudi Arabia and some Gulf countries also have quite maligned interests in the region, so defining the problem is not as easy as simply saying it is either one side or the other. Part of the problem is that there is a disconnect with our policy in the region. We need to take politics out of policy. We are currently making policy and conducting interventions in an unconnected and incoherent manner, and it is essential that we fix this.

Dr. Jon Wilkenfeld (University of Maryland)

As part of the SMA Reach Back Cell effort, the University of Maryland ICONS ran a simulation to look at what would happen if the US were to announce a plan to significantly increase its presence on the ground in the region. The simulation found that this would have little impact if the troops were deployed to Iraq, but would have a greater impact if the US troops were deployed to Syria. Interestingly, in running this scenario, the simulation found that by significantly increasing its presence on the ground in Syria, the US also ran the risk of triggering a tripwire reaction from Russia, thus further increasing the risk of instability and conflict between the US and Russia.

Dr. Munqith M. Dagher (IIACSS)

Why is Daesh winning and the US losing?

First, Daesh has portrayed itself as the best available alternative to the people on the ground. When people on the ground compare Daesh to the governance in place, they see that Daesh provides safety and a set of rules that bring order and eliminate corruption. Daesh is very good at setting itself up as the best available option on the ground.

Second, Islam has become a trademark for anyone who wants to defeat the West, and Daesh has become a big trademark for defeating the West (i.e., an alternative to the West).

Third, we should not focus solely on Iran and Iraqi Shia alignment, but instead focus on and better understand the good and bad things that are occurring within the relationship between Iran and Iraqi Shia.

Question and Answer

A participant noted that we do not do a good enough job of defining terms like “ideology” when we use them. For example, saying something like “Daesh is not an ideology” could mean two different things to two different people.

How do we assess whether Daesh is really making an impact in its targeting of recruits, or if it is just getting people who would have joined the fight anyways, regardless of the group?

Dr. McCulloh responded that Daesh’s online videos are influencing people who are disenfranchised and choosing to look online for an avenue to vent. These people find Daesh and use the group as their avenue to vent their frustrations. Daesh is very good at marketing itself in the sense that if they find someone who is bored, they entertain, and if they find someone who is sad, they appeal emotionally and provide hope—Daesh is very good at targeting and assessing with its outreach.

Dr. DeGennaro added that we need to get used to a more chaotic system now that we are so interconnected and there are so many more tools and people involved than ever before.

Dr. McCulloh added that we need to improve our information operation capacity. We need to get better at things like targeting and properly preparing information operations to coincide with kinetic operations.