Lessons for Israel's Fight Against Hamas from the West's Fight Against ISIS

written by Dr. Adi Schwartz | 22.10.2023

Key Messages:

- World leaders, including US President Joe Biden, have compared Hamas to ISIS.
- A Western-led coalition has been fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq since 2014. **American Secretary of Defense, James Mattis, characterized the fight against ISIS in their stronghold of Mosul as "a war of annihilation."**
- The fight against ISIS for Mosul, Iraq in 2016-2017 was the heaviest urban combat since World War II; **the destruction resembled that wrought by the Allied Forces in World War II on the German city of Dresden**. The UN calculated that more than 80% of Mosul was estimated to be uninhabitable as a result of the destruction.
- The city of Raqqa in Syria, another stronghold of ISIS attacked by the US military, was considered "unfit for human habitation," following the attacks.
- While Israel will continue to take steps to avoid civilian casualties, it is likely that in its fight against 'ISIS in Gaza' – e.g. Hamas – it will need to adopt similar strategies and standards as those actually used in some cases by Western governments in their fight against ISIS.

Background

In the wake of the barbaric atrocities perpetrated by Hamas against Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023, numerous world leaders have unequivocally denounced the actions of this radical Islamist extremist group. Some have drawn explicit parallels between these actions and the gravest atrocities committed by the Islamic State (ISIS). For example, on October 10, United States President Joe Biden declared: "The brutality of Hamas — this bloodthirstiness — brings to mind the worst — the worst rampages of ISIS."[1]

The War against ISIS

In reaction to ISIS's swift territorial expansion in Iraq and Syria, several Western nations, including the United States, the United Kingdom, and France, initiated interventions to counter the threat from the radical Jihadist group. Among the most significant military operations were those conducted in Mosul, located in Iraq, and Raqqa, situated in Syria, which both served as key strongholds of ISIS in the region.

According to Time magazine, senior American military commanders reached back into history for parallels and precedents as to the scope and ferocity of these battles[1]. PBS' Frontline program cited military commanders describing the fight for Mosul as the largest military operation in the world since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the heaviest urban combat since World War II[2]. Michael Butt, Emergency Response Coordinator for International Medical Corps Iraq, said that the destruction resembled that of the Germany city of Dresden in WWII[3]. Then US Secretary of Defense James Mattis characterized the fight as "a war of annihilation."[4]

In an interview with CBS' Face the Nation program on May 28, 2017, Mattis said that ISIS was "a threat to all civilized nations. And the bottom line is we are going to move in an accelerated and reinforced manner, throw them on their back foot. Our intention is that the foreign fighters do not survive the fight to return home to North Africa, to Europe, to America, to Asia, to Africa. We're not going to allow them to do so. We're going to stop them there and take apart the caliphate."[5]

The destruction in both Mosul and Raqqa was near total. The United Nations calculated that more than 80% of Mosul was estimated to be uninhabitable as a result of the destruction.[6] The fighting left behind eight million tons of debris.[7] Raqqa was considered "unfit for human habitation," with around 80 percent of the city damaged or destroyed[8]. Army Command Sergeant Major, John Wayne Troxell, the senior enlisted advisor to the U.S. military's top officer, said in November 2017 that Americans "fired more rounds in Raqqa in five months than any other Marine artillery battalion since the Vietnam War".[9]

Collateral Damage

Since 9/11, the United States has been involved in the war against radical Islamic terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, with many of the battles taking

place in densely populated urban areas. Under the law of armed conflict, military forces are required to apply a principle of discrimination — using deadly force against hostile forces, but not against civilian noncombatants. As applied with respect to civilian population centers, the requirement has two elements: there must be a legitimate military target, and the damage to civilians must be "proportionate." The question of course is how many innocent civilian deaths make a strike against a legitimate military target "disproportionate".

In an article in July 2007, Salon's Mark Benjamin learned that "the magic number was 30," according to Marc Garlasco, who was the US Pentagon's chief of high-value targeting at the start of the War on Terror. "That means that if you hit 30 as the anticipated number of civilians killed, the airstrike had to go to [then Defense Secretary Donald] Rumsfeld or [then President] Bush personally to sign off."[1] If it was anticipated that a lower number of civilian casualties would be caused by a strike on a high-value military target, the strike could be approved at less senior levels.

Conclusion

Following the heinous acts committed by Hamas on October 7, both Israel and its Western allies have declared that Hamas shares similarities with ISIS, and consequently, they advocate for a comparable approach: the complete dismantling of the organization.

To implement this strategy, Israel may consider drawing lessons from the practices of its Western counterparts in combating ISIS, particularly in urban regions akin to those in the Gaza Strip. While Israel will continue to take steps to avoid civilian casualties, it is likely that in its fight against 'ISIS in Gaza' – i.e., Hamas – it will need to adopt similar strategies and standards as those actually used in some cases by Western governments in their fight against ISIS.

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[2] Blue, V. J. (2019). After the 'War of Annihilation' against ISIS. *Time*. https://time.com/longform/mosul-raqqa-ruins-after-the-war-of-annihilation/

[3] PBS. (2017). *Frontline Mosul*. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/documentary/mosul/

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[5] Blue, V. J. (2019). After the 'War of Annihilation' against ISIS. *Time*. https://time.com/longform/mosul-raqqa-ruins-after-the-war-of-annihilation/

[6] Garamone, J. (2017). Defeat-ISIS 'Annihilation' campaign accelerating, Mattis says. *DOD News*. https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1196114/defeat-isis-annihilation-campaign-accelerating-mattis-says/

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Amnesty International. (2019). *War in Raqqa: Briefing*. https://raqqa.amnesty.org/briefing.html