

Understanding the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

PART TWO: ISIL'S CORE CAPABILITIES

A team of researchers, headed by Dr. Gina Ligon of START, conducted an internal strategic organizational analysis of ISIL, and found support for the hypothesis that ISIL is a durable movement in the geographic region it currently controls.

The researchers found that there are three strategic resources and capabilities that may allow ISIL to become a durable movement:

1. A unique leadership style and structure;
2. State-of-the-art cyber usage; and
3. Organizational legitimacy in an unstable region.

Researchers reached these findings by conducting a VRIO analysis, posing the following four questions about the competitive potential of ISIL and other Violent Extremist Organizations:

Value: Does the organization have a resource or capability that is valuable, meaning that it allows the organization to exploit existing opportunities or mitigate threats?

Rarity: Does the organization have a resource or capability that few other organizations possess?

Imitability: Does the organization have a resource or capability that other firms cannot easily replicate?

Organization: Is the organization structured and organized in such a way that it can effectively exploit the resources and capacities that have been identified as valuable, rare, and inimitable?

Researchers identified ISIL's leadership style as particularly rare, valuable, and inimitable. ISIL leadership exhibits a pragmatic and participatory style, motivating followers by sharing power and decision-making authority throughout the organization, rather than motivating through charismatic or authoritarian leadership.

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's participatory, pragmatic leadership style is commonly seen in state-level leaders, but is rare among VEO leaders. Strengths of this style include a strategic rather than emotional approach to problem solving, information sharing among organization members, actions that promote the organization's needs over the leader's, and opportunities for autonomy and leadership throughout the organization, which fosters loyalty. This diffusion of power and authority also has the effect of making the organization resilient against leadership decapitation, as will be discussed later in this training.

ISIL's leadership emerged from the same perfect storm that gave rise to the group as a whole, and is thus difficult for other organizations to replicate. The strengths of the individuals involved in ISIL's leadership, and the timing of events in their lives in the broader geopolitical context of the region (such as the timing of al-Baghdadi's detainment coinciding with that of elite former Baathists) have given rise to a leadership style that provides ISIL with a sustainable competitive advantage.

Although it may seem counter-intuitive, the leadership attribute that may matter most when assessing VEOs is not the prowess of the individual leader, but the leader's willingness and ability to empower the organization around him or her.

The second core capacity researchers identified was ISIL's facility with state-of-the-art cyber technologies.

ISIL's use of cyber is marked by innovation and flexibility. ISIL followers and leadership utilize a variety of technologies for internal communication and organization, as well as external messaging and recruitment. This cyber sophistication was acquired via the recruitment of cyber experts, and also via a dedicated investment in the tools and infrastructure needed for these experts to work.

In addition, congruent with ISIL's leadership style, this usage of cyber is decentralized and therefore difficult for outsiders to disrupt. Furthermore, ISIL's leaders have argued that the individuals with the greatest authority in Islam are those in the fight,

as opposed to armchair scholars opining from the safety of their homes. As a result, individual fighters in ISIL have both the ideological tools and the technological means to recruit, radicalize, and incite followers.

ISIL's usage of cyber exhibits a sophisticated understanding of multiple platforms and of marketing, organizational branding, and media relations. The result is a strong and sustainable capacity for robust, fluid recruitment and messaging. No other Violent Extremist Groups rival ISIL in their capacity for exploiting cyber technologies.

Just as ISIL's leadership emerged from and ably exploits the current geopolitical context of Iraq and Syria, the array of cyber capabilities available in the 21st Century enabled ISIL's rise to power and continued advancement. ISIL's cyber usage is an essential element to its success.

It is clear that VEOs' effective use of cyber can greatly enhance VEOs' ability to spread their message, coordinate operations, and maintain organizational coherence across geographic distances. Cyber has emerged as a key area of assessment for understanding and anticipating the capacities of VEOs.

The third core capacity identified is ISIL's organizational legitimacy, particularly in comparison to competing groups in the region. This legitimacy has resulted from a combination of leadership style, strategic branding, and consistent messaging. The congruence between ISIL's words and actions has sent a clear message to current and potential followers that "ISIL Sells Success". ISIL pursues a branding strategy that positions it as an organization that is both stronger and ideologically superior to other institutions in the region, and it is this positioning that makes ISIL particularly magnetic to its followers.

In particular, ISIL's combination of ideological and pragmatic messaging has allowed it to position itself as something larger than just an organization: it allows ISIL to position itself as a social movement, as a cause to be joined. A follower's commitment to a social movement is deeper than commitment to any single organization or leader could ever be, and this quality allows both local populations and the broader Umma to see validity in ISIL's vision of a Caliphate.

For VEOs to successfully recruit new members, retain current members, and influence the greater public, establishing legitimacy through congruence between words and actions increases the organization's resilience. Rather than influencing a society solely through brute force or other extrinsic motivators, VEOs that cultivate intrinsic motivation in their followers and in the public are able to create a sustainable, intangible asset.

This concludes Part 2 of this training.



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