



# SMALL WARS

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## JOURNAL

## More Lessons from a Long War

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### More Lessons from a Long War

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In the fall of 2015, scholars from the National Defense University's Institute of National Strategic Studies completed a book on the strategic lessons of the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. The book, *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War* has met with significant success and is being widely integrated into Joint Professional Military Education courses. The book has also become the most downloaded publication in the history of the NDU Press.

The book was entitled *Lessons Encountered* because so many of our lessons or observations were not new, but leftover from other conflicts, lessons identified, but not learned or retained. It highlighted lessons in five baskets: national level decision making, unity of effort and unity of command, intelligence and understanding the operational environment, the character of contemporary conflict, and security force assistance.<sup>[1]</sup> Among the specific lessons or observations were:

- The difficulty of national security decision making and the need for our senior-most Admirals and Generals to study the system, earn trust, and formulate effective military advice that fits the situation and works toward meaningful objectives.
- The need for the senior-most officers to have interagency acumen, media savvy, understanding of congressional relations and defense planning, and skill in multinational environments.
- The difficulty of interagency and coalition unity of effort.
- The failures in both Iraq and Afghanistan to foster unity of command.
- The need for timely and comprehensive operational and strategic assessments.
- The deleterious effects of the 2003 intelligence failure in Iraq.
- The great success of intelligence fusion in supporting tactical operations and supporting special operations forces.
- The widespread failure to understand the operational environment, indigenous partners, and the enemy.
- The requirement for better post-conflict planning.
- The caution to avoid becoming a third-party in another nation's large-scale counterinsurgency effort.

- The need to see wars of regime change as protracted conflicts that require prudent, long-term international effort to bring stability and foster reconstruction, especially in weak or failed states.
- The imperative to include detainee planning and the careful consideration of legal issues in advance of deployments.
- The requirement to improve our ability to teach others how to defeat an insurgency or fight terrorists, emphasizing local needs and local leadership.

In the book, we carried out our analysis through 2013, but as we were writing the final draft, the scourge of ISIL came to dominate much of the fighting in the Syrian civil war. Later, fighting as a conventional army, ISIL took a third of Iraq, humiliating the Iraqi government and its armed forces. In the authors' first presentations on the strategic lessons, alert listeners pressed us on what lessons we had that would be useful for dealing with ISIL.

This short essay is an attempt to encapsulate lessons from the Long War beyond the timeframe operative in the NDU book. Once again, the lessons may not be new. They are often simple, but nevertheless profound. As with all strategic lessons, they are context dependent.

To begin, who could forget where they were in August 2011 when the last American combat units convoyed without incident from a mostly peaceful Iraq into Kuwait? For many of us, it was a relief to imagine that somehow ---unlike Humpty Dumpty--- all the King's horses and all of his soldiers had somehow found a way to put a shattered Iraq back together again. The boldness of the Surge and the Sunni awakening had reduced violence in Iraq by 90 percent. The U.S. and its allies helped to rebuild a competent Iraqi Army. The Surge enabled the Coalition to begin to withdraw and for Iraq to hold a second round of apparently successful elections. In some ways, the peaceful U.S. departure from Iraq diminished the pain of an expensive, bloody campaign, a preventive war built on faulty premises.

Few of these rosy perceptions proved to be true or lasting. Here is a précis of what happened and some important lessons encountered in the new battle to save Iraq and defeat ISIL while protecting the American and European homelands from its agents of death.

### **Lesson 1: Wars start and end with politics.**

While we were focused on temporary security gains, the politics of Iraq were headed south in a hurry. Between the end of the Surge and the beginning of the withdrawal, we stopped exerting leverage on the Iraqi government in the name of letting Iraqis be Iraqis. We gave up on a government with some checks and balances and supported an Iraqi strongman.[2] We did not successfully negotiate a follow-on force. Some blame this on Iraqi politics, but others believe that the current Administration made only a half-hearted effort to keep a substantial force there. The military's estimate of 24,000 troops was progressively whittled down to a mere 5,000 troops, and the Iraqis would not budge on immunity issues.[3] The Obama Administration then decided on what was virtually a full withdrawal, removing an important source of leverage on Iraqi policy. Compounding the problem, as our force dwindled, we lost interest in Iraqi issues. As one former senior Pentagon official told us, speaking of high level policy makers in the first Obama administration: "we took our eye off of the ball" in Iraq.[4]

Even before our withdrawal, the *Dawa*, Maliki's party, which did not finish first in the 2010 election, maneuvered its way back into power with the acquiescence of Embassy Baghdad and the White House. The Maliki regime quickly began backsliding, moving closer to Iran, and moving against its Sunni partners. Iraqi democracy was a half-baked pie. Maliki's team in Iraq understood majority rule, but not minority rights. As Joel Rayburn, an Army expert on Iraq noted: "The Iraqi state that the United States

and its allies worked hard to decentralize and democratize had reverted under Nuri al-Maliki to its old form: an Arab oil power ruled by one sect, one party, one man.”[5] On the military front, even before the U.S. withdrawal, the talented Iraqi army commanders that Generals Petraeus and Odierno had jawboned into key command positions were replaced by Maliki loyalists.[6]

In the summer of 2014, when challenged by ISIL, the new name for al Qaeda in Iraq, the Iraqi Army’s training did not fail; its leadership did. Many in the Sunni population of Iraq compounded the problem by believing ISIL to be a lesser evil than the Maliki government. Emma Sky, an area expert and advisor to senior U.S. commanders, described the ensuing debacle:

The Iraqi security forces had quickly disintegrated in June [2014] in Mosul in the face of the advance of the Islamic State. Although they far outnumbered the Islamic State and had been better equipped, they were poorly led. There was no official chain of command through the Ministry of Defence .... Maliki had replaced competent officers with people loyal to himself. Corruption was rife. Some had taken the funds meant to buy food for their soldiers. None gave orders to their forces to fight. The Islamic State had taken possession of all the equipment the US had supplied the Iraqi Army.[7]

In the period 2010 to 2014, our military success was undone by political failures, both Iraqi and American. War is the extension of politics, and war among the people begins and ends with politics. No successful military operation can be an end in itself. Permanent fixes must include effective political arrangements that can bring stability, earn the illusive quality of legitimacy, and provide an alternative to violent Islamist extremism.

In future campaigns, when angry politicians call for American troops to take Raqqa or assault Mosul, the proper response to those advocating U.S. “boots on the ground” should be: “then what?” Keep asking that question until your interlocutor can explain how risky military operations will lead to some sort of effective governance. This will be a tough issue for a liberated Mosul and an even tougher issue for Raqqa in civil war-torn Syria.

## **Lesson 2: On the military end, understand defeat and don’t overestimate its significance.**

After the Surge, one source of confusion came from the defeat of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI changed its name to ISIL,[8] but at the end of the surge, it was crushed, no longer a serious adversary, or so we thought. A few wiser heads knew that AQI had only been defeated in Iraq and then dispersed. Just like the Taliban in 2001, defeat did not mean physical destruction, nor did defeat in combat destroy the poisonous ideology that propelled the movement.[9] As the Taliban hunkered down in Pakistan, ISIL limped across the porous border and roosted in Syria, a familiar safe haven. General [and later CIA Director] David Petraeus --- even before the withdrawal of US troops --- tried to move the U.S. government to encourage the Syrian government to take on the rump of AQI, but Assad was not interested and the U.S. did not want to formally ask for his help.[10] No effective action was taken; the ISIL tumor grew and metastasized.

ISIL morphed into a more potent organization than AQI.[11] It bonded more closely with Baathist officers, Syrian radicals, graduates of various prisons, and young people skilled in using the internet to recruit and sell their new black-bannered brand. ISIL’s regional appeal subsequently went global, creating both new recruits and small cells of terrorists in Europe and the United States. Rather than being the JV team, as President Obama called them, ISIL split from AQ and became the leading Salafi *jihadi*

movement, not initially focused on the far enemy, but on taking and holding ground, first in civil war Syria, and then in weakened Iraq. Logistics and financing followed the black flag, ensuring a formidable force. ISIL-inspired radicals or ISIL-infiltrated agents have struck in the United States, Belgium, France, Turkey, Libya, and in other states.

In the future, we will celebrate the fall of this town or that city, and ultimately the defeat of major ISIL formations, possibly accompanied by the capture or death of al-Baghdadi. Within the next few months, even Raqqa or Mosul may fall. Unmanned aerial vehicles will continue to kill ISIL leaders. After ISIL's military defeat, the first question must be: "where did they go?" Like the classical insurgent of old, even ISIL is not likely to "die in place," but will run away to live and fight another day. Lasting solutions will require effective governance and governing forces will have to deal with the religious and ideological roots of the conflict. Translation: we are 15 years into a multi-generational conflict.

### **Lesson 3: Leave your ethnocentrism at the door. Know your enemy and your local partners.**

How many times did you hear the President or one of his aides talk about ending the war in Iraq?[12] We never had such an intention. We did plan to and succeeded in ending our participation in the war in Iraq, but the difference between ending a war and ending our participation in it are huge. What comes after our combat forces depart is critical. Post-combat forces and/or levels of aid are critically important to assist fledgling regimes. Both the U.S. departure from Iraq and its "zero footprint" approach to post-conflict Libya are object lessons for the future. Both cases also argue for care in deciding when and how to intervene in conflict situations. Great power freedom of action is significant before intervention, but decreases rapidly over time during interventions.

The wars in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, etc. involve us, but they are not about us. The locals are in charge and, as already outlined above, they have different objectives than we do; they don't see the world in the same way, even when they are parroting our terminology. Whether we are talking to their leaders, training their army, or working with the people, we have to know them and realize that ultimately, they will be in charge. We have to help them be better in their milieu, and not poor copies of U.S. forces. Local authorities must have ownership of force development programs for their forces.[13]

At the same time, we have to drive hard bargains with our new partners. General Martin Dempsey, the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, advocates a transactional relationship.[14] He said in an interview with the author and a colleague that our support has to be "transactional and conditional." General Dempsey believed that conflicts in weak or failing states tend to be societally based, wrapped up in religion, sectarian relations, and ethnic issues. Unconditional support could exacerbate that situation and make us lose sight of our own objectives.

The exhortation to know your enemy and local allies is the right recommendation, but it is a very difficult one for a global power with global interests. How does one maintain general purpose forces for global missions, but, at the same time, ensure that when committed we can act with great knowledge of local actors and conditions? Regionally aligned forces might be one part of a solution, and more language training for people in the general purpose forces might also help. Selected special operations forces have language training programs, but those too are likely in need of more work. Of course, having the right language capabilities for the next contingency will still involve chance, the constant companion of military operations.

### **Lesson 4: The Importance of Allies.**

Despite the incessant carping of office seekers and pundits, allies and partners are extremely important to the United States. They add to our capabilities and legitimacy, and create opportunities for logistical and

basing synergies that are often priceless. On the other side of the balance sheet, allies often fail to carry their fair share of the load. They can also complicate command and control arrangements and frustrate rational planning because of national caveats. Intelligence sharing is also a problem, as is logistics. Both normally remain national responsibilities, causing small numbers of allied combat troops to have disproportionately large support tails. Very large coalitions, as in the First Gulf War, can also limit flexibility when it comes to war termination.

Close allies also perform one other important function: they can give a superpower sanity checks. While every great power must reserve the right to go it alone, for the United States, willing allied support and participation has been a great predictor of success. Traditional U.S. allies signed on willingly for the Korean War, operations in the Balkans, the First Gulf War, and the conflict in Afghanistan, all of which turned out (or have a chance to turn out) well. U.S. allies --- for the most part --- balked at supporting the war in Vietnam and the invasion of Iraq. Of course, allied support may be necessary, but it hasn't always been sufficient for success. NATO's Libyan intervention was a case with wide, but not universal, allied support, but it failed in the post-conflict phase. Still, even if not definitive, when the allies won't come on board, maybe we should cancel the voyage. The old saw remains true: the only thing worse than fighting with allies is fighting without them.

### **Lesson 5: The character of contemporary wars changes and requires adaptation by the combatants.**

Once upon a time, the Long War was mainly about a war in Iraq and a conflict in Afghanistan. Al-Qaeda was a major factor in both of these fights. Today, with both ISIL and al-Qaeda on the prowl, we are faced with a trans-regional conflict that includes: Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, the Sinai, Libya, the Philippine Republic, as well as the United States and European homelands. Adding to the problem set, Iran is spreading its influence in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, empowered by our failure to bring the intervention in Iraq to a stable and successful conclusion. Our book was about the big fights in Iraq and Afghanistan, but today, the Long War has taken a trans-regional cast, and has gained in complexity. While the next President will have to worry about China, Russia, Iran, North Korea, cyber issues, etc., the trans-regional war against ISIL and al Qaeda will occupy much of his or her time and energy.

This all comes at a time of war weariness within the United States. The answer to our problems is not likely to be U.S. boots on the ground. To come to grips with the trans-regional war, the United States will have to get more out of its coalition partners, repair relations with some allies, like Saudi Arabia, and reorganize to meet this threat. It will be necessary to do more by teaching than by doing, and that, sadly, has not always been a U.S. strength. The U.S. part of the trans-regional conflict also needs a single war manager, with the ability to set priorities, deal with allies in various regions, and shift assets among the various combatant commands involved, including SOCOM, CENTCOM, AFRICOM, and PACOM. It may also require a new headquarters or coordination center to do this work in a timely fashion. I am not sure that the Pentagon can focus like a laser beam on the trans-regional conflict while simultaneously dealing with all of the other challenges to U.S. national security. That said, adding yet another joint headquarters is not likely to please anyone. Perhaps the readers of *Small Wars Journal* can solve this vexing puzzle.

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### **End Notes**

[1] Richard D. Hooker, Jr., and Joseph J. Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*

(Washington, DC, 2015). The lessons are detailed in the Introduction and the final chapter, pages 7-17, 401-19.

[2] Ambassador Christopher Hill admitted this to the US commander, General Ray Odierno. See Emma Sky, *Unravelling*, p. 322. For a harsh appraisal of Hill, a laissez faire diplomat, see Sky's description, pp. 312-13. Ambassador Hill's personal take can be found in his memoir, *Outpost: Life on the Frontlines of American Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014) 362-98.

[3] Rick Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit," *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 2014) 32-34.

[4] Interview with former Obama official who requested anonymity by the author and a colleague, January 2015.

[5] Joel Rayburn, *Iraq after America: Strongmen, Sectarians, Resistance* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2014) 243.

[6] Rayburn, *Iraq after America*, 55-60; Sky, *Unravelling*, p. 356; discussions with various senior US Army officers.

[7] Sky, *Unravelling*, p. 356.

[8] ISIL (the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant) became ISIS (the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham, a term similar to the Levant), and later simply, IS, the Islamic State. ISIL is the USG-preferred acronym.

[9] Two recent books provide an excellent guide to ISIL ideology. For the general reader, see Sebastian Gorka, *Defeating Jihad: The Winnable War* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2016). For the expert, see William McCants, *The ISIL Apocalypse: the History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2015).

[10] During the Bush Administration, Petraeus wanted to meet with Assad on the issue of ISIL, but was turned down by the White House. Email with the author, April 21, 2016. In the summer of 2012, he and Secretary Clinton tried to get the White House to arm and train rebel groups in Syria. Again, the President did not accept the plan. See "White House Rebuffed Clinton-Petraeus Plan to Arm Syrian rebels: Report," Reuters, February 2, 2013 at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-syria-clinton-idUSBRE91201220130203> .

[11] For an excellent narrative account of the birth and maturing of ISIL, see David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[12] See for example, "President Obama Has Ended the War in Iraq," on October 21, 2011 at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/10/21/president-obama-has-ended-war-iraq> .

[13] T.X. Hammes, "Raising and Mentoring Security Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq," in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, 277-344.

[14] See the interview of General Martin Dempsey by myself and Richard Hooker in *Joint Force Quarterly* (JFQ) no. 78, July 2015, at <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/tabid/7781/Article/607296/from-the-chairman-an-interview-with-martin-e-dempsey.aspx> .

### About the Author



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