The Islamic State's Way of War in Iraq and Syria: From its Origins to the Post Caliphate Era

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Abstract

This article examines the Islamic State's way of warfare from its origins in the early 2000s to the present (2019), by analyzing and addressing the critical issues of how and why a state or non-state actor fights the way it does.

Keywords: way of warfare, Islamic State, guerrilla war, Iraq, Syria

Introduction

Despite its defeats, which effectively ended its 'caliphate' in 2018, Islamic State (IS) continues to pose a threat to international security. It is therefore critical to understand IS' way of warfare in order to defeat an "enemy that refuses to die"[1]. In 2016, IS 'officials' were already prepared for the possibility that they would lose territory and large numbers of personnel. Convoluted discussions about victory and defeat being part of a 'Divine plan' or of God's judgment on His 'flock,' were rationalized by claiming that sometimes God's favor smiles on them and sometimes it does not. However, they did not simply rely on the Divinity for explanations of their successes and setbacks; instead they took measures to lessen the impact of setbacks and to remain militarily effective much to the chagrin of their exhausted enemies.

Purpose of Study

Much has been written about IS' ideology, social media operations, organization, finances, and brutality toward its foes. However, almost absent from these discussions are detailed analyses about how it fights and why it fights the way it does. This article aims to fill that void in conceptual analysis of the IS way of warfare by building on and going beyond what has been written so far. Specifically, this article has two goals. The first is to discuss briefly the concept of 'a way of warfare' and the factors that shape ways of war. This will help us establish a conceptual framework for better understanding how Islamic State fights. The primary purpose is to trace Islamic State's way of warfare from 2003 to the end of 2018.

The Concept of a Way of Warfare

The concept of a way of warfare, which has been used extensively in military history and more recently Strategic Studies, addresses the twin issues of how and why a state or non-state actor fights the way it does. A military organization's way of war does not just emerge; its rise is shaped by many factors.

Factors shaping ways of warfare

Ideology and leadership ideas or preferences shape ways of war. The structural influences range from the impact of environment such as geography and terrain, nature of the demographic base, availability of resources including finances, characteristics of the available military technology, and, of course, the nature of the enemy and that enemy's strengths and weaknesses.

The role ideology plays in warfare is complicated. IS ideology, its system of beliefs, which we generally refer to as being part of the Salafi-jihadist worldview, is the primary source of why to fight and only secondarily of how to fight. Ideology is the source of the goals it seeks to implement, it tells IS members who the enemies are and

why they must be fought. Ideology influences their view of the world, and if they suffer ideological fracture then that affects overall cohesion of the movement.

How ideology affects ways of war has been extensively debated. To quote Leon Trotsky, "Marxism can be applied with great success even to the history of chess. But it is not possible to learn to play chess in a Marxist way." [2] The jihadist strategic thinker, Abu Bakr Naji, noted in Management of Savagery that war-fighting consists of universal principles – sunan kawniyyah -- that are independent of ideology but are subject to the constraints imposed on them or opportunities provided by technology, human capabilities, resources, environment and the nature of the enemy.

While the previous discussion makes a great deal of sense, ideology cannot be easily dismissed as a factor in the formulation of ways of warfare of societies, especially for those that are ideological in thought and behavior. In the context of Islamist and specifically IS' way of warfare, this is where the term jihad comes in. Jihad means to struggle, to strive, or to exert effort. It also means holy war and for some Islamists it is one of the most important obligations of the religion. Islam sanctions war ideologically like other religions. The Quran permits jihad to repel aggression, to defend the state and the religion, to establish Islam in areas where it does not exist, to fight injustice and the persecution of Muslims. This does not tell us how to fight but why you must fight. The Quran also calls upon Muslims to make certain military preparations for jihad, both mental and material, much of which pertains to how to fight.[3]

The impact of ideology on the IS way of warfare occurs at three distinct levels. At the first level, ideology identifies the enemy, rationalizes why he is the enemy, and provides the justifications for war against that enemy. That level is not about how and why IS fights the way it does, but also about justification and rationalization for war.

At another level, ideology influences the trajectory of what is permissible to do in war, i.e. how to fight, how to treat soldiers and civilians, how to deal with prisoners of war, what technology is permissible to use in war, and the disposition of property and assets seized. This primarily deals with notions of 'Just War' and the laws of war.

At the third level, ideology shapes training and preparation for war fighting. Is the ideologically prepared soldier a better soldier? Well-trained and fit soldiers who regularly and realistically train for the clash of arms are usually better prepared for war. But do spiritual and ideological preparations add to their fighting prowess in terms of resilience, higher morale, and cohesion?

Ideological systems like Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, Communist Vietnam and Islamic Iran have provided strong doses of ideological preparation for their soldiers. Similarly, Islamist groups have valued ideological indoctrination and preparation from the time of Palestinian militant Abdullah Azzam's exhortation that foreign fighters coming to help the Afghan mujahidin fight the Soviet invaders must be mentally and spiritually prepared before battle. Hence, Islamist training camps and war fighting curricula included a heavy dose of ideological preparation. In the early years of their confrontations with their enemies, many Islamist groups seemed to put greater stress on ideological preparation at the expense of instruction in preparation and readiness for war fighting. This often showed on the battlefields where poor military training resulted in significant casualties.

Many groups then began to put equal, if not greater stress on 'professional' training and preparation for war, which resulted in greater lethality. While one could argue that ideological and professional military training should go hand in hand to make an effective soldier, it is difficult to convincingly disaggregate the impact of ideology and spiritual training from other factors that promote resilience, cohesion and morale in a particular entity's way of warfare.[4]

Leaders and elites also play a role in the formulation of a way of warfare, be it a state or non-state actor. Their respective views of the outside world, and particularly of the enemy shape their way of warfare. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the man responsible for the origins of IS, had a pathological hatred for the Shia and this hatred formed the very basis of his attacks against Shia civilians, Shia-dominated Iraqi security forces and government

officials. His successor, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, on the other hand, wanted to build a territorially based 'state' – the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) -- and he urged the formation of semi-regular fighting units to face the enemy.[5]

Geography is an immutable factor as it is the space in which organized mass violence between warring groups takes place. The physical and human environments profoundly shape ways of warfare. IS strategists complained that Iraq was not suitable for classic guerrilla warfare because of its lack of sanctuaries, the absence of truly inhospitable terrain such as in Afghanistan, Chechnya or Yemen. Zarqawi himself wrote of this. In an interview released in December 2006, he was asked, "What difficulties face jihad in Iraq?" He responded:

> There can be no comparison between our capabilities and the enemy's resources. Hundreds of our brothers are fighting hundreds of thousands of the enemy…. The land of jihad in Iraq is different from Afghanistan and Chechnya. The brothers in those two countries are helped either by forests or high mountains where they can hide from the enemy and prevent him from reaching them. Iraq is flat without mountains, wadis or forests.[6]

To be sure, geography does confer advantages on certain types of terrain for irregular war. It is advantageous for the weaker side to use terrain inaccessible to the stronger side. Mountainous and jungle terrains are considered to be advantageous to the insurgent as control of terrain for a sustained period of time allows an armed non-state actor the 'luxury' to develop more sophisticated and more deadly war fighting techniques.[7] The situation was remedied to some extent by the jihadists' success in establishing a sanctuary in Diyala province northeast of Baghdad where the terrain enabled them to set up training grounds and build disciplined small units that could fight.

The major problem for the jihadist insurgents in Iraq was the human terrain rather than the physical terrain for many reasons. Firstly, the jihadists actively provoked and killed communities they considered their enemies but this in turn reduced the jihadists' ability to build a supportive environment to further their cause. Secondly, those who were their allies – Iraqi Sunni insurgents – were often short-term opportunistic allies with whom they competed for power and resourced and who would ultimately transform into enemies.

The role of military technology in influencing the way of warfare has been massively acknowledged in both military history and strategic studies. Non-state actors simply do not have the same military technology as states: they do not have established and secure facilities for production or modification of weapons. States that may be sympathetic to insurgents have to provide munitions and arms in a clandestine and covert manner through convoluted supply lines. Non-state actors can also acquire weapons and ammunition through capture (as has happened with the case of IS against dismal performance by Syrian and Iraqi forces in 2013 and 2014). If insurgents consolidate control over territory, they can begin their own production facilities, which provide their forces regularly with weapons, ammunition, and even produce innovative low-tech weapons or modifications of the advanced weapons captured from the enemy.

The nature and capabilities of the foe one is fighting also shapes your way of warfare. When the jihadist 'war machine' recovered between 2012 and 2015, it faced Syrian, Iraqi and Kurdish forces who were suffering from serious shortfalls in their morale, capabilities and in their respective ways of war against emerging insurgent forces. This facilitated IS' ability to fight almost conventionally. However, with the improvement in the capabilities of the Syrian, Iraqi and Kurdish forces, as well as the introduction of potent airpower by the United States and its allies, IS was forced to re-think its way of warfare to deal with the dynamics on the ground.

Is there an Islamic way of warfare?

Understanding ways of warfare has never been a 'scientific' objective analytical exercise. It has more to do with how peoples, cultures, and states view the way of warfare of others and often this turns out to be skewed by lack of accurate information and the existence of ingrained political and cultural prejudices. This particularly affects our understanding of the ways of war of non-state actors.

Since 9/11 there have been many writings arguing that there is an Islamic way of warfare based on Islamic theories and practice of war going back to the Prophet Mohammad and his successors. Most of the literature dealing with an alleged Islamic way of warfare lacks depth, is ahistorical, and highly political or 'orientalist' in that it posits certain unchanging structural attributes from the founding days of the religion to the present way of warfare of the myriad Islamist groups around the world.

In *American Thinker*, author Robert Engler writes that IS military strategy is a mirror image of that used by Mohammad in his wars. Engler begins dramatically: "The strategy is world domination under the rule of Islam."[8] However, Engler makes avoidable mistakes. Strategy is a means to an end or goal. He then tells us: "tactical advances and withdrawals, controlling large areas of territory, using the media to broadcast terror and fear, the use of oil as a source of revenue and soliciting ISIS recruits from Muslim communities in the West have so far made ISIS unstoppable."[9] Mohammad did not have access to any of these resources (oil, modern media, or 'Muslims living in the West'). Finally, Engler, like many others who believe in the existence of a specific 'oriental way of war,' adds that 'tactical advances and withdrawals' and 'controlling large areas of territory' are military factors that are specifically Islamic or Islamist; they are not as any military commander or military historian would point out. Engels' piece is just the tip of the iceberg here as there are other numerous faulty understandings of the so-called Islamic or Islamist ways of warfare.[10]

By way of contrast, rigorous military studies of jihadist warfare are emerging. Many researchers have done outstanding work seeking to understand how IS fights. The primary weakness of their analyses, however, is the lack of a conceptual framework for understanding IS' way of warfare. Much data is accumulated leading to very detailed descriptions of battles and technical specifications of IS weapons but little assessment of what that all means.[11] More recently, some observers have provided conceptual frameworks for analyzing the enormous amount of data on IS' military enterprise, looking at both IS military strategy and ways of warfare conceptually, as well as minutely describing battles and theater operations.[12] This article profits from what has already been done on IS way of war and builds upon all these preceding works to promote further accumulation of knowledge and to arrive at some tentative conclusions.

The IS Way of Warfare: Thought and Practice

The man responsible for the emergence of the original movement is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, born Ahmad Fadel Nazzal al-Khalayleh in the gritty industrial city of Zarqa, Jordan. In 1989, at the age of 23 he made his way to Peshawar with other novices. Zarqawi was quite clear that during his first sojourn in Afghanistan the group did not gain much experience in organizational or military matters. Moreover, given the end of the war with the Soviet invaders and the falling out among various mujahidin groups, there was nobody able or willing to provide training, development or organizational structure:

During the second trip, which took place in 1999, things improved. Zarqawi's initial organizational structure was not based on a rational system of hierarchy and management but more on a circle of family and friends who came from the Fertile Crescent. When they arrived in Iraq in 2002 with their organization, Jamiat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (JTJ) to confront the coming American invasion, they realized they were not ready for war. By its own admission, JTJ initially lacked a base for operations, military credentials, and popular support. A report by one member, Abu Anas al-Shami, stated:

> We have discovered that after one year of jihad we have not accomplished anything on the ground. None of us could find a piece of land [the size of the palm of the hand] to use as a shelter or a place to retire to safety among some members of [his] group…. We would hide at daylight and sneak like a cat at night… Homes were raided and the heroes were chased. It was a dark picture and everyone felt a sense of terrible failure.[14]

War in Iraq forced Zarqawi to develop a more formal structure. The group created an organization endowed

with specific tasks and missions. They sought to establish a leadership that would manage the organization as it set about the deadly business of sowing mayhem in Iraq. The organization was going to be involved in serious fighting for the first time and needed to create a functionally specialized military capability with distinct sets of expertise and skills. At the beginning, Zarqawi's chief operational weapons were suicide bombing and Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). Between April 2003 and September 2005, 400 suicide bombings took place in Iraq, including 90 in May 2005, nearly as many as the number conducted by Palestinians in Israel between 1993 and 2005.[15] As Zarqawi put it in an interview released after his death:

> The brothers' most effective weapon, after relying on God and praying to him for success, has been martyrdom operations. It is the brothers' unanswerable weapon for which the enemy can find no remedy. The enemies cannot prevent such operations…. Hence these martyrdom operations have played a big role in weakening the enemy and making it reach this level of despair, confusion, defeatist spirit, and psychological collapse.[16]

The impact of suicide bombing campaign was strategic but not to the ultimate benefit of the organization. The campaign contributed to the outbreak of the vicious civil war between Sunnis and Shias and to the decision of many Sunni groups to turn against Zarqawi and his organization in late 2006. Zarqawi's organization was very weak in urban warfare, small-unit skills and fighting abilities. The level of functional specialization in other military arenas such as artillery, mortar units, snipers and logistics were considerably less developed, if at all, in those earlier years.[17]

Zarqawi's successors sought to further build up the organization and were deluded into thinking that the time was ripe for an Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) under Zarqawi's immediate successor as leader, Abu Umar al-Baghdadi. This was at the very moment the organization was being hollowed out by relentless U.S. operations and a major assault by the thoroughly disgruntled Sunni insurgents. ISI's ability to move freely came under severe pressure as Iraqi civilians and certain insurgent elements began to provide useful information to U.S. forces who used it effectively and quickly to take down ISI leaders and cells.

In early November 2007, U.S. forces raided an insurgent hideout in Balad and found a diary of an ISI 'emir,' or commander named 'Abu Tariq.' Mostly written in October 2007, the diary catalogues the decline of ISI in that sector. 'Abu Tariq' once commanded 600 fighters, a substantially sized ISI brigade, as most were smaller. By October 2007 he was down to 20 men. He blamed the Sunni turn-around against ISI for the organization's demise.[18]

Abu Umar al-Baghdadi's recognition of the disastrous defeat of ISI is detailed in Issue 101 of the organization's magazine Al-Naba, which addresses military matters, and led him to lament "lam yabqa lana al 'an makan, nastati' al-sumud fi ha rub' saa" (there is no place left for us to make a stand even for a quarter of an hour). He had to take the bold decision ('qararan jar'in) to dismantle the semi-conventional structure and rely largely on clandestine means such as assassinations, sabotage, raids and use of 'stand-off' weapons such as IEDs.[19]

The loss of the human terrain – support of people and other insurgent organizations – negatively affected ISI's way of warfare and led to its rapid atrophy as a fighting force between 2007 and 2011. However, despite the massive losses by 2011, it is clear, in retrospect, that ISI had not been decisively defeated either by the Sunni revolt against it or by the ongoing U.S. military surge. When the Americans withdrew, ISI began reassessing its position, learning from its mistakes and rebuilding the organization.

Military Re-Emergence and Decline of Islamic State, 2012-Present

The December 2011 U.S. withdrawal signaled the end of Islamic State of Iraq's (ISI) decline. The Iraqi Security Forces simply did not have the training, flexibility, and will to plan and execute high-tempo operations against the jihadists.

In July 2012, the ISI began the first of two intensive insurgency campaigns that paved the way for its operations of 2014.[20] The first, "Breaking the Walls," involved a wave of high-explosive truck bombings against prisons, security installations and 'soft' targets. It lasted for a year and was designed to free jihadist prisoners and provoke Shia retaliation. The second, "Soldiers Harvest," which began in July 2013, was a targeted campaign of assassinations and bombings against the security forces. These campaigns were well resourced and executed with a high level of professionalism. ISI had moved from being a largely terrorist outfit, which used suicide-bombers, assassinations, and car bombs to one that could fight effectively along a spectrum ranging from terrorism to more complex operations involving the command and coordination of different types of units and weapons.

The Rise of ISIS Conventional Warfare Capabilities

In 2013, ISI changed its name to Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) because of its decision to become involved in the Syrian civil war against the regime of Bashar al-Assad. ISIS developed into a more functionally specialized military organization able to wage war using robust guerrilla warfare and semi-conventional mobile warfare. It put these capabilities to good use in mid-2014 and beyond in both offensive and defensive operations in both Iraq and Syria, particularly during the spectacular defeats of Syrian forces in Tabqa, Menagh, Deir-Ez-Zor, and Palmyra and of Iraqi forces in Mosul, Tikrit, and Ramadi.

The ferocity of ISIS offensives in both Syria and Iraq contributed considerably to the demoralization and degradation of Syrian and Iraqi military units. The defeat of Syrian and Iraqi military forces in 2014 allowed ISIS to acquire vast stocks of weapons, munitions and military vehicles. ISIS was able to seize significant territory enabling it to set up its "caliphate" – also known as the Islamic State - with about 8 million people under its control.

The capture of territory gave IS the 'breathing space' to start building a conventional capability and a relatively robust military production and modification capability that was impressive for its achievements in producing weapons, modifying captured weapons and churning out ammunition and shells for its forces. It seized a significant quantity of Russian and American artillery from the Iraqi armed forces and Russian artillery from the Syrian army. IS developed an armored corps based largely on the Soviet and Russian T-series of tanks.[21] IS also used tanks to breach enemy defensive positions and to provide firepower for advancing 'motorized' IS units, often riding in Toyota pick-up trucks.[22] IS, however, did not use its tanks in major or large-scale armored battles reminiscent of clashes between the armored forces of conventional armies. It seemed unable to handle more than one to two platoons of tanks (i.e. 4-5 or 8 to 10) at any one time. This may have been due to growing pains in command, communications, and control, which it may have been unable to resolve before its conventional military capabilities were eroded. Instead, IS small units used anti-tank missiles in both the offense and defense and were effective in taking out numerous enemy tanks and armored personnel vehicles. [23]

IS avoidance of massing armor could have been a way to avoid giving its enemy's air power the opportunity to strike large formations. IS writings showed that it was very concerned by the impact of enemy airpower on its ability to function on the ground. This was clearly reflected in articles referring 'to how to fight under the eyes of Crusader planes,' which recommended the dispersal of IS ground forces and the use of extensive camouflage and deception on the battlefields.[24]

Unlike its predecessors, IS built a relatively large conventional infantry force structure of special units, known as inghimasi, and regulars, which included foreign fighter units and local fighters. The inghimasi are IS' equivalent of the special forces of regular armies. They are not suicide bombers but well-trained commandos whose missions are to breach defensive positions at whatever cost necessary. They were also used in the frontlines as assault troops in offensives, to conduct reconnaissance operations, and to cover retreats of IS forces.[25]

IS 'regular' infantry forces were divided between foreign and local Syrian and Iraqi fighters. The foreign fighters were more ideologically motivated than the local units who were largely motivated by local grievances against their respective governments in Syria and Iraq. However, cohesion and discipline issues within both foreign

fighter units and among the local fighters became a concern after reverses and serious defeats followed the victories of 2014.[26]

IS' seizure of garrisons and bases in both Iraq and Syria (such as Menagh and Tabqa) showed it had built a relatively effective small-unit conventional capability. Operational methods improved dramatically in the 2013-2015 time frame. Its 'officers' were able to command, control and coordinate the fire and maneuver of fire teams on the ground in the assault against government positions in Syria and Iraq. Later, when IS was forced onto the defensive in cities, its units were able to defend effectively in the inner areas of cities until it ordered its forces to melt away into the desert or rural areas.[27]

Its traditional operational method such as suicide vehicle borne improvised explosive devices (SVBIEDs) became even more lethal and was used with deadly effect in urban warfare. IS transformed its suicide bombing enterprise from a small-scale effort producing suicide belts and vests for individual suicide bombers and fitting passenger cars with explosives for the deadly SVBIEDs in small workshops to more industrial scale production in the captured cities. IS would eventually also be able to rig large trucks and captured military vehicles with large quantities of high explosives. The scale of IS' industrial production of SVBIEDs, for use in the defense of Mosul against the Iraqi Army was staggering.[28]

IS shocked the allied ground forces when it introduced simple drones into the theater of operations. IS used drones for a variety of purposes: to provide reconnaissance and surveillance, to drop small quantities of munitions and grenades on enemy ground forces, to guide SVBIED drivers to their targets, and help IS units to plan offensives and defensive battles.[29]

Down the Spectrum of Violence: Terrorist and Insurgent Campaigns

From 2016 onward, IS was forced on the defensive and began to cede ground. The defeat of IS, loss of over 90% of its territory, death of a considerable number of its high quality personnel, and destruction of military equipment eliminated its capabilities to wage effective warfare at the higher end of the violence spectrum.

The loss of territorial strength – tamkin – was a double blow to IS conventional military capabilities and to its state-building enterprise. IS officials tried to downplay the significance and argued that it had happened once before in the 2008-2010 timeframe, that they were prepared for it again, and that they would eventually overcome this latest setback.[30]

However, following its catastrophic losses IS reverted to terrorism and guerrilla warfare. This was expected as extensive territorial losses force an armed non-state actor back down the spectrum of 'lesser' forms of warfare. Having experienced a similar scenario of defeat and loss of territory in the past, IS leaders again discussed available options in 2016. They realized that their position as a territorial entity was increasingly untenable and that they would have to revert to 'lower' and simpler operations in order to remain significant. In an August 2018 speech the IS leader, the 'caliph' Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, said: "for the mujahideen, the scale of victory or defeat is not dependent on a city or town being stolen or subject to those with aerial superiority, intercontinental ballistic missiles or smart bombs." [31]

After 2017, IS fighters regularly launched terrorist and guerrilla attacks on civilians, military forces, police and anti-IS militias in both Syria and Iraq. Clandestine IS cells tasked with covert missions such as assassinations and sabotage reappeared in provinces and cities from which they had been ejected at great cost.[32]

Conclusions

It is too early to reach concrete conclusions about IS' way of warfare. However, a number of key points can be highlighted from this brief overview of IS' way of warfare.

First, IS leaders have been faced with two problems common to many entities in an unequal fight: (i) how does

the weak fight the strong; (ii) and how does the weak defeat the strong. The weak can be any kind of organized entity fighting a stronger organized entity that has greater numbers of manpower, better technology, and more resources. A non-state actor cannot build a capability that is simply the mirror image of the state. Therefore, it has to find other ways to fight and defeat the stronger opponent. In recent conflicts involving non-state actors, many have discovered that developing a wide repertoire of ways and means – strategies and weapons systems – guarantees them greater military effectiveness and resilience against their enemies.[33]

Second, IS was and continues to be a learning organization. IS is eclectic in that it borrows from all sources – both ancient and modern and both Islamic and non-Islamic – in its way of warfare.[34] The commonly accepted cliché is that while IS' theology is that of the 7th century, it is a thoroughly modern entity in how it propagates its ideology, builds its organization, recruits personnel, conducts information operations, justifies brutal terror, and in how it fights.

Third, IS evolved into a hybrid non-state actor after 2012. The term 'hybrid capabilities' or 'hybrid warfare' are ambiguous and loosely applied terms.[35] However, for the purposes of this article, a hybrid non-state actor has two paramount characteristics: (i) Unlike traditional terrorist groups whose resources are limited, IS developed robust and lethal structure that included the traditional instruments of terrorism, the techniques of insurgents, and the capabilities to conduct semi-conventional warfare; (ii) depending on circumstances, the environment, and the characteristics of the enemy, IS can go back and forth along this spectrum of violence from terrorism to semi-conventional warfare. This was evident in 2016, when the extensive loss of territory and state infrastructure forced IS to revert back to its basic guerrilla or terrorist specialties: the small hasty ambushes, the solo suicide bomber and 'covert' Suicide Vehicle Borne IED using civilian vehicles. When it faced lackluster conventional military forces on the ground, IS was able to engage at the higher end of the spectrum of violence and used semi-conventional warfare.

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Notes

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