

Degrade, Dismantle, and Defeat

THE slow-but-steady pace of the US-led air war against ISIS terrorists in Iraq and Syria has finally begun to turn the tide. The first phase of the war ended this April, after 20 months of effort to (in President Obama's words) "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS' brutal Islamic terrorists.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly to outside observers, officials say the war has made real progress. In mid-April, Army Col. Steve Warren, chief Operation Inherent Resolve spokesman, announced the first phase of the war was therefore over.

"A year-and-a-half ago, we saw images of [ISIS] convoys moving freely into Mosul and throughout Iraq," Warren said April 13. "Those days are gone."

Phase One was designed to "degrade the enemy," Warren said. "We focused on stopping [ISIS] from advancing and degrading their military capabilities [in] an effort to eliminate [ISIS]' ability to operate as a conventional force."

At long last, the US-led coalition is on to Phase Two of this war, which is to "dismantle the enemy," Warren said. "A fractured enemy, an enemy that's shattered and scattered, has significantly reduced ability to mass combat power. They're not able to ... create decisive effects on the battlefield," a state of being that may not matter to a traditional terror group, but would mean the death of ISIS.

This group is not attempting to simply hew fear and destruction, it actually intends to oversee territory as an Islamic state and caliphate. This is impossible if ISIS leaders are continuously killed off, money and resources are not accessible, governmental functions are nonexistent, and forces have to disperse and hide merely to survive.

Two years ago, ISIS thugs marauded across north-central Iraq and Syria essentially unopposed. The US began air strikes and relief operations in August 2014.

The relief efforts were enormously successful and quickly helped avert a major humanitarian disaster on Iraq's Mount Sinjar. And air strikes soon helped bring ISIS' advance to a halt, buying time for the beleaguered and overwhelmed Iraqi forces to regroup, lick their wounds, and stand their ground.

What followed was seemingly months of US ambivalence toward Inherent Resolve.

But ISIS has now quietly lost more than 40 percent of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria, and coalition forces continue to target its leadership, forces, facilities, and financial capabilities. During Phase Two against ISIS, Warren said, "we will enable our partners to dismantle the enemy, fragment his forces, isolate his centers of gravity, and liberate the territory he holds."

The level of effort is still tepid when measured against historical precedents.

In some ways, the war against ISIS has borne more similarity to 1999's Operation Allied Force, fought to halt Serbian murder and genocide in Kosovo, than to 1991's Desert Storm or 2003's Iraqi Freedom.

The 1991 and 2003 wars were high-intensity battles from the outset, wars in which US and allied resolve were never in doubt because of the sheer scale and force of the attacks against Saddam Hussein's forces.

The wars against ISIS and Operation Allied Force against Serb forces targeting Kosovo in 1999 began slowly and ramped up gradually. Official statements about the campaigns' progress seemed defensive and failed to inspire confidence. Observers without security clearances had little evidence of progress and lacked clear indications of success. Numbers of sorties flown and weapons released became proxies for progress—spiritual successors to the body counts touted in the Vietnam War.

Allied Force was criticized because it took 12 days to hit the same number of targets that had been hit in the first 12 hours of Desert Storm eight years prior.

The war against ISIS demonstrates a wholly new level of restraint. To wit: In 1999, coalition forces dropped 28,000 bombs in 11 weeks of war. In the first three months of 2016, coalition forces released fewer than 7,000 weapons against ISIS targets.

The ramp-up in air effort has been gradual, to put it charitably: The coalition delivered 6,000 weapons against ISIS in the first three months of 2015.

Still, what goes on behind the scenes is important. "Every weapon employed and every sortie executed does not result in a direct correlation to the pressure placed on our adversaries or the pace of the operation," Air Forces Central Command officials recently stated in an airpower summary. "As indigenous ground forces continue to make progress ... intelligence and information gathered enables the coalition to become increasingly effective."

"We know it's a brutal enemy," Warren noted. ISIS "takes great pleasure in executions, beheadings, ... and other assorted acts of barbarism and terror."

The people of Iraq and Syria are now being freed from this horror. "You can't argue with 6,000 square kilometers liberated in the last month," said Warren. It is an area roughly the size of Delaware. "You can't argue with that as progress."

Imagine what's possible with a large-scale boost in intelligence flights and a commensurate increase in air strikes against ISIS targets, with closer coordination with indigenous forces. The results could improve geometrically, splintering and eradicating the remnants of a deadly and nefarious enemy.

The sooner ISIS is eliminated as a functioning entity, the better. Beyond the obvious humanitarian benefits, victory means USAF will be able to return large numbers of airmen and equipment home, allowing the force to recover, retrain, and rebuild its strength.

Said Obama in April, ISIS' "barbarism only stiffens our unity and determination to wipe this vile terrorist organization off the face of the Earth."

With the Administration now committed to defeating ISIS, it is time to put significantly more metal into this fight and bring it to an end once and for all. ☛

The war against ISIS has been painfully slow, but is finally showing progress.