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Analyzing ISIS Strategy in Establishing an Islamic Caliphate Through Lykke's Three-Legged Stool Strategy Model

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Abstract

This paper examines the strategy of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to establish an Islamic state called a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. In examining the case, this paper used the theory of strategy that comprised means, ways and ends introduced by Art. Lykke. Since its appearance in 2014, ISIS has occupied some prominent cities in Iraq and Syria to gain its objective of transforming the state into a caliphate. The group has used various ways or concepts to execute their objective through propaganda, beheading, modern technology network and the new media's role in recruiting new members. Regarding means or resources, the group has independently established and managed its economic income. However, the group has faced significant losses and decreases in the last two years. Thus, it has made achieving its objective of establishing a caliphate harder.

Key Words

Strategy, ISIS, Lykke, Iraq, Syria

1. Introduction

The study related to the theory of strategy is inseparable from the theory of strategy developed by Arthur F. Lykke regarding ends, means, and ways. According to him, a strategy must consist of goals (ends), methods (ways), and resources depicted as a three-legged stool. However, the success of a strategy is not solely determined by the presence of ends, means, and ways, as the most critical aspect is ensuring that these three elements are in balance. If they are not balanced, the resulting risks will be more significant, and the magnitude of the risks increases the chances of failure in a strategy.

Concerning Lykke's theory of strategy regarding means, ways, and ends, it is interesting to examine the strategy used by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or ISIS, also known as Daesh, in spreading its influence to establish a caliphate or Islamic state in Iraq and Syria. This article will analyze ISIS's strategy using Art—Lykke's three-legged stool theory of ends, means, and ways. The article will also assess the balance of ISIS strategy concerning ends, ways, and means and how it affects the failure or success of ISIS in achieving its main objectives or goals.

This article finds that ISIS implemented ends, ways, and means in its strategy to spread its influence. However, there was an imbalance between ends, ways, and means that prevented ISIS from achieving its goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria until now. In fact, in 2016, ISIS experienced a decline in performance marked by the recapture of many ISIS-held

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territories by the Iraqi and Syrian forces. It impacted the group's funding sources and threatened ISIS's means or resources in executing its strategy.

2. Analytical Framework: Lykke's Three-Legged Stool Strategy Model

Yarger argues that strategy is an effort to bridge the gap between the current reality and a desired future state. Therefore, strategy is inseparable from calculations involving objectives, concepts, and resources. According to Yarger, objectives are akin to doing the right things, concepts focus on doing things right, and resources primarily pertain to costs. If objectives determine effectiveness, then concepts and resources determine efficiency. Yarger states that inefficiency increases the cost of success, while a lack of effectiveness hinders achieving strategic success (Yarger, 2006, p. 49). Hence, effectiveness and efficiency play a significant role in determining the success of a strategy.

In its development, the idea of bridging the gap in the theory of strategy, as expressed by Yarger above, was pioneered by General Maxwell D. Taylor during his visit to the US Army War College in 1981. Arthur F. Lykke Jr. discussed this in his article "Towards an Understanding of Military Strategy" in *Cerami* (Cerami & Holcomb, 2001), where military strategy, as proposed by Maxwell D. Taylor, is inseparable from the formulation that includes means, ways, and ends. Initially, this general concept was introduced and applied within the scope of military strategy. However, according to Lykke, in its development, the M+W+E concept can be applied in any form of strategy, including military, political, economic, and others.

Strategy = Ends + Ways + Means.	
<i>Component</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Ends	Objectives towards which one strives
Ways	Course of action
Means	Instruments by which some end can be achieved

Figure 1. Theory of Strategy Introduced by General Maxwell D. Taylor (1981)

Source: Arthur Lykke, "Defining Military Strategy = E + W + M," *Military Review* 69, No. 5 (1989)

From the table above, Lykke then developed and formulated Taylor's formulation of strategy, $S=M+W+E$, into military strategy theory. Here, Lykke interprets ends as a military objective. Ways are defined as military strategic concepts, and means are interpreted as military resources to achieve ends. Based on this formulation, it can be concluded that objectives always answer the question of "what," what is to be achieved or what goals are to be attained. Concepts/ways always answer the question of "how," how the means/resources will be used, and resources explain what will be used to execute the concepts/ways.

Lykke articulates military strategy theory using the analogy of a three-legged stool, where each leg consists of objectives, concepts, and resources, assuming that if one or two legs are shorter, they will be imbalanced. When these three elements are not balanced, the risks associated with the strategy will increase. The magnitude of the risk will impact the success of the strategy being devised. Therefore, a valid strategy maintains an equal balance among objectives, concepts, and resources. If the balance among these elements becomes more distant and the risks of the strategy increase, several actions can be taken, such as adding resources, changing ways or reducing ends. If these options are not feasible, then the framework of the

overall strategy must be altered (Leonard, 2016). In this regard, it is evident that strategy requires objectives, concepts, and resources and a balance among them.

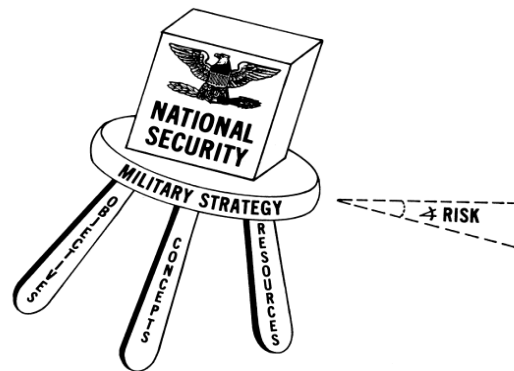


Figure 2. The Lykke's Model
Source: Ceramy & Holcomb (2001)

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. ISIS Strategy: Ends, Means and Ways

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), formerly known as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), is an affiliate of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda based in Iraq. Despite being an affiliate of Al-Qaeda, ISIS has distinct strategies, tactics, and objectives compared to Al-Qaeda in achieving its objectives. The emergence of ISIS in Syria in 2014 is closely linked to the chaos and upheaval that occurred during the revolutionary upheavals in the country since 2011. In Iraq, the withdrawal of US forces in 2011 contributed to various new terrorist group affiliates seeking to capitalize on the turmoil of the Arab Spring phenomenon in the Middle East.

The international community quickly recognized the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria because, in carrying out their actions, they were notorious for using brutalities such as beheadings, propaganda, sex trafficking, and the brutal destruction of historical sites. Unlike Al-Qaeda, which applied the strategy of targeting the "far enemy," ISIS implemented the strategy of targeting the "near enemy" (Byman, 2001). It means that the primary targets of ISIS were not the United States or other Western countries, as with Al-Qaeda. Instead, ISIS aimed at countries within the local or domestic sphere of the Middle East, particularly those with regimes considered apostate or deviant for not implementing Islamic law and Sharia in their countries (Dessi, 2017). However, as it evolved, ISIS also employed the far-enemy strategy in some cases by carrying out attacks in several European countries and terrorizing the United States. It made ISIS a terrorist group that posed a threat not only to regional stability and security but also to international security.

In examining the strategies employed by ISIS to spread its influence and carry out its actions, it is essential to consider the ends, ways and means that ISIS possesses, allowing it to rapidly and extensively expand. Firstly, regarding ends or objectives, the primary goal of ISIS is to establish a caliphate or an Islamic governing system in Iraq and Syria (Friedlant, 2016, p. 6). ISIS employs a primary strategy of weakening and eliminating the military forces of states, paramilitary groups, and other jihadist organizations that potentially challenge its control in Iraq and Syria (Gambhir, 2015).

It is evident that ISIS aims to enforce a caliphate system and challenge the Westphalian system, which has been the reference for all countries in determining their governance systems. However, the reason the ideas and objectives of ISIS have faced challenges is that the intended

caliphate system contradicts the fundamental principles and definition of an Islamic caliphate. Moreover, the concept of a caliphate itself has sparked considerable debates within Islam regarding its principles and definition (Oosterveld et al., 2017)

Regarding ISIS's objectives, Lina Khatib (Khatib, 2014) states that what has facilitated the rapid and extensive expansion of ISIS is its clear primary goal, unlike other terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. However, according to Khatib, establishing a new caliphate in Iraq and Syria is not the end goal for ISIS but rather a beginning. This is because ISIS has the slogan "lasting and expanding" (*baqiya wa tatamaddaw*). In the long term, it means that ISIS intends to conquer Iraq and Syria and expand its influence globally.

Furthermore, in terms of ways or tactics used, it is interesting to observe how ISIS spreads its influence, as it differs significantly from other terrorist groups. ISIS transformed from a conventional military force to an insurgency. It adapted its tactics to carry out hit-and-run attacks, ambushes, bombings, assassinations, and other acts of terrorism. These activities aimed to destabilize local governments, instil fear and maintain influence in certain areas (Hassan, 2018). There are five specific ways or tactics that ISIS actively employs in its actions (Friedlant, 2016). Firstly, they utilize propaganda to facilitate territorial expansion and carry out military operations. ISIS's propaganda is unique as it leverages social media platforms to disseminate its influence. ISIS utilizes Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram for recruitment purposes, and they also publish their magazine known as DABIQ (Gambhir, 2014). Through their communication strategies, ISIS has influenced both domestic and foreign youth, which are easily swayed due to their proximity to social media usage. ISIS often sought to exploit sectarian divisions within societies in the Middle East, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities. Fueling sectarian tensions aimed to create chaos and destabilize governments, furthering their objectives.

Secondly, ISIS encourages its supporters, particularly those in Western countries, to join the fight alongside ISIS in Iraq and Syria, knowing that these individuals will later become a problem for their home governments when they return. It is why ISIS actively recruits foreign fighters to join their ranks, even though it entails financial costs to pay for these foreign jihadists. Thirdly, ISIS carries out a series of kidnappings and executions of hostages, including citizens of the United States and Europe, to spread public fear. These hostage-takings also serve as a source of funding for ISIS to sustain its operations. Fourthly, ISIS employs car bombs and suicide bombings to fight against government forces in Iraq and Syria. These bombings are often targeted in densely populated urban areas where Shia Muslim communities gather. Fifthly, ISIS frequently leaves behind modified explosive devices that can be detonated remotely, further adding to the terror and destruction caused by their attacks.

In terms of means or resources, ISIS differs significantly from other terrorist groups that rely on external funding sources. ISIS is more self-sufficient and has created its sources of funding. Several sources have been the primary financial support for ISIS, including territorial seizure, bank looting, control over oil and gas resources, donations from foreign fighters, taxes imposed on individuals crossing ISIS-controlled areas, ransom payments from kidnappings, and fundraising through modern communication networks (Levallois et al., 2017). To obtain cash, ISIS engaged in various illegal operations, including oil smuggling, extortion, taxing, and looting. These initiatives enabled the group to fund its operations and maintain some economic independence (Levallois et al., 2017). Regarding human resources, ISIS has tens of thousands of members; most foreign fighters are recruited through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram. In 2015, ISIS membership was estimated to range from 50,000 to 70,000, with approximately 27,000 foreign fighters (Oosterveld et al., 2017).

3.2. Has ISIS Strategy Balanced?

If we look at the ends, ways, and means, ISIS has utilized these elements in formulating its strategy to establish a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. However, as Lykke pointed out, strategy is about fulfilling the ends, ways, and means and achieving a balance. In the case of ISIS, since its declaration in 2014 until now, it has yet to be able to control Iraq and Syria fully. In fact, in 2017, ISIS experienced significant losses, with the territorial areas it previously occupied being retaken. It indicates an imbalance in the ends, ways, and means that ISIS possesses, resulting in increased risks and difficulties in achieving its primary objective.

At the beginning of its emergence, ISIS experienced significant success in capturing several territories in Iraq and Syria, including Mosul, Fallujah, Tikrit, and Raqqa. However, by the end of 2017, ISIS had lost many strategic areas, including Mosul, and was left with only a few sparsely populated territories on the Iraq-Syria border. Significant portions of ISIS-controlled territory were recaptured through military offensives by local and international forces, leading to the loss of these resource-rich areas (Gambhir, 2015). ISIS relied on extortion and taxation of local populations in the territories it controlled to generate income. As the group lost control over population centres, its ability to collect these revenues diminished, resulting in a decline in financial resources.

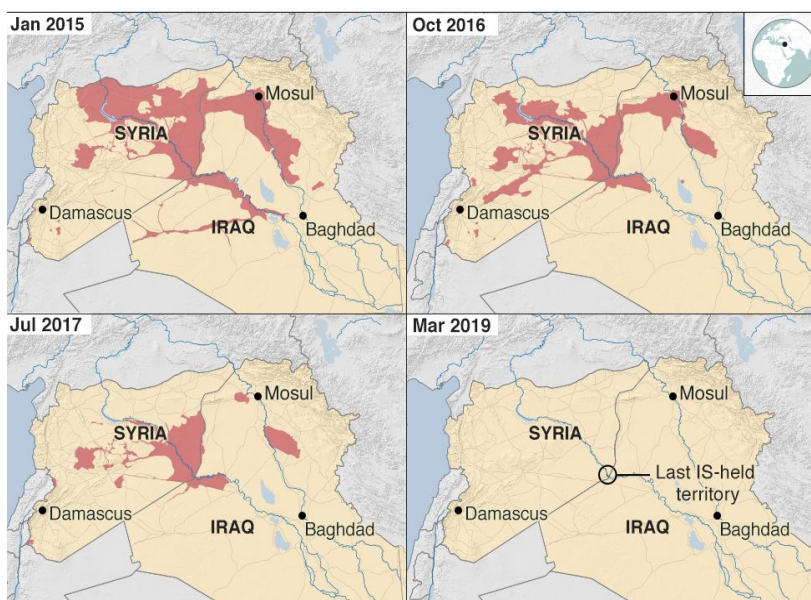


Figure 3. How the area under ISIS control has shrunk

Source: BBC, 2019.

This decreased ISIS's income by up to 80 per cent since the occupation of territories had been their primary source of revenue (Jamieson, 2017). ISIS's income has declined since 2016, going from \$1.9 billion in 2014 to \$870 million in 2016 (Al-Jazeera, 2017). The military defeats suffered by ISIS resulted in the loss of crucial resources, including oil fields, infrastructure, and financial assets. The coalition forces targeted and disrupted their revenue streams, which significantly impacted ISIS's ability to sustain itself financially (Solomon, 2016).

Moreover, due to ISIS's method of engaging in open warfare, the group has lost over 60,000 fighters since 2014, either due to anti-ISIS coalition attacks or in clashes with the Iraqi and Syrian armies while vying for control over ISIS-held territories (Burke, 2017). It is partly due to the fact that many ISIS fighters were not trained military personnel, and their lack of experience contributed to the high casualty rate within the group. The formation of international coalitions,

such as the Global Coalition to defeat ISIS, has bolstered efforts to counter ISIS and disrupt its recruitment networks (Fact Sheet, 2017). These collaborative efforts have included sharing intelligence, conducting joint operations, and implementing measures to monitor and block the movement of foreign fighters.

In this regard, ISIS faced challenges with its means or resources. From the beginning, ISIS did not correctly consider managing their income, especially since they did not have a consistent external funding source like Al-Qaeda. Therefore, when ISIS lost its territorial holdings, the group also lost its financial resources. This issue related to means contributed to the decline in ISIS's performance. Training camps for foreign fighters were shut down, and the number of jihadists crossing the Turkish border into Syria decreased significantly, from nearly 2,000 to just around 50 individuals (Oosterveld et al., 2017). Similarly, ISIS's propaganda efforts through social media also experienced a significant decline. In collaboration with social media platforms, international efforts have intensified their counterterrorism measures to combat extremist content. These measures include stricter content policies, faster removal of terrorist propaganda, and increased cooperation between tech companies and law enforcement agencies. As a result, ISIS has faced more significant challenges in disseminating its propaganda and recruiting new followers.

4. Conclusion

According to Lykke's theory of strategy, a successful strategy requires a balance between ends, ways, and means. When these three components are not in equilibrium, the risks and the likelihood of strategic failure increase. It is what happened with ISIS in pursuing their goal of establishing a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Since its declaration in 2014, ISIS had clear ends, ways, and means. However, ISIS's performance significantly declined, especially from 2017 onwards. Furthermore, their primary objective of gaining control over Iraq and Syria still needs to be achieved. Instead, ISIS has lost numerous oil-rich territories and suffered significant losses in terms of jihadist and foreign fighters due to successive territorial defeats. Their media propaganda efforts have also diminished compared to the intensity seen in 2014.

This condition shows that in terms of ends, ways, and means, ISIS experiences a lack of means or resources. It subsequently poses a risk to ISIS's performance with ends and ways. The scarcity of resources hinders ISIS from rapidly gaining control over Iraq and Syria. The imbalance in means, according to Lykke, becomes a barrier to the success of realizing a strategy. Although experiencing a decline, ISIS has not entirely disappeared or fallen. However, to sustain itself long-term, especially to implement the slogan 'lasting and expanding,' ISIS needs to change its means strategy promptly.

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