COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER
at West Point

The Group That Calls Itself a State:
Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State

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THE COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER AT WEST POINT

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) has a history of studying insurgent and terrorist organizations operating out of Iraq.[1] This report, which examines the rise, activities, and weaknesses of the group that calls itself the "Islamic State" (IS), is a continuation of that effort. Leveraging unique data sources, including the group's own material from captured documents as well as online postings, this report explores the IS as a multi-faceted organization that engages in a wide range of activities, has suffered setbacks, has undergone adaptations, and continues to exhibit weaknesses.

IS's Evolution and Relationship with al-Qa'ida

In an effort to understand how the IS became what it is today, this report begins by examining the origins of the group in the late 1990s in Afghanistan. This report finds that the evolution of the IS is best understood as an outcome of both design and accidents. It is an outcome of design because the group's territorial gains and governance, according to what it believes to be Islamic teachings, were part of the vision of its founder, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, since at least 1999. But, the IS is also an outcome of accidents that allowed the group to exploit the militant landscape in Syria as well as the politics of sectarianism that adversely affected Iraq's Arab Sunnis.

The design and accidents that allowed the IS to achieve its current status also placed it in direct conflict with the most prominent global jihadi organization of recent memory: al-Qa'ida (AQ). For while AQ considered itself as an anti-establishment global force of "jihadis without borders," al-Zarqawi's vision for his organization (the predecessor of the IS) was one of building an establishment, a vision that his successors are seeking to translate into a reality. The announcement of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the expansion it signaled was likely perceived by AQ leader Ayman al-Zawahiri as an attempt to upstage AQ and led al-Zawahiri to intervene to annul the ISIL. When his judgment was ignored, AQ publicly disowned the ISIL in February 2014. This rift continues at the time of this writing.

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[1] See, for instance, *Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq* (2007), *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout* (2008), and *Dysfunction and Decline* (2009). For a complete listing of previous and current CTC research on Iraq, please visit the CTC's ISIL, Iraq, & Syria resource website at: https://www.ctc.usma.edu/programs-resources/isil-resources.

Strengths and Weaknesses: Examining the IS's Activities

The evolution of the IS through accident and design led to an organization with the ability to carry out a large number of attacks. From November 2011 to May 2014 (before the IS's advance into Mosul), the IS self-reported over 19,000 military operations in Iraq alone. The large majority of its attacks were concentrated in Sunni-dominated areas in Iraq, while Shi'a-dominated areas saw comparatively less violence over time. In the short-term, this divide suggests the existence of a natural demographic buffer against expansion by the IS. Over the long-term, the efficacy of this buffer depends on intervening events and actions by other states and groups.

Supporting the activities of the IS is a diverse financial portfolio that includes (among other things) oil, donations, and war loot. This diversity provides some insulation against the loss of any individual component. Oil is important to the IS, but certainly not the only source of revenue. This is not to suggest that the group is financially impregnable, but it does mean that a comprehensive strategy that addresses the group's varied revenue streams is necessary to effectively minimize the IS's ability to function over the long term.

Another area in which the IS has had some measure of success is in its propaganda campaign. This success comes in part because of the fact that the IS's messages to recruits differs in important respects from that of an organization like AQ. For example, videos put forward by the IS tend to be filled with rank-and-file members whom potential recruits find much more relatable than AQ's videos full of leadership figures giving speeches. This "relatability," paired with slick production techniques and military successes on the ground, appeals to a new generation of recruits for the IS.

Finally, key to the long-term trajectory of the IS is its ability to provide satisfactory levels of governance to people living under its control. In the short-term, the IS has had some success at providing social services to locals that the Syrian and Iraqi governments failed to provide. This success has resulted in some boost to its overall appeal. However, there is no lack of shortcomings in the area of the IS's governance. Barring adaptation by the group and a reduction in pressure applied by third-party actors, these failures will only increase with time. Highlighting these failures, together with the negative aspects of the IS's governance, may undercut support for the group.

Strategic Implications

Though prominent and tragic events on the ground in Iraq and Syria dominate the headlines, pulling back and analyzing the fight against the IS at the strategic level reveals opportunities and challenges. Countering an amorphous transnational insurgent organization that is fueled by an end state that, although implausible, is attractive to a small number of disenfranchised individuals living in countries they perceive to be led by corrupt regimes is an onerous task. As a result, the fight against the IS and jihadism is likely to be a long-term conflict.

The Syrian civil war has proven to be a significant draw to individuals from around the world. While many countries are justifiably concerned about the threat posed by "battle-hardened fighters [who] could return to their home countries and attempt terror attacks,"[2] there are other aspects of the foreign fighter threat that receive less attention but deserve more scrutiny. Recent history suggests that it is more likely that threats will come from diverted foreign fighters, homegrown terrorists who never fight abroad but are inspired by the IS's ideology, and fighters sent from the IS to the West through other creative means.

The beginning of this summary highlighted the fact that events in Iraq and Syria provided fuel for the formation and evolution of the IS. Just as the genesis of the IS is not simply an "Iraq problem" or a "Syria problem," neither can the solution focus on one country or the other. Issues in both countries and in the region more broadly will need to be dealt with in order to more completely undercut the IS.

Additionally, developing an effective strategy requires recognition of the fact that different partners place different values on each aspect of the problem. The moderates in Syria may want to fight the IS, but ultimately place more priority on the removal of the Assad regime. Arab Sunnis in Iraq may want to fight the IS, but only to the extent that doing so results in their grievances being addressed. Resolving this situation requires understanding these differing incentives and incorporating them into an overall strategy.

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[2] Mark Hosenball and Warren Strobel, "U.S. Weighs Passport, Border Changes in Wake of Canada Attack," Reuters, 23 October 2014.

Introduction

Sun Tzu once said that "if you know yourself, but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat." Over the past several months, the world has become increasingly familiar with the Islamic State (IS) through media reporting of its brutal executions and military successes. A focus on these aspects of the organization that relate to violence alone, however, leaves us vulnerable to the type of failure described by Sun Tzu.

In an attempt to paint a more complete picture of the IS, this document identifies key areas where the IS has shown strength, learning, and adaptation. This report also highlights key areas of weakness, mistake, and failure. In doing so, the reader should be well aware that this product provides such an overview with the explicit understanding that there is more to learn in each of these areas.

The report proceeds as follows. The first section traces the historical evolution of the group, with emphasis on the fact that well executed design and an ability to take advantage of accidents led to the creation of the IS. The second section provides a very brief and preliminary comparison of the IS to other prominent militant organizations against which the United States has fought: al-Qa'ida (AQ) and the Taliban. This section is followed by a third that outlines and explores the strengths and weaknesses of the IS as a whole, noting that the IS's success comes from its ability to leverage all parts of its organization to achieve maximum gain. This section also points out that, despite this success, the fact that the IS is attempting to operate across multiple functional areas will test the group's ability to adapt over time and will ultimately expose the group's shortcomings. The fourth and final section steps back to examine, at the strategic level, some of the challenges faced and opportunities available to those combating the IS.

The goal of the Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) over the next several months is to produce deep dives in different functional areas that examine questions that this product leaves unresolved. These reports will explore different aspects of the IS and problems related to its rise and future trajectory. It is our hope that through a concerted research effort we can increase our understanding of the IS and provide insight and information that will be useful to those designing policies to counter it.

A Note on Naming the Islamic State

This report uses a number of different names to describe the IS and its predecessor organizations. When the group led by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi became affiliated with al-Qa'ida (AQ) in 2004, it became al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia, more commonly known as al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI). In November 2006, the leader of AQI declared the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI). After setbacks, resurgence, and an expansion into Syria, the ISI became the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in April 2013. This title lasted for approximately a year until the Islamic State (IS) was declared in June 2014.

Each of these acronyms (AQI, ISI, ISIL, IS) is used consciously by the authors of the report depending on the time period in which they are discussing the organization. The use of the term "Islamic State" has been avoided by many for being seen as empowering the organization by legitimizing its expansion. Our purpose here is not to legitimize the organization or its expansion, but we find it useful to use the varying acronyms as a way to distinguish between different phases of the group. Whether the acronym is ISI or ISIL or IS (all of which refer to some form of "stateness"), the name used does not elevate the organization to that of a legitimate state or hide the many flaws that separate the IS from other legitimate states.

A Note on Data

This report relies on primary and secondary sources in its evaluation of the IS. Each of these different sources suffers from strengths and limitations when it comes to availability, reliability, and depth of information. We are not ignorant of these limitations, but believe that the utilization of each source of data is necessary to paint as complete a picture of the IS as possible.

A Note on Authors

While this product was certainly a collaborative venture, each section of the report had a primary author who was responsible for drafting, revising, and seeing it through to the end. The primary author's name is listed in each chapter. Mr. Muhammad al-'Ubaydi's intellect and insight contributed greatly to each chapter.

Metamorphosis: From al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad to Dawlat al-Khilafa (2003-2014)

Nelly Lahoud

The evolution of the group that calls itself the "Islamic State" (IS) is best understood as an outcome of both design and accident. As this section shows, it is an outcome of design because the group's territorial gains and governance, according to what it believes to be Islamic teachings, were part of the vision of its founder, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, since at least 1999. In this respect, it is critical to appreciate the differences between IS and al-Qa'ida (AQ). For while AQ considered itself as an anti-establishment global force of "jihadis without borders,"[3] al-Zarqawi's vision was one of building an establishment, a vision that his successors have sought to translate into a reality. Indeed, as the following section discusses, the Iraq-based group learned from some of its past failures, including the mistakes of its founder. But the IS is also an outcome of accidents that allowed the group to exploit the militant landscape in Syria as well as the politics of sectarianism that adversely affected Iraq's Arab Sunnis. To borrow from Machiavelli's vocabulary, the leaders of the IS did not achieve their recent successes only through their skills (virtu), but luck (fortuna) also played a considerable part in what they achieved. In Machiavelli's words, "I think it may be true that fortune determines one half of our actions, but that, even so, she leaves us to control the other half, or thereabouts."[4]

This section of the report examines the evolution of the IS in relation to AQ and in the context of the militant landscape in Syria and the sectarian politics of Iraq that marginalized the country's Arab Sunni population. It highlights the current features of the IS that are an outcome of design, and it situates them in the context of the accidental events in Syria and Iraq that delivered the IS with opportunities that enabled it to translate some parts of its design into reality. It is to be remembered that the Iraq-based group had faced near annihilation in 2007/8, and it is far from being invincible.

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[3] As described by the AQ operative Fadil Harun, *al-Harb 'ala al-Islam*, vol. 1, p. 146.

[4] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, edited and translated by David Wootton (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1995), Chapter XXV.

In June 2014, in a statement titled "This Is God's Promise," Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, the spokesman of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), asserted that all the requirements to establish a state have been met. "Only one matter," he added, "remains outstanding … namely, [the establishment of the] *khilafa* (state)."[5] That is why al-'Adnani went on to declare the "proclamation of the establishment of the Islamic caliphate/state," thereby "annulling 'Iraq and the Levant' from the name of the state." He also announced that the leader of the ISIL, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was to be the caliph (*khalifa*). He presented al-Baghdadi to be a descendant of the tribe of Quraysh,[6] one of seven conditions to qualify for the office of caliph according to classical Sunni scholars.[7]

In February 2014, four months prior to the proclamation of the caliphate, al-Qa'ida (AQ) had released a statement disowning the ISIL and its actions, deriding it as the "group" that calls itself a "state."[8] In May 2014, al-'Adnani responded and accused Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of AQ, of "dividing jihadis,"[9] dismissing the import of AQ's statement since, in al-'Adnani's words, the ISIL "is not a branch of AQ and it never has been one."[10] He went on to explain that AQ is a mere *organization*, not a *state* like the ISIL. What then is the relationship between the Iraq-based group and AQ?

A Society (*mujtama'*) in the Making During Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's Era

According to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the designation "Islamic State" (IS) marks the sixth name change of the group since its founding in 2003 by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi (killed

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[5] Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, "Hadha Wa'du Allah," 29 June 2014, CTC Library. Undoubtedly, the title is meant to echo Q. 24:55. Unless otherwise stated, translations of Arabic in this section of the report are by Nelly Lahoud.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Al-Mawardi, *The Ordinances of Government*, translated by Wafaa H. Wahba (Reading, England: Center for Muslim Contribution to Civilization, 1996), 4.

[8] Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad–al-Qiyada al-'Amma, "Bayan bi-Sha'ni 'Alaqat Jama'at Qa'idat al-Jihad bi-Jama'at al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-al-Sham, Markaz al-Fajr li-al-I'lam," *Shabakat al-Fida' al-Islamiyya*, 2 February 2014, CTC Library. For consistency, the article uses "al-Qa'ida" instead of "Qa`idat al-Jihad." For the possible nuance between the two names, see Nelly Lahoud, "The Merger of Al-Shabab and Qa'idat al-Jihad," *CTC Sentinel* 5:2 (2012), fn. #6.

[9] Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, "'Udhran Amiru al-Qa'ida," May 2014, CTC Library.

[10] Ibid.

in June 2006).[11] If 2014 marks the public divorce between the Iraq-based group and AQ, the history of relations between the two is marked by ideological differences, some of which have ultimately proven to be irreconcilable. According to Sayf al-'Adl, one of AQ's military strategists, these ideological differences were apparent to both Usama bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri when they first met al-Zarqawi in Afghanistan back in 1999; both of them thought at the time that al-Zarqawi held "rigid views" in matters of religious doctrine.[12]

According to his onetime mentor, the jihadi ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, al-Zarqawi's political activities prior to his heading to Afghanistan in 1999 had largely been based in Jordan and revolved around spreading the religious teachings of al-Maqdisi.[13] Al-Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi had met in Peshawar in 1991 and upon their return to Jordan, they, along with like-minded individuals, spread al-Maqdisi's writings, which rejected the legitimacy of the political systems that govern Muslim-majority states, including Jordan and Saudi Arabia.[14] Their activities ultimately led to their arrest and imprisonment by Jordanian authorities.[15]

Although Bin Ladin and al-Zawahiri were reluctant to have an association with al-Zarqawi in 1999, Sayf relates that he convinced them that al-Zarqawi's connections in the Levant might yield dividends in the future.[16] It appears that al-'Adnani was one of these connections; a biography of al-'Adnani posted on a jihadist website claims that he

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[11] Abu Bakr al-Husayni al-Qurashi al-Baghdadi, "Wa-Bashshir al-Mu'minin," *Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam*, April 2013, CTC Library. It should be noted that on 12 June 2006, a short-lived coalition was put together under the name Hilf al-Mutayyabin that was meant to replace the Advisory Council. See "I'lan Hilfu al-Mutayyabin," 12 June 2006, https://nokbah.com/~w3/?p=533. It is not clear why it didn't last and why Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi does not count it as part of the history of the group.

[12] Sayf al-'Adal, "Tajrubati Ma' Abi Mus'ab al-Zarqawi," *Minbar al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad*, http://www.tawhed.ws/r?i=ttofom6f. For further discussion on the ideological differences, see Nelly Lahoud, *The Jihadis' Path to Self-Destruction* (New York and London: Columbia University Press/Hurst, 2010), 205-11.

[13] For studies that explore al-Maqdisi's jihadi ideology, see Nelly Lahoud, "In Search of Philosopher-Jihadis: Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi's Jihadi Philosophy," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10, no. 2, (June 2009), 205-20; see also Joas Wagemakers, "A Purist Jihadi-Salafi: The Ideology of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 36, no. 2 (August 2009), 281-97.

[14] Lahoud, 205-6; Wagemakers, 285-6.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Sayf al-'Adal, "Tajrubati Ma' Abi Mus'ab al-Zarqawi."

and thirty-five other Syrians had pledged allegiance to al-Zarqawi in the early 2000s before they joined him in Iraq following the U.S. invasion.[17]

In 1999, Sayf facilitated the establishment of a training camp in Herat to be run by al-Zarqawi; it was initially funded by a "brother" from the Hijaz.[18] Perhaps fearing his zealot disposition, AQ did not want to have any official ties with al-Zarqawi then, and Sayf made that clear: "we do not want from [al-Zarqawi] and those who joined [his group] a complete pledge of allegiance; rather, we want to coordinate and collaborate in the service of common goals."[19] Al-Maqdisi claims that it was al-Zarqawi who declined to join AQ because Bin Ladin refused to assign al-Maqdisi's books in AQ's training camps,[20] a claim that al-Zarqawi refuted.[21] At any rate, within weeks of setting up the camp, Sayf came to realize that al-Zarqawi was not simply acquiring military training; he was also keen on building a complete social structure (*mujtama' mutakamil*).[22] If Sayf's account is accurate, it appears that as early as 1999, and while AQ was in the business of setting up training camps to mount a fight against the global establishment in the form of states, al-Zarqawi was envisaging an establishment of his own.

The embryo of al-Zarqawi's society began to take shape in Afghanistan, but Sayf relates that al-Zarqawi had always looked to Iraq as the place where his society would grow and expand. Sayf also relates that al-Zarqawi had established contact with the Kurdish group Ansar al-Islam that had a presence in northern Iraq, a contact that later proved useful when he had to flee Afghanistan. Thus, when U.S. forces invaded Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks, it was logical for al-Zarqawi to head to Iraq. The choice of Iraq was not simply because, as Sayf put it, "we had anticipated … that the Americans would inevitably make the mistake of invading it,"[23] but also because al-Zarqawi wanted to duplicate an episode in Islamic history, with Mosul at its center. In the words of Sayf, al-Zarqawi:

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[17] Abu Hammam Bakr Bin 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Athari, "Ta'arraf ila Sirat al-Sheikh al-Mujahid al-'Adnani," *Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam*, 26 May 2014, CTC Library.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Sayf al-'Adal, "Tajrubati Ma' Abi Mus'ab al-Zarqawi."
[20] Lahoud, "In Search of Philosopher-Jihadis," 205.
[21] Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, "Bayan wa-Tawdih lima Atharahu al-Shaykh al-Maqdisi fi Liqa'ihi ma' al-Jazira," 12 July 2005, CTC Library.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

was impressed by the personality of the unique Islamic military commander Nur al-Din Zangi [d. 1174] who led the movement for the liberation and [political] change that were to be completed by Saladin [d. 1193]….I think that what he read about Nur al-Din and the launching of his campaign from Mosul in Iraq [to liberate the al-Aqsa mosque from the Crusades] played a large role in influencing al-Zarqawi to move to Iraq following the fall of the Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan.[24]

Al-Zarqawi managed to move to Iraq after the fall of the Taliban, but did not live long enough to launch a Nur al-Din-like campaign from Mosul. In 2014, al-Baghdadi appears to have taken on the mission that al-Zarqawi had started. On the Fourth of July, when Americans were celebrating their Independence Day, al-Baghdadi made his public debut in Mosul's Great al-Nuri Mosque, which had been built in the 12th century by none other than Nur al-Din;[25] the choice of place was perhaps designed to pay homage to al-Zarqawi.

Al-Zarqawi's group began operating in Iraq under the name "al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad" in 2003 and announced itself in April 2004. Among the operations that the group claimed responsibility for was the operation that killed Sergio Vieiro de Mello, the UN Secretary-General Special Representative in Iraq, on 19 August 2003.[26] Thus when in October 2004, al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Bin Ladin seeking to join AQ, he had already made his presence felt on the militant landscape of Iraq. In the meantime, AQ had suffered serious blows in 2003;[27] thus if in 1999 AQ could afford to set conditions on al-Zarqawi and collaborate with him from a distance and on its own terms, in 2004 Bin Ladin was willing to compromise AQ's standards and accept him into the fold.[28] In so doing, al-Tawhid wa-al-Jihad acquired a new name, AQ in Mesopotamia (*Tanzim al-Qa'ida fi Bilad al-Rafidayn*).

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[24] Ibid. For an historical background about the Zangi legacy, see S. Heidemann, "Zangi," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed.

[25] "al-Baghdadi ikhtara Awwala Zuhurin lahu min al-Masjidi alladhi Banahu Nur al-Din Zangi," *Haqq*, http://www.dawaalhaq.com/?p=14591

[26] The official announcement was made in April 2004 in two different releases, a statement signed by Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi and a video release, titled *Riyah al-Nasr*, featuring Abu Anas al-Shami, CTC Library.

[27] On AQ being severely weakened in 2003, see Nelly Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators: al-Qa'ida through the Lens of its Confidential Secretary*, CTC Report, 4 June 2012, 104-5.

[28] Usama bin Ladin, "Risala ila al-Muslimin fi al-'Iraq Khasatan wa-al-Umma al-Islamiyya 'Ammatan," December 2004 (CTC Library).

Judging by the tone of the intercepted/leaked letters by the leaders of AQ, specifically al-Zawahiri and 'Atiyyatullah al-Libi, the inclusion of al-Zarqawi's group under the umbrella of AQ was a regretful one. Al-Libi reminded him that he was a battlefield commander and needed to consult with the leadership of AQ before taking unilateral decisions, not least those that concern declaring a war against Shi'ites and expanding the war to neighboring countries. Al-Zawahiri gently, but firmly, questioned al-Zarqawi's attacks against Iraq's Shi'ites, reminding him that Iran held more than one hundred AQ detainees and would likely want to respond with retaliatory measures. [29]

Notwithstanding the concerns over al-Zarqawi's statements and actions, AQ's leaders limited their criticisms of the group to internal communiqués and chose not to make it public. It is not clear why in January 2006 al-Zarqawi changed the name of the group to *Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin fi al-'Iraq* (The Jihadis' Advisory Council in Iraq). It is possible that he could not ignore the plethora of Sunni militant groups that emerged following the de-Ba'athification of Iraq, or perhaps he was under pressure from AQ to exert some effort toward unity among jihadis, or a combination of both. At any rate, the new name initially brought together six Sunni militant groups;[30] others joined later. While the Advisory Council was headed by a certain 'Abdallah bin Rashid al-Baghdadi,[31] it is not reported that al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to him.[32] Indeed, one finds many statements that were released by the media committee of the Advisory Council but still bearing the signature of AQ in Mesopotamia, suggesting at least that the latter had a degree of continued autonomy. It is unlikely that he joined the Advisory Council to secede from AQ. If he did, his wife did not think so when she eulogized her husband, welcoming his martyrdom and describing him as "nothing more than a soldier in one of the ranks of [Bin Ladin]'s armies."[33]

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[29] See captured letters authored by Ayman al-Zawahiri and `Atiyatullah al-Libi to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. These are available at www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zawahiris-letter-to-zarqawi-original and www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/atiyahs-letter-to-zarqawi-original.

[30] The first statement announcing the formation of Majlis Shura al-Mujahidin dates 15 January 2006, and it was signed by Abu Maysara al-'Iraqi, CTC Library.

[31] It is reported that he is none other than Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi, who would become the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq. See "Nafi 'Iraqi li-I'tiqal Qiyadi Murtabit bi-al-Qa'ida," *BBC Arabic*, 10 March 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/arabic/middle_east_news/newsid_6436000/6436527.stm.

[32] See for instance the statement announcing the martyrdom of al-Zarqawi, "Bayan min Tanzim al-Qa'ida fi Bilad al-Rafidayn hawla Istishhad al-Sheikh al-Zarqawi," signed by Abi 'Abd al-Rahman al-'Iraqi, June 2006.

[33] Umm Muhammad, "Risala min Zawjat al-Sheikh Abi Mus'ab al-Zarqawi," June 2006, CTC Library.

The March to "Statehood"

The killing of al-Zarqawi in June 2006 did not cause his successors to give up on his plan of building a society (*mujtama'*); indeed, they developed more ambitious designs. Abu Hamza al-Muhajir succeeded al-Zarqawi, and his initial statement suggests that he saw his group to be loyal to AQ, assuring Bin Ladin that "we are at your beck and call and at your disposal."[34] Yet within four months, Abu Hamza pledged allegiance to Abu `Umar al-Baghdadi's newly formed group the "Islamic State of Iraq" (ISI), thereby submitting the "army of al-Qa'ida," as Abu Hamza put it, to the authority of the ISI.[35] It is reported that both Abu Hamza and Abu 'Umar had trained in Afghanistan and joined al-Zarqawi's group in Iraq. It is also reported that it was Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi who served as the intellectual engine of the ISI.[36] If it is true that he was the head of the Advisory Council that al-Zarqawi joined, then his influence on the Iraq-based group predates his assumption of its leadership in 2006. The so-called state did not want to limit its activities to militancy and in April 2007 it announced the appointment of ten ministers, including ministers for health, oil, agriculture, and fisheries.[37] In other words, the ISI conceived of itself to be in the business of governance.

The declaration of a state in 2006 did not meet the approval of AQ, and judging by internal communiqués, AQ's leaders were highly critical of Abu Hamza and Abu 'Umar. According to a statement released by al-Zawahiri in May 2014, the proclamation of the ISI was made without any consultation with AQ's leadership, not even with Bin Ladin.[38] Al-Zawahiri seems keen to highlight AQ's displeasure with Abu Hamza and Abu 'Umar, so much so that he cited an anonymous letter highly critical of both leaders that was captured during the raid that killed Bin Ladin and was published by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, after declassification.[39] The letter that al-

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[34] Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, "Sa-Yuhzamu al-Jam'u Wa-Yuwalluna al-Dubra," 13 June 2006.

[35] Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, "Inna al-Hukma illa li-llah," 10 November 2006. The ISI was announced on October 15, 2006. This discussion is partly based on the article by Nelly Lahoud and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, "The War of Jihadists against Jihadists in Syria," *CTC Sentinel*, 26 March 2014.

[36] See the segment about Abu 'Umar al-Baghdadi on *al-Iraq al-An*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2BN1oI32MgY; "Zawjat Abu Ayyub al-Misri," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 25 July 2010.

[37]"al-Tashkila al-Wizariyya al-Ula li-Dawlat al-'Iraq al-Islamiyya," 19 April 2007, signed by Muharib al-Jaburi, CTC Library.

[38] Ayman al-Zawahiri, untitled letter, 2 May 2014, CTC Library.

[39] Ibid.

Zawahiri cites highlights the "political mistakes" of Abu 'Umar, and refers to him and Abu Hamza as "extremists," "repulsive," and "lack[ing] wisdom."[40]

U.S. and Iraqi forces killed Abu `Umar and Abu Hamza in April 2010, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assumed the leadership of the ISI and has been in charge of the Iraq-based group since then. The challenge that the declaration of the ISI posed to AQ, however, did not end with their death. Two serious implications resulted as a consequence of Abu Hamza's pledge of allegiance to Abu 'Umar. The first concerns the very notion of declaring an "Islamic state": this entails elaborate conditions, including providing security to the populace residing in the territory of the "state" and making jihadists accountable to good governance, an accountability that the ISI could hardly deliver at that stage, not least given the occupation of Iraq by U.S. forces at the time. It is for such reasons that Bin Ladin mocked al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) for wanting to declare an Islamic state in Yemen,[41] and urged Somalia's al-Shabaab not to go that route.[42] Indeed, al-Qa'ida's statement disowning the ISIL does not admit that it represents a "state"; instead, it refers to the ISIL as the "group" that calls itself a "state." The criticism is made more apparent when the statement derisively remarks that "we do not hasten to declare emirates and states…that we impose on people, then declare whoever disapproves of such entities to be a rebel (*kharij*) [against whom it is lawful to fight]."[43]

The second serious implication pertains to Abu Hamza's oath to Abu 'Umar when he pledged, "I hereby enlist under your direct leadership twelve thousand fighters who constitute the army of al-Qa'ida." Did the ISI cease to be under the leadership of AQ in 2006, and, indeed, did the pledge by Abu Hamza effectively subordinate Bin Ladin's authority to that of al-Baghdadi? Of course, Bin Ladin never pledged allegiance to Abu 'Umar, and according to al-Zawahiri's May 2014 letter, Abu Hamza wrote to the leadership of AQ to assure them that the group continued to consider itself to be part of AQ.[44] Nevertheless, because Bin Ladin did not go public and discredit the group, the ISI became a fait accompli "state," acting without consultation with AQ and even against

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[40] Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000011, 1.

[41] Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000019, 19-23.

[42] Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000005.

[43] Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad, "Bayan bi-Sha'ni 'Alaqat Jama'at Qa'idat al-Jihad bi-Jama'at al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-al-Sham."

[44] Ayman al-Zawahiri, untitled letter, 2 May 2014, CTC Library.

its directions. In an internal communiqué dated early 2011, the American jihadist Adam Gadahn advised the leadership that "it is necessary that al-Qa'ida publicly announces that it severs its organizational ties with the Islamic State of Iraq, and [to make known] that the relationship between its leadership and that of the State [i.e., ISI] have not existed for several years, and that the decision to declare a State was taken without consultation with the leadership, and this [ill-considered] innovative affirmation (*qarar ijtihadi*) led to divisions among jihadists and their supporters inside and outside Iraq."[45]

Parting Ways with al-Qa'ida

Why did it take so long for AQ to disown ISI/ISIL publicly if the problems between them began in 2005 and worsened in 2006? In April 2013, al-Baghdadi unilaterally proclaimed the founding of the ISIL by declaring a merger between his group and that of Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) in Syria. JN, it should be noted, was the first jihadist group to emerge in Syria in January 2012,[46] and in its nascent phase, it was praised even by non-jihadists for its effective conduct on the battlefield, and its dealings with the populace.[47] It was not organic to the Syrian revolution; instead, its members had fought alongside the ISI in Iraq and their move to Syria was initially funded by ISI.[48] The leader of JN, Abu Muhammad al-Julani, publicly rejected the merger and pledged allegiance directly to al-Zawahiri.[49] In June 2013, al-Zawahiri intervened, annulling the merger and therefore the very concept of the ISIL, and appointed Abu Khalid al-Suri – who had fought in Afghanistan and was closely connected to the jihadi strategist Abu Mus'ab al-

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[45] Harmony Document SOCOM-2012-0000004, 8.

[46] Transcript of the founding statement/speech by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, *Shabakat al-Jihad al-'Alami*, posted on 12 February 2012, CTC Library.

[47] See for example Riyad al-As'ad (interview), posted 19 March 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWrZhQG4leg.

[48] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Wa-Bashshir al-Mu'minin," *Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam*, April 2013, CTC Library; and Abu Muhammad al-Julani, "Hawla Sahat al-Sham," *Shabakat al-Fida' al-Islamiyya*, April 2013, CTC Library.

[49] al-Julani, ibid.

Suri and Ayman al-Zawahiri –[50] a member of the Syrian militant group Harakat Ahrar al-Sham, to serve as an arbitrator between the two groups.[51]

Several things may have caused al-Baghdadi to make this unilateral decision: it is possible that he was envious of JN's stardom in the jihadist world, and he wanted to make it known to the world that gratitude is owed to his group; it is also possible that he was worried about his investment in JN, seeing that it was collaborating with militant groups whose agenda was nationalist rather than jihadist;[52] or he believed that the time was ripe to expand his "state" into Syria. Judging by what happened later, expanding the "state" would not only make his divorce from AQ public; it would also fulfill the modus operandi that al-Zarqawi and his successors had envisaged for the jihadist landscape. That is to say, the jihadism of the ISIL/IS is not designed simply to fight against the perceived unjust global establishment, as it was with AQ, but is in fact aimed to create a just establishment and deliver what al-Zarqawi had started.

Al-Zawahiri may have sensed that the merger that al-Baghdadi was imposing on JN amounted to a coup against AQ, hence his intervention to annul the ISIL. Before long, the public dispute developed into a bloody conflict, particularly starting in December 2013,[53] when the ISIL kidnapped and then killed Abu Sa'd al-Hadrami, the leader of JN in the Syrian province of al-Raqqa.[54] It is not clear which side initiated the transgression: although the ISIL received the lion's share of criticisms in the mainstream media,[55] it is

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[50] See the letter authored by Abu Khalid al-Suri and Abu Mus'ab al-Suri which was addressed to Usama bin Ladin via Ayman al-Zawahiri, cited in Alan Cullison, "Inside al-Qaeda's Hard Drive," *Atlantic*, 1 September 2004.

[51] "Al-Zawahiri Yulghi Damj 'Jihadiyyi' Suriya wa-al-'Iraq," al-Jazira, 9 June 2013. It should be noted that Harakat Ahrar al-Sham is part of the Islamic Front (al-Jabha al-Islamiyya), one of the largest coalition of militant groups operating in Syria under the banner of Islam. Ahrar al-Sham was a signatory to the charter that the Islamic Front released in November 2013.

[52] See for example "Mithaq al-Jabha al-Islamiyya," 22 November 2013, CTC Library. See also the one produced in March 2014 by the same coalition that includes Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham.

[53] The protagonists on the battlefield are many, but the main ones consist of ISIL (supported by Katibatu al-Muhajirin and led by Abu 'Umar al-Shishani), on the one hand, and JN and its seeming allies (the Islamic Front coalition, particularly the group Ahrar al-Sham, Jaysh al-Mujahidin, and smaller militant groups).

[54] The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, "Bayan al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-al-Sham — Wilayat al-Raqqa Hawla ma Tashhaduhu al-Madina min Ahdath," Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam, January 13, 2014.

[55] Muhammad al-Najjar, "Abu Qatada Yuhajim Tanzim al-Dawla wa-Yu'ayyid Muhlat al-Nusra," al-Jazira, February 27, 2014. See also Abu Qatada al-Filastini, "Ma ba'da al-Muqaraba [Rabi' al-Mujahidin] … Waqi' wa-Amal,"Shabakat al-Fida' al-Islamiyya, February 2014.

also the case that statements by the ISIL in early January 2014 suggest that its members were being harassed, imprisoned, and constrained in their movements by other militant groups in Syria.[56]

What is the difference between the "Islamic state" of 2006 and that of 2014?

According to al-Baghdadi, the changes in the name of the group occurred to reflect the group's "[higher level of] development and nobility of aspiration."[57] Following this line of logic, now that the name is ecumenical with the dropping of geographical references, we can expect no further changes to the name the "Islamic State." But as President Barack Obama remarked, "ISIL is certainly not a state" according to international law.[58] Nevertheless, while Obama's statement is designed to cut the group down to size and highlight that it is nothing more than a terrorist organization, the group projects itself otherwise. To be sure, the IS does not seek membership in the United Nations to be part of the global community of nation-states. Indeed, it believes the world order to be illegitimate and seeks to redraw today's world map and create a global Islamic state, a caliphate, akin to that which predates the modern state system. Accordingly, the group is intent on pursuing the acquisition of additional territories beyond Iraq and Syria. Indeed, in his address on the occasion of the start of the holy month of Ramadan, the designated caliph promises that if the "soldiers of IS" remain united and commit themselves to being the "guardians of religion," they "shall conquer Rome and seize the earth."[59]

Yet from a legal perspective, why should the "Islamic state" of 2014 be any different from that which was proclaimed in 2006 (i.e., the Islamic State of Iraq) or that which was announced in 2013 (i.e., ISIL)? One would think that the intent of establishing an Islamic *state* is intrinsically universal, an issue that the jihadist pundit Abu al-Fadl Madi, an opponent of the IS, highlighted. He questioned whether there is anything legally

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[56] See, for example, "Nida' mina al-Dawla al-Islamiyya fi al-'Iraq wa-al-Sham," *Shabakat al-Fida' al-Islamiyya*, 4 January 2014.

[57] Al-Baghdadi, "Wa-Bashshir al-Mu'minin."

[58] President Barack Obama, "Transcript of Obama's Remarks on the Fight Against ISIS," *New York Times,* 10 September 2014.

[59] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "Risala ila al-Mujahidin wa-al-Umma al-Islamiyya fi Shahri Ramadan," 1 July 2014, CTC Library.

meaningful about it and forewarned that even a "limited air bombing campaign could deny this caliphate all its resources."[60]

It is perhaps more important to ask what the IS could deliver by way of outcomes. An internal communiqué to the ISI designed to present an internal critique of the Iraq-based group in the years 2006–2007 suggests that the announcement of a state was used by many of the group's leaders "to cover up their weaknesses (in the military and security [domains]) and [they] to convincing themselves and others that they should [focus on] building a state and its institutions without paying due attention to military and security matters.[61]" The author laments that the announcement of the state caused that generation of leaders to be "deluded" by a supposed power in the form of a state.[62] In his mind, this led to a complacency such that "we [i.e., ISI] switched roles [with the Americans]," and "we virtually became an organized army whose movements are known … to everyone while America turned into guerillas working to assassinate the leaders and the jihadist elites … we lost the cities, then the villages and [even] the desert became a dangerous shelter … and found ourselves in a closed circle."[63] What has gone right for the ISI since then? And will the change of name lead to a different outcome this time?

The Sectarian Factor

If the first generation of the ISI fighters found themselves in 2007 and 2008 lost in the desert and in a "closed circle" after they were rejected by Arab Sunnis, why would today's IS fighters be in control of Sunni-majority territories in Iraq and Syria? Even though the Iraq-based group sees itself as championing the Sunni creed, the group's relationship with Iraq's Arab Sunnis, including militant Sunni groups, has been nothing short of tumultuous. Numerous internal documents attest to this history.[64] One such document by the ISI portrays Iraqi Sunnis (*ansar*) to have presented a challenge from the start, largely because they did not share the same ideology. "Most of the brothers," the document relates, "have severe difficulty reciting the Qur'an and understanding its

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[60] Abu al-Fadl Madi, Twitter, @sadeknimah, 30 June 2014.

[61] "Analysis of the State of ISI," Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-612449, 17.

[62] Ibid., 17.

[63] Ibid., 19. For a discussion of the challenges faced by ISI, see Truls Hallberg Tonnessen, "Training on a Battlefield: Iraq as a Training Ground for Global Jihadis," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20 (2008), 543-62.

[64] See the study by Brian Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside Al-Qa'ida in Iraq*, CTC Report, 16 March 2009.

meaning … often deferring to the head of the tribe in matters of war and peace." [65] They seem to have joined the ranks of jihadists "so that they may secure their daily bread … without having the sincere intention to take up arms and fight against the infidels and the apostates."[66] It appears that al-Zarqawi's group was constrained by the Arab Sunnis' lack of cooperation. In a document dated 18 February 2005, al-Zarqawi's group states that it is disappointed to see that some tribal members "stand as a stumbling block in the path of jihad and have taken to obstructing the work of jihadis." It goes on to threaten that whoever stands in the way of jihadists or speaks ill of them shall see that "the swords of jihadists shall respond with an appropriate punishment so that [the fate of the culprit] may serve as a lesson to others."[67]

Other internal documents reveal that the tension progressively expanded to include militant Iraqi Sunni groups who had once sided with the jihadists believing them to be fighting to repel U.S. occupation from Iraq. In a document dated 13 May 2007, the ISI justifies its killing of twelve leaders from the groups al-Jaysh al-Islami, Ansar al-Sunna, and Jaysh al-Mujahidin, asserting that the operation is a "natural outcome resulting from the conduct of this 'rebel group'" (*al-zumra al-baghiya*). The author explains that the problem had begun at least a year earlier and suggests that these groups attract mostly former members of "the apostate state."[68] In a document by al-Jaysh al-Islami, the group highlights, among other things, what it considers to be the extremism of ISI, its threats to shed the blood of those who do not pledge allegiance to it, its attempt "to eliminate the jihad of those who do not follow [ISI]." In the same document, al-Jaysh al-Islami calls on Bin Ladin to dissociate his organization from the actions of the ISI and correct its way.[69]

Despite the tumultuous history the group experienced with Arab Sunnis, the success of ISIL/IS in mid-2014 to acquire territory in Iraq is not divorced from the period that precedes it. Two key factors allowed the ISI/ISIL/IS to exploit events affecting Arab Sunnis to its advantage. On the Iraqi side, it was able to exploit a parallel domestic

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[65] "Analysis of the State of ISI," 15.

[66] Ibid., 15.

[67] Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, "Ila Abna' 'Asha'ir al-Jazira," 18 February 2005, Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-637951.

[68] Authored by "The Doctor," "Taqrir 'an Mawqif 'Arab Jabur," 13 May 2007, Harmony Document, SOCOM-2010-0000003.

[69] Al-Jaysh al-Islami fi al-'Iraq, Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-637885.

struggle concerning the sectarian politics that alienated Arab Sunnis. On the Syrian side, in late December 2013 and early January 2014, the ISIL forces suffered the loss of their strongholds in western Syria at the hands of other rebel groups. This forced them to consolidate themselves in the territories in eastern Syria bordering Iraq. By that time, Arab Sunnis in Iraq had given up on a peaceful solution with the Maliki government and turned against government forces, creating a fragile security environment that was ultimately exploited by the ISIL. As will be discussed below, it is either that the ISIL's plan could predict with precision how the events were about to unfold, or that the events, particularly in Iraq, presented the ISIL with an outcome that was too good to be true.

Iraq

While countless reasons may be enumerated for the ISIL's exploitation of events that affected Arab Sunnis in Iraq, one cannot avoid highlighting two key structural causes related to the politics of sectarianism in Iraq, in addition to the Iraqi government's response to the peaceful demonstrations calling for political reform that started in late 2012. The two structural causes concern (1) the political sectarianism that was introduced by the 2005 constitution, and (2) the forced displacement (*tahjir qasri*) of people on the basis of religious affiliation to create a demographic map along sectarian lines. On the constitutional level, prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, while many Iraqis had suffered under his dictatorship, his reign was secular, promoting his loyalists and brutally eliminating his opponents, regardless of sects or ethnicity. Yet it was Arab Sunnis who bore the lion's share of sectarianism that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Saad Jawad, a scholar of Iraqi politics, argues that the United States "reduc[ed] the Iraqi state to a collection of Shi'as, Sunnis, Kurds and other minorities," an approach that was ultimately translated into "the new constitution emphasis[ing] differences and divisive issues rather than focusing on the uniting elements of Iraqi society."[70] Jawad remarks that "sectarian affiliations had never been mentioned in an Iraqi constitution," whereas the new constitution affirmed the distinction between sects and sidelined the Arab Sunni population whose representatives sought to emphasize the Arab identity of the state.[71]

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[70] Saad N. Jawad, "The Iraqi Constitution: Structural Flaws and Political Implications," LSE Middle East Center Paper Series/01, November 2013, 5.
[71] Ibid., 15.

As sectarianism ascended to dominate Iraqi political discourse, Shi'ite and Sunni militant groups began a systematic campaign designed to force the displacement of people on the basis of religious affiliation and create provinces that are demographically divided along specific sects. While the number of displaced people peaked in 2009,[72] it was as high as 7.2 percent of the total population in 2012,[73] and some studies have pointed out that the Iraqi government did not make an effort to stop such operations, and that some elements in the government apparatus were even "implicated in them."[74] This forced displacement resulted in the creation of Sunni and Shi'ite areas. Given the dominant perception among Arab Sunnis that the Iraqi army is a tool in the hands of the Iranian government, Sunni areas did not cooperate with government forces, thus allowing the infiltration of members from ISI/ISIL.

These two causes, and more, had led to the peaceful demonstrations that began in December 2012, hoping to produce an Iraqi "Arab Spring." What came to be known as the popular movement (*al-harak al-sha'bi*) began in the Anbar province, then quickly spread to include six provinces (Salah al-Din, Ninawa, Diyala, Mosul, Kirkuk, and Baghdad).[75] While the Maliki government sought to characterize the demonstrators as "Sunnis," the protestors highlighted the "Iraqi" nature of their demands.[76] Among their demands was a change to the law concerning combating terrorism, which the protestors believed was being abused by the Maliki government to eliminate his opponents, citing the example of the terrorism charges brought against Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi, who had to flee Iraq.[77] Another pressing demand for the protestors was the release of

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[72] Yahya al-Kabisi, "al-Tahjir al-Qasri: al-Harb al-Ahliyya Ghayr al-Mu'lana fi al-'Iraq," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, 18 November 2013, 8.

[73] Ibid., 8.

[74] Ibid., 6.

[75] 'Abd al-Hadi 'Ali, "Taqriri 'an al-Harak al-Sunni fi al-'Iraq," *al-Rased*, 11 January 2013, http://www.alrased.net/main/articles.aspx?selected_article_no=6014. It should be noted that the trigger was al-Maliki's warrant of arrest for Dr. Rafi al-Issawi, accusing him of terrorism related charges. Al-Maliki was perceived as abusing terrorism laws against his opponents, and his move against al-Issawi was interpreted as a repeat of the charges he mounted against former vice president Tariq al-Hashimi a year earlier. See "Maliki's Dilemma: The Crisis of the System of Quotas and Exclusion," *Al-Jazeera*, 29 January 2013.

[76] "Barlaman al-'Iraq Yabhathu Mataliba al-Mutazahirin," *Al-Jazeera*, 2 January 2013.

[77] Ibid.

men and women from prison,[78] many of whom Human Rights Watch reports had been imprisoned without judicial hearing and suffered torture.[79]

The Iraqi government did not address the demands of the protestors, and Maliki himself refused to acknowledge that there was any legitimacy to their demands. In one statement, he blatantly threatened: "terminate [what you have started] before we terminate you."[80] Just before government forces used force to end the demonstrations, Maliki gave a press conference in which he painted the struggle in purely sectarian terms. He invoked a 7th century episode that is central to Shi'ite identity, stating that the conflict today is a continuation of the conflict between the "partisans of Hussain" — the grandson of the prophet and considered by Shi'ites to be their third rightful Imam — and "the partisans of Yazid," the Umayyad ruler who is cursed by Shi'ites because his forces killed Hussein.[81] In the same press conference, Maliki proposed that the *qibla*, the direction toward the Ka'ba and to which Muslims turn when they pray, ought to be changed to Karbala', where Hussein was killed and buried.[82] Of course, the radical sectarian discourse of the Maliki government did not escape ISIL's leadership; when the peaceful protest began, al-'Adnani highlighted that the "Rafida" (a derogatory term referring to the Shi'ites) government is full of enmity for Arab Sunnis, citing a line by the serving Shi'ite minister Baqir Jabr Sulagh in which he said: "For us, the Sunnis are of three kinds: those who ought to be killed, those who ought to be imprisoned, and those who ought to be our servants."[83]

How Fortuna *Transformed ISIL's Misfortunes in Syria into Gains*

When the Maliki government violently suppressed the demonstrations in late December 2013, the Popular Movement responded in kind, thereby ending the peaceful nature of its protest. On the 29 December, they took up arms and began to expel government forces from the Anbar province, specifically from the cities of Ramadi and

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[78] "al-Maliki Yuhadhdhir min Tada'iyat al-'Isyan al-Madani," *Al-Jazeera*, 12 December 2012.

[79] Human Rights Watch, *World Report 2014* , http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/iraq.

[80] YouTube, January 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ltd9t01JCtE.

[81] YouTube, 23 December 2013, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMRQNu-YOq8.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Cited in Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, "Sab'u Haqa'iq," January 2013, CTC Library.

Falluja.[84] On the 1 January 2014, the ISIL forces arrived in Ramadi, "in support" of their Sunni brethren. It is not clear whether they were invited by Sunni tribes on the basis that they could use a hand against a common enemy,[85] but within days the Sunni tribes turned against the ISIL and ejected them from Ramadi.[86]

What followed were several setbacks affecting the ISIL forces on both the Syrian and the Iraqi fronts, all of which pushed them to the areas that by June 2014 they called a "state." On the Syrian front, the ISIL forces were not popular among other rebel groups. Abu Khalid al-Suri, al-Zawahiri's appointee to serve as arbitrator between the ISIL and JN, accused the group of "crimes and erroneous practices in the name of jihad."[87] He further decried the way in which he believed the ISIL was degrading those who have "liberated the country," behaving as if it were a real state while other groups were mere "platoons."[88] Al-Suri was assassinated in February 2014; the ISIL was accused of his assassination, but the group denied responsibility. And when the group continued to operate under the name the ISIL, against al-Zawahiri's verdict, many militant groups were galvanized to eradicate it. In the video *Flames of War* produced by the IS, it describes 3 January 2014 as a "black day," when the "various deviant groups were united in their enmity towards the Islamic State as they undertook a full-fledged, coordinated, and multi-pronged assault on its fighters and their families."[89] Rebel groups in Syria, including JN, expelled the ISIL from the western part of that country (Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, and Latakia), forcing it to consolidate itself in al-Raqqa, then to the east (Deir al-Zur and Hasaka), bordering Iraq.[90] Since the Syrian regime prioritized

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[84] "Bidayat al-'Amal al-'Askari didda Quwwat al-Maliki," YouTube, 29 December 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inmLw2yXZ_w; "Thuwwar al-Anbar Yahtajizun al-'Asharat min Quwwat al-Maliki wa-Yaghnamun Jami'a Aslihatihim," Youtube, 30 December 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XeYD55Fk_U; "al-Sheikh Faruq al-Zufayri ...," 1 January 2014, http://www.sunniiraq.org/Subject.aspx?id=160&name=home.

[85] "Junud al-Dawla al-Islamiyya Yasiluna ila al-Ramadi fi al-Anbar li-Nasrati Ahlihim," YouTube, 1 January 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RxGdBS6qMLk.

[86] "al-Amtar Tuwqifu al-'Amaliyyat al-'Askariyya fi al-Ramadi wa-al-'Asha'ir Tatrudu Da'ish min Ahya' al-Ramadi," *AlMada*, 12 January 2014.

[87] Abu Khalid al-Suri, "Risalat Munasaha min al-Sheikh Abu Khalid al-Suri," Shabakat al-Fida' al-Islamiyya, January 16, 2014.

[88] Ibid.

[89] *Flames of War*, 19 September 2014, CTC Library.

[90] Ibid.

its fight against rebel groups over the ISIL, the regime weakened the former and unwittingly enabled the latter.[91]

As the group was consolidating itself in al-Raqqa and eastern Syria, it was forced out of al-Ramadi and parts of Falluja by Sunni tribes in Iraq. The group thus reverted to its old ways of guerrilla warfare in Iraq,[92] and moved toward Samarra in June, but was quickly repelled by government forces.[93] However, when the group turned to the city of Mosul (Nineveh province), its fortunes changed. The Iraqi army fled the scene, leaving it to the ISIL forces. The governor of Nineveh explains that his government had repeatedly warned the Maliki government about the movements of the ISIL in Mosul, but claims that his warnings were either ignored or told that they lacked veracity.[94] Maliki claims that the fall of Mosul was not due to lack of arms, but was a result of conspiracy by some elements that will be dealt with once terrorism is eliminated.[95] At any rate, the group was emboldened by the acquisition of Mosul and its momentum enabled it to acquire several areas that would link it to the eastern part of Syria through Hasaka and Deir al-Zur, thereby erasing the Sykes-Picot borders that separated Iraq from Syria. A video produced by the ISIL shows al-'Adnani officiating the erasing of the borders, as captured U.S. Humvees and other military equipment arrive from Iraq into Syria.[96]

As subsequent sections demonstrate, the Iraq-based group has over the years been resilient in the face of domestic and international forces that sought to eradicate it. It has also invested in skills and human capital that were put to use when the opportunity presented itself. But it is also undeniable that luck was on its side; even its misfortunes in Syria worked to its advantage. Looking at the near annihilation of the group in 2007 and 2008, it is difficult to envisage why its leaders would want to pursue their "state." Evidently, its leaders were adventurous, and in Machiavelli's words, luck (*fortuna*) is "mastered by the adventurous rather than by those who go work more coldly. She is

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[91] Salim al-Bayk, "Nizam al-Asad la Yaqsufu Da'ish," *al-Quds al-'Arabi*, 27 January 2014, http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=127718.

[92] For more detail on these types of operations, refer to the subsequent section in this report that examines the IS's operations from November 2011 to May 2014.

[93] Ahmad al-Hamdani, "'Da'ish' Kharij Samarra'", *al-Arabiya*, 6 June 2014.

[94] "Athil al-Najayfi Yatahaddath 'an Khafaya Suqut al-Muwsil," YouTube, June 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XjKj2c_av4U.

[95] "Suqut Mudun bi-Yadi Da'ish lam yakun li-Naqsin bi-al-Asliha bal kana bi-Mu'amara sa-Nata'amalu ma'aha ba'da Sahqi al-Irhab, June 2014, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vEekGaKsx-M.

[96] "Kasr al-Hudud," YouTube, 29 June 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g4Xh2EPr6qM.

therefore, always, woman-like, a lover of young men, because they are less cautious, more violent, and with more audacity command her."[97]

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[97] Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Chapter XXV.

Goals and Methods: Comparing Three Militant Groups

Daniel Milton

The mission statement of an organization is a telling signal regarding its future activities. In the case of the Islamic State (IS), its goals combined with the methodology for achieving those goals are what distinguish it from a number of other militant groups. In this section, we discuss the goals and methodology of the IS and then compare these them with those of other prominent militant organizations: al-Qa'ida and the Taliban.

The purpose of this comparison is to offer a brief answer to the question of how the IS is different from other terrorist / insurgent organizations that have emerged in the past. In particular, the organizations being compared to the IS were selected because of the prominence in recent memory, as well as the fact that they are often lumped together in public discourse. To be clear, this comparison is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of the various goals and methods of these organizations or to suggest that they are more similar than they actually are, but rather is intended to help contextualize the long-term threat posed by the IS in comparison to these other organizations.

The Goals and Methodology of the Islamic State (IS)

As discussed in the previous section, in April 2013, Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi issued a statement creating a group known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). At that time, he noted that they did not recognize borders and that their path was one of "advancement."[98] The advancement of the IS is toward the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. The actual geographic range of this caliphate is not entirely clear, although the rhetoric on this point suggests an ultimate goal that is far beyond the current territory occupied in Iraq and Syria. If the IS chooses to follow previous models, there is historical precedent for a wide expansion of a caliphate. For example, with its borders stretching from Spain in the west to partway through China in the east, the Umayyad Caliphate of the 7th and 8th centuries was the largest (in terms of territory controlled) of all historical attempts to establish a caliphate. The boundaries of the Umayyad

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[98] Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, "ISI: Declaration of Establishing 'Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant' — Statement by Emir of the Believers Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi," posted to the Al-Furqan Establishment for Media Production on 9 April 2013.

Caliphate match closely with images that have been posted online by supporters of the IS (see Figure 1).[99] Of course, figures posted online by activists do not a strategy or vision make.

Figure 1: One Possibility of the Envisioned Geographic Span of the IS's Caliphate

If we move beyond what the supporters of the IS have posted, it is also clear from the public comments of IS leadership that the recent gains made by the IS in Syria and Iraq represent merely a first step in establishing what they hope will be a wide-ranging empire.[100] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's 2014 speech in Mosul during Ramadan made the assertion that the day is coming "when the Muslim will walk everywhere as a master"

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[99] Don Mackay, "ISIS militants in Iraq proclaim new Islamic state and pose threat to 'all countries,'" *Mirror*, 30 June 2014.

[100] For the most part, this map matches the areas that Baghdadi identified in his speech in Mosul in the summer of 2014 as places where "Muslim's rights are forcibly seized." The specific areas he mentioned are as follows: China, India, Palestine, Somalia, the Arabian Peninsula, the Caucasus, Sham (Syria), Egypt, Iraq, Indonesia, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Ahvaz, Iran, Pakistan, Tunisia, Libya, Algeria, and Morocco. The areas Baghdadi mentioned outside of the area contained in Figure 1 hold special importance for his efforts: Indonesia (the largest population of Muslims in the world) and the Philippines (an area where Islamic terrorist organizations have pledged support to the IS). See Abu Bakr al-Husayni al-Qurashi al-Baghdadi, "A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Ummah in the Month of Ramadan," translated by Al-Hayat Media Center, 5 July 2014, p. 3.

and that obeying his advice would enable the IS to "conquer Rome and seize the earth."[101] Such statements indicate a desire for more, although there is clear recognition among group members that such an event is not imminent and will require patience to achieve.

However, the goal of establishing a caliphate is one that many jihadi organizations share, albeit with different boundaries, as will be discussed below. To offer another simple mechanism for distinguishing militant groups of recent memory, we also examine the methodology through which these organizations hope to accomplish their goals.

Abu Muhammad al-'Adnani, the spokesman of the IS, noted that achieving goals means following the model of the Prophet, which al-'Adnani sees as using force to bring those who resist the establishment of the caliphate in their territory under the control of the IS.[102] But the goal of conquering territory is merely one part of the process, which the IS recognizes. As was made clear by the leader of what was then the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, ejecting infidels and apostates through jihad comes first, but holding the community together after this is accomplished comes next.[103] It is important to note that, in the view of the IS, the application of force to establish control is permissible against broad categories of individuals. The IS sees force as permissible not just against foreigners, but also against all Shi'a Muslims (rejectionists), and even Sunni Muslims who are considered collaborators.[104] The challenge of governance after control is established is one that has not evaded the leadership of the IS, and we will discuss some of their successes and struggles in this area in a subsequent section.

This brief examination of the goals and methodology of the IS has shown that their goal is the establishment of a caliphate throughout a broad region, while the methodology

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[101] Ibid, 4 and 6.

[102] Audio statement of Abu-Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami, posted to the *Hanin Network Forums* in Arabic 30 July 2013.

[103] Abu Umar al-Baghdadi, "The Harvests of the Years in the Land of the Monotheists," Al-Furqan Media Center, 17 April 2007.

[104] While the Islamic State sees the application of violence as an acceptable method of establishing control, they also make allowances for repentance by foreigners, Shia Muslims, and Sunni collaborators, provided this occurs before the IS captures the individual. See ibid. In fact, a video recently posted online by the IS shows members of the Yazidi community seeking forgiveness from the IS and membership with them. According to the video, such petitions were received and accepted without prejudice. See http://youtu.be/fuCJG3k3mTs, posted on 20 August 2014.

that they use to achieve it is the wide-scale imposition of violence against a broad range of targets, including many Muslims, to establish control within these regions. These two areas of goals and methodology, provide the context for distinguishing the IS from other prominent recent militant groups: the al-Qa'ida (AQ) and the Taliban.

Comparing the Goals and Methodology of the IS to AQ

Despite the many references to the IS as another version of AQ or an AQ "offshoot," there are significant differences between these two organizations even when it comes to something as basic and fundamental as goals and methodology. As noted in the previous section exploring the IS's organizational history, these differences have been present since the beginning. In the case of AQ's goals, even since its creation AQ saw itself as the vanguard of a broader movement that was engaged in jihad, but the final goal of that movement was not specifically outlined in AQ's foundational documents.[105] This is not to say that such a goal did not exist or was not a part of the thinking of its leaders, but the lack of mention of a caliphate in the foundational documents of the group that are publicly available may suggest it was not the primary concern. According to some insiders, this made AQ unique among organizations. For example, one scholar who studied the autobiography of the operative Fadil Harun, who presents himself as AQ's "Confidential Secretary," noted that AQ stood in contrast to other groups in that it was "modest about its place in the Islamic world."[106] In Harun's words, this modesty was necessary particularly given the absence of an Islamic state, caliphate, or a caliph, which Usama bin Ladin was not, in Harun's eyes (or Bin Ladin's, for that matter).[107]

Eventually, members of AQ were asked to take an oath to support the reestablishment of the caliphate.[108] However, given the context discussed above, this should be seen as AQ awaiting the arrival of such a caliphate, rather than trying to become one itself. Bin Laden later mentioned the establishment of the caliphate as a goal and that AQ would fight the "Crusaders" while waiting, or preparing the way, for such a caliphate.[109] Such

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[105] Harmony Document, AFGP-2002-600048, "By-Laws," 3.

[106] Nelly Lahoud, *Beware of Imitators: al-Qa'ida Through the Lens of Its Confidential Secretary*, CTC Report, 4 June 2012, 37.

[107] Ibid., 37 and 40.

[108] Harmony Document, SOCOM-2012-000003, 1; Harmony Document, SOCOM-2012-0000015, 3.

[109] Bruce Lawrence, *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Verso, 2005), 120–21.

a view of AQ is consistent with the instructions provided by al-Zawahiri to the then head of al-Qa'ida in Mesopotamia (commonly referred to as al-Qa'ida in Iraq, or AQI), Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, to "develop [Zarqawi's organization in Iraq] and support it until it achieves the level of a caliphate."[110] It seems likely that AQ saw itself as a supporter of emerging caliphates through its conduct of jihad, not as an actual caliphate itself.[111] This belief in fighting for the eventual establishment of a caliphate stands in contrast to the IS, which sought to (and actually has) established itself as a new caliphate.

Given that both organizations engage in violence, AQ's methodology for achieving its goal may seem at first glance to be similar to that of the IS. However, upon closer examination it becomes clear that AQ was hesitant to apply violence on the same broad scale as does the IS. In the same foundational AQ documents referenced earlier, it was made clear that AQ sought to maintain good relations with other jihadi groups, Islamic movements, religious scholars, and the Muslim people in general, even amid disagreements.[112] It was the very issue of applying violence too broadly in pursuit of goals that led al-Zawahiri to reach out to al-Zarqawi on the issue of AQI's brutality against Muslims in Iraq.[113] And although al-Qa'ida had no aversion to the use of violence, it saw the broad application of violence differently than the IS. For al-Qa'ida, its use of violence to achieve its goals was a tool to be used judiciously against a relatively narrow subset of enemies, whereas for the IS, violence has been unleashed broadly against a wide range of enemies, including a wide range of Muslims.[114]

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[110] Ayman al-Zawahiri, Letter to Zarqawi, 12 July 2005, http://ctc.usma.edu/harmony/harmony_docs.asp, 3–4.

[111] In fact, Bin Ladin argued that the time for a caliphate was not yet present because of the fact that the West would join together to defeat any emerging caliphate. Only once the West was weakened and the potential state "possessed the proper resources", in Bin Ladin's view, would the time be right for a caliphate. See SOCOM-2010-0000017-HT, 2–3.

[112] Harmony Document, AFGP-2002-600048, "By-Laws," 2.

[113] Ayman al-Zawahiri, Letter to Zarqawi, 12 July 2005, http://ctc.usma.edu/harmony/harmony_docs.asp, 7–11.

[114] Consider Bin Ladin's statement of concern regarding the possibility of poison being used in operations in Yemen. He was explicit to encourage those contemplating such operations to "be careful of doing it without enough study of all aspects, including political and media reaction against the mujahidin and their image in the eyes of the public." While not prohibiting the use of violence or chemical/biological weapons, his concern over image is distinct from what we have heard from the IS. Harmony Document, SOCOM-2012-0000010-HT, 4.

Comparing the Goals and Methodology of the IS to the Taliban

The Taliban form an interesting comparison to the IS. The Taliban announced the establishment of an emirate in Afghanistan in April 1996. The governance of Afghanistan by the Taliban ended in 2001 when U.S. and Northern Alliance forces pushed the Taliban from power. Since being pushed from power, the Taliban continues to fight to reestablish its control by ejecting what it sees as foreign occupation forces and an apostate national government. What sets the Taliban's goal apart from that of the IS is its narrower scope. As recently as July 2014, Mullah Umar made very clear that the goal of his organization was limited in terms of expanding outside of the borders of Afghanistan:

> We assure the world and the neighbors as we assured them in the past that our struggles are aimed only at forming an independent Islamic regime and obtaining independence of our country. We are not intending to interfere in the [internal] affairs of the region and the countries of the world, nor do we want to harm them. Similarly, we don't tolerate their role to harm us and urge them to have reciprocal stance. I call on all Mujahideen in the frontier areas to protect their borders and maintain good relations with neighboring countries on the basis of mutual respect.[115]

This outward statement of the limitation of the Taliban's goals is most likely due to an effort by the Taliban to distinguish itself from the IS, but also in part to show that it learned the lessons of the response to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks against the United States carried out by al-Qa'ida, which was allowed to operate from Afghanistan. Regardless of the reason, such an explicit limitation of the geographic span of their goal stands in contrast to the much more broad geographic ambition of the IS. It is very difficult to see the IS making a similar statement about "maintaining good relations" and "mutual respect." Its goal is simply too sweeping for that type of approach.

In terms of the methodology of the Taliban, while it advocates the use of violence against foreign troops and national government forces that it views as "invaders" and

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[115] Mullah Umar, "Message of Felicitation of Amir-ul-Momineen (may Allah protect him) on the Auspicious Eve of Eid-ul-fitr," posted to website of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on 25 July 2014. This statement is similar to other statements that have been made and posted to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan website on previous occasions.

"colonialists," its application of violence across the civilian portion of the Afghan population is more limited than that of the IS.[116] One compelling reason for this may be demographics: 85-95 percent of Muslims in Afghanistan are Sunni, whereas 30-35 percent are Sunni in Iraq.[117] There may simply be fewer enemies to target with violence. Nevertheless, whether partially due to demographics or not, there are other things that suggest some measure of difference in how the Taliban views civilians and the application of violence.

For instance, the Taliban recently established a "Department of Prevention of Civilian Casualties." While such an organization is designed in part to focus on uncovering and publicizing what it sees as excesses of foreign troops and the national government, the fact that it allows for investigations of "mistakes of Mujahideen of the Islamic Emirate resulting in material and soul losses to our defenseless people" is noteworthy in contrast to the open brutality that has been displayed by the IS.[118] In a June 2013 interview with the head of a special committee on civilian causalities (the predecessor organization to the aforementioned "Department") set up by Taliban, it was noted that Mullah Umar himself consistently emphasized the importance of avoiding excessive civilian casualties.[119] While there is most likely a self-serving angle to these public statements, the willingness to make them is more than is seen from the IS, which seems to take pride in its execution of violence and level of brutality.

None of this discussion should be construed as suggesting that the Taliban did not carry out violent attacks against civilians, but rather that their focus on (to a certain extent) minimizing civilian losses seems to stand directly at odds with the methodology of the IS. This point is further illustrated by Figure 2, which displays the number of attacks carried out by the IS on the left and the Taliban on the right. The color differentiation signifies the number of attacks carried out by each group against

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[116] "Statement of Islamic Emirate marking the 10th year of American occupation of Afghanistan," posted to the website of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on 7 October 2011.

[117] *Mapping the Global Muslim Population*, Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life (2009). It is worth pointing out this estimate is strictly that: an estimate. It may be higher. There is no public collection of data on the number of Shi'a and Sunni individuals in Iraq. The last official census was in 1997, and it did not include any questions on religious background.

[118] "Department of the Prevention of Civilian Casualties Commission of Military Affairs," posted to website of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on 10 September 2014.

[119] "Interview with Mr. Sarhadi, the director of the special committee for the prevention of civilian losses," posted to the website of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan on 17 June 2013.

government (blue) and nongovernment (red) targets.[120] While both groups conduct attacks against nongovernment targets, the IS appears to do so with greater frequency than does the Taliban. This is consistent with the arguments made above about the relatively more discriminate selection of targets by the Taliban as compared to the broader focus of the IS.[121]

Figure 2: Attacks Against Government and Nongovernment Targets
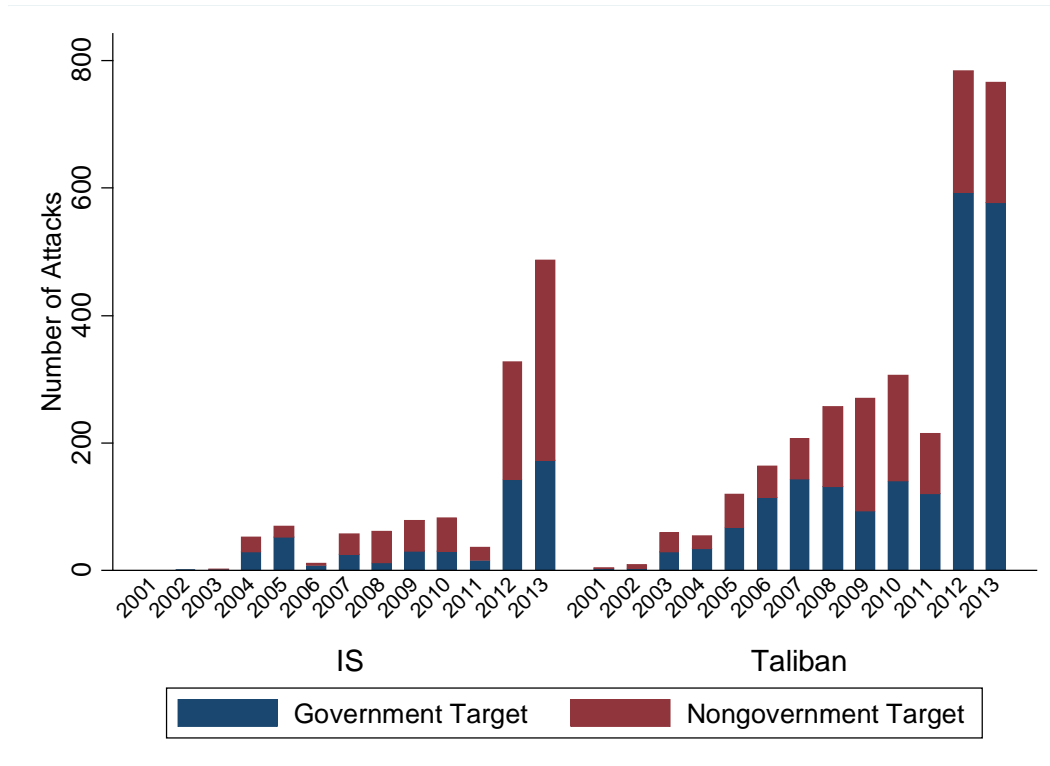
In the end, the IS stands in contrast to all of these others groups because of its expansive goals *and* its willingness to apply violence broadly to achieve those goals. When put together, those two factors help explain why the threat posed by the IS is different from what has been seen from other militant organizations in the past. In the next section, we

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[120] This information was compiled using the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), an open-source database of terrorism collected by the University of Maryland's START research center. The dataset is available to the public at http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/. GTD codes the target of attacks into broad categories. To make this chart, I collapse attacks against the government (diplomatic and general), military, and police into a single category called "government attacks." All other types were considered to be "nongovernment attacks."

[121] Based on the discussion of the IS above, it should be clear to the reader that the IS would not make the "government" versus "nongovernment" distinction being made here.

discuss what the practical result of the combination of the goals and methodology of the IS has been in terms of the different functional areas in which they operate.

The Islamic State: An Adaptive Organization Facing Increasing Challenges

Daniel Milton

Traditionally, analysts of organizations that use terrorism have focused on the one facet that best defines these organizations: the execution of violence. Any focus on how these groups have also attempted to engage in propaganda dissemination and provision of social services has been a distant second to the focus on violence. It is easy to fall into this trap with the Islamic State (IS). However, the IS has managed to create a unity of effort in the different facets of its operations, making it much more akin to an insurgent organization than strictly a terrorist organization.

One of the challenges with understanding how the "Islamic State" (IS) currently operates and the long-term threat it poses is that most open-source reporting focuses on a single aspect of the group's activities, such as its financing or its brutal treatment of civilians. While these focused glances at different parts of the IS are informative, there is a need to look at IS more holistically.

The purpose of this section is to provide a broader view of the breadth of the IS's activities. Before proceeding, a general comment should be made on data availability. One of the challenges inherent in doing this type of analysis is the lack of primary source information on the IS. The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) has a number of primary source documents available on al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), with some releases planned in the near future. However, when it comes to the IS, the amount of material is relatively limited.[122] What follows is, in our view, the best analysis that we can offer in these different areas while relying on open-source and unclassified documents regarding the IS.

After our examination of how the IS operates, this chapter concludes by noting how the success of the IS has come, not just from being an effective organization in any one of its

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[122] The primary source information that has come out in the public sphere amounts to a captured laptop of an IS fighter. Harald Doornbos and Jenan Moussa, "Found: The Islamic State's Terror Laptop of Doom," *Foreign Policy*, 28 August 2014. A more intriguing source of data on the IS would be the contents of the captured laptop of Abdulrahman al-Bilawi, one of the IS's top commanders. Martin Chulov, "How an arrest in Iraq revealed Isis's $2bn jihadist network," *Guardian*, 15 June 2014.

functional areas, but especially due to its ability to leverage activities in one area for gains in others. However, the success of operating effectively in multiple areas has also exposed the IS to "growth" challenges in each of these areas. These challenges present opportunities for governments to counter the IS and undermine its long-term prospects.

Trends in IS Military Operations

This assessment of military operations occurs mostly at the macro level, although a few insights into tactical operations are offered where appropriate.[123] Overall, the open-source data on the military operations of the IS show that this organization is well organized for the execution of violence and that it conducts operations not just to achieve victory in a particular battle, but also in an effort to "prime the battlefield" in places where it eventually hopes to attain victory.

A useful data resource to understand the IS's military operations is a series of reports released by the IS itself.[124] Each of these reports represents one issue in the a*l-Naba* product line, which offers a line-by-line accounting of self-reported IS operations by province, to include the date, location, target, casualty count, and weapon used. Taken together, these reports offer the most comprehensive view of what the IS says it has done in Iraq. For the more than two-year period of time covering (roughly) November 2011 to May 2014, the IS alleges to have carried out more than 19,000 operations.

Frequency, Pace, and Geographic Spread of Operations in Iraq

One basic barometer of an insurgent organization's strength and capability is the number of operations it is able to execute on a regular basis. Figure 1 contains a graph that shows the monthly breakdown of IS's operations from November 2011 to May 2014. It is revealing because it illustrates how the group's operations have accelerated over that time at a couple of key intervals. The first is the slight increase that takes place in July 2012 (months 7–8), which coincides with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's announcement

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[123] For a more in-depth look at tactical gains made by the IS over the past few years, see Michael Knights, "ISIL's Political-Military Power in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 8 (2014).

[124] These figures use monthly data released by the IS from November 2013 to May 2014 and two annual reports that cover the period of time from November 2011 to November 2013. For more in-depth discussion of how the annual report data came about, see Daniel Milton, Bryan Price, and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, "The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: More than Just a June Surprise," *CTC Sentinel* 7, no. 2 (2014), and Alex Bilger, "Backgrounder: ISIL Annual Reports Reveal a Metrics-Driven Military Command," Institute for the Study of War, May 22, 2014.

of the "Breaking the Walls" campaign.[125] That slight increase was followed by a slight decline, and then a steady increase of events during the rest of the data period, culminating in the group carrying out close to 800 operations on a monthly basis during the remaining 18 months. Despite the significant increase that took place over this time period, the increase in operations was not uniform across the territory in Iraq contested by the IS.

Figure 1: Monthly Islamic State Operations, Iraq
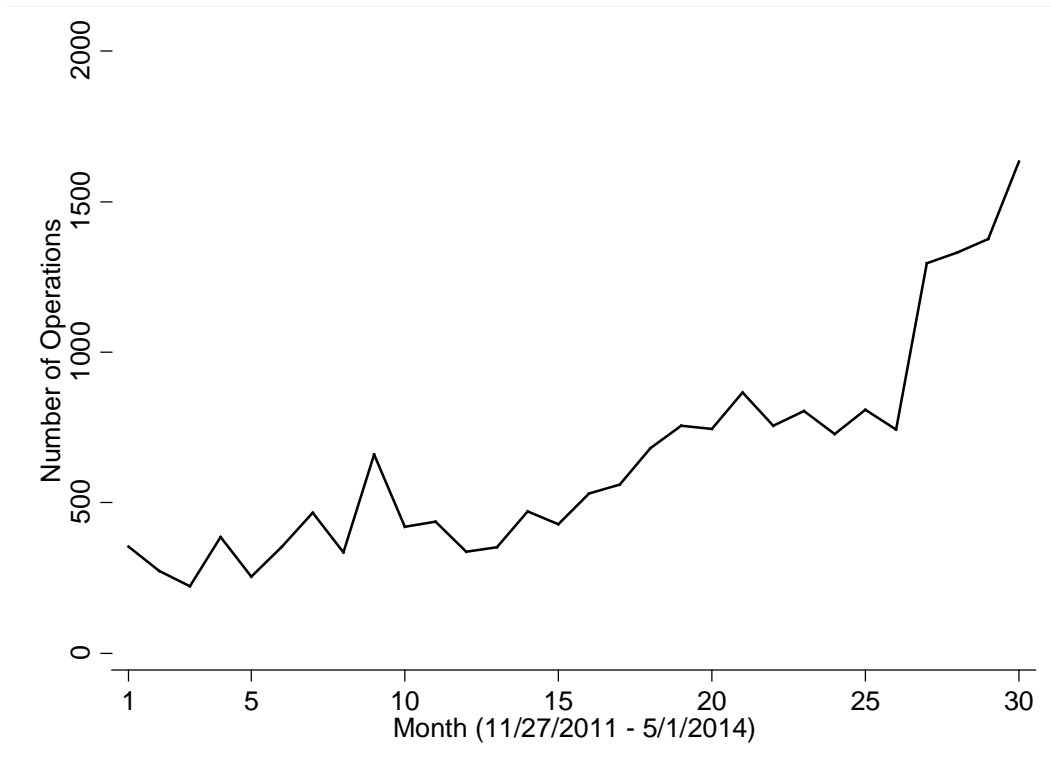
To understand the spatial variation in the IS's military operations, Figure 2 provides a breakdown of operations by province over this same time period. As can be seen through these charts, while the IS maintained an operational presence in a number of areas, the steepest inclines came in the three areas in Iraq where the IS would eventually conduct its most serious fight for territory: Ninawa, al-Anbar, and Salah al-Din and

[125] The "Breaking the Walls" campaign was designed to provide the organization with more manpower through the "breaking down" of prison walls where members and potentially new recruits were being held. See Jessica Lewis, "Al Qaeda in Iraq's 'Breaking the Walls' Campaign Achieves Its Objectives at Abu Ghraib—2013 Iraq Update #30," Institute for the Study of War, 28 July 2014; and Maamoun Youssef, "Al-Qaida: We're returning to old Iraq strongholds," *Associated Press*, 22 July 2012.

Northern Baghdad.[126] In hindsight, these attacks were most likely strategically planned moves to prepare the battlefield for future operations. In particular, a number of these attacks appear to have been specially designed to not just inflict military damage, but also to spread psychological fear among the population, especially security forces employed by the Iraqi government, in preparation for future operations.[127]

Figure 2: Islamic State Operations, November 2011 – May 2014, by Province
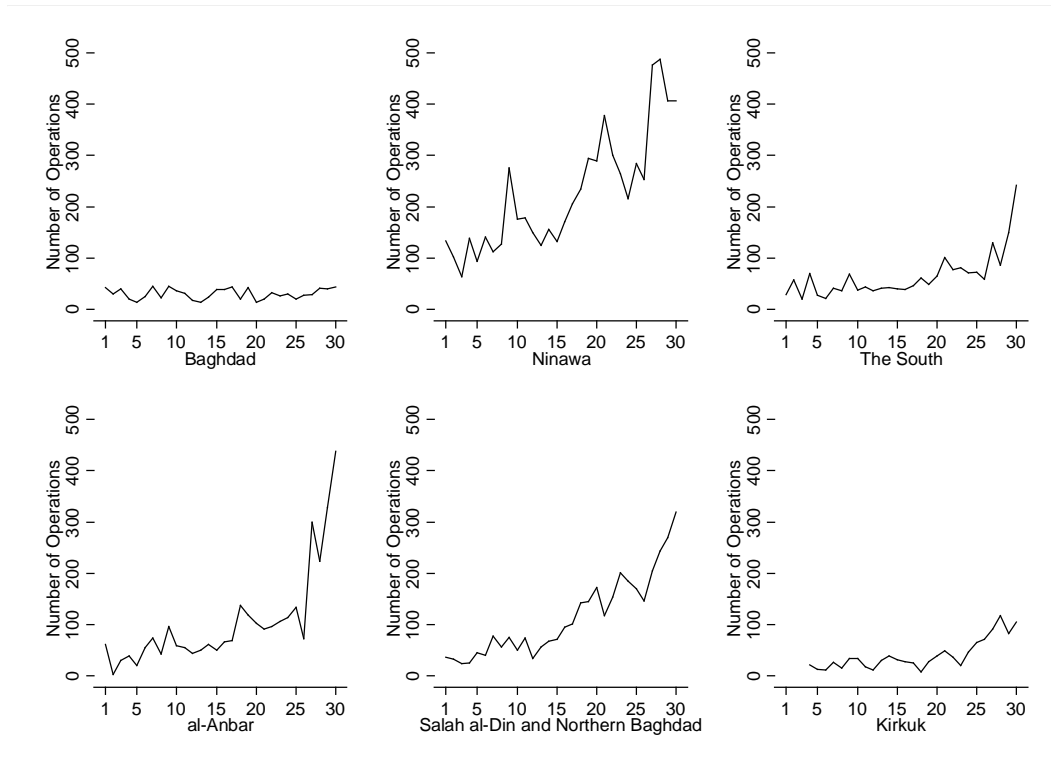
While the IS certainly has military strength in some provinces, this analysis also reveals that it is constrained in other areas in terms of its ability to carry out operations. One major point is that the IS's Sunni identity makes it more challenging for the group to establish a presence in areas with a majority Shi'a population — particularly in places

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[126] The Salah al-Din and Northern Baghdad case is interesting. For November 2011 to November 2013 (months 1—24) of the data we present, these two areas were considered together. However, from November 2013 to May 2014 (months 25—30), because of the IS's growing strength and presence in these areas, they split these areas into separate provinces (with separate organizations). We have shown the data here as combined for ease of presentation. In the future, we also expect to see two new provinces that the IS recently created: Wilayat al-Furat and Wilayat al-Falluja.

[127] Bryan Price, Daniel Milton, and Muhammad al-`Ubaydi, "Al-Baghdadi's Blitzkrieg, ISIL's Psychological Warfare, and What It Means for Syria and Iraq," *CTC Perspectives*, 12 June 2014.

like Baghdad and Iraq's southern regions. In addition to this particular challenge, the IS is also constrained by factors such as available resources, manpower, etc.

It is also worth emphasizing the relative stability of the trend line in Baghdad province. Despite significant fear about the long-term security of Baghdad, the data shows that the IS has not carried out the same level of attacks present in other parts of Iraq prior to its major military offensives. This is possible for two reasons. First, it may be because of the difficulty the group faces in operating in a heavily Shi'a area, the presence of Shi'a militias, and the resources the Iraqi government and international community have devoted to protect that strategic location. In this case, the low level of attacks may be in spite of the interest by the IS in carrying out higher levels of activity in Baghdad. The other possibility is that the IS knows that it can't carry out a high level of attacks, but still maintains a low level of violence to keep Iraqi security forces focused on Baghdad instead of elsewhere. At this stage, we do not have evidence to adjudicate between these two possibilities.

Finally, the trend lines in the South and Kirkuk reveal another useful takeaway: that the group has been patient and strategic in its attempts to build infrastructure in those areas. For example, the data shows that in the South and Kirkuk, the number of IS operations was relatively stable for many months before picking up.[128] Clearly the IS has been patient and strategic in building infrastructure in these areas. This suggests that it will be important to not just focus on fighting the IS in areas where it has strength, but also to try to undermine it in areas where it wants to expand its influence.

Long-Term Historical Perspective of the IS's Operations

Given the group's historical lineage with AQI/ISI/ISIL, the authors sought out additional data — from other sources — to understand the group's operations over a broader time horizon. The challenge lies in finding data that allows for analysis of the IS's activities during that period of time.[129] The largest open-source database of terrorist

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[128] A point of clarity needs to be made regarding "the South" province. Some may mistakenly believe that this refers to everything south of Baghdad. It does not. It only includes some of the south parts of Baghdad proper, as well as some cities in the northern part of Balil and Wasit provinces.

[129] We are confident that the predecessor organizations of the IS kept records of operations in some form or another since 2004. However, such data has not been made available and is likely to not be well organized. The group has significantly improved its record-keeping since that point in time, as evidence by the data we used for this study.

incidents is the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), hosted by the University of Maryland's START center.[130] Another, more limited source of data on group attacks is the Chicago Project on Security and Terrorism's (CPOST) suicide attacks database.[131] Even though all of this data is used prominently in academic and policy studies, there is reason to be hesitant about its broad use in examining a group that has a very high operational tempo like the IS.

To illustrate this concern, data on vehicle-borne and individual-borne suicide attacks carried out by the IS in Iraq from three sources (IS, GTD, CPOST) was compiled into Table 1.[132] These simple comparisons offer important notes of caution to the use of open-source data for assessing detailed trends in a group's activities. The open-source datasets (GTD and CPOST) are based on media accounts, which tend to emphasize spectacular attacks in areas of interest. In the first year in which we have data on the IS, the GTD tracks relatively closely with the IS attack data. In the second year, both the GTD and CPOST present similar numbers, but both fall short of matching the rise reported by the IS in terms of their attacks.

Table 1: Comparison of Suicide Attacks by Database

Source	Method	27 November 2011 - 14 November 2012	15 November 2012 - 14 December 2013
IS	Vehicle	22	78
	Individual	18	160
GTD	Vehicle	18	37
	Individual	7	28
CPOST	Vehicle	6	38
	Individual	0	44

An examination of Table 1 suggests that reports of suicide attacks from these open-source datasets are relatively close proxies to the actual numbers of large-scale activities of the group when it carries out relatively few attacks. However, as the number of

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[130] The GTD data is publicly available at http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/.

[131] The CPOST data is publicly available at http://cpost.uchicago.edu/. Accessed by the author on 23 September 2014.

[132] One of the challenges is that attacks from GTD and CPOST are attributed to groups under various titles during this timeframe. To be as inclusive as possible, any vehicle/belt suicide attack performed in Iraq by AQ, ISI, and the ISIL/ISIS was included in this table.

operations that the group carries out increases, the discrepancies between these different sources of data increase as well. Consequently, relying on these open-source datasets is most useful for understanding trends in a group's activity, but may miss the overall magnitude of what a group is doing.

Figure 3: Attacks of IS and Predecessor Organizations, 2004—2013
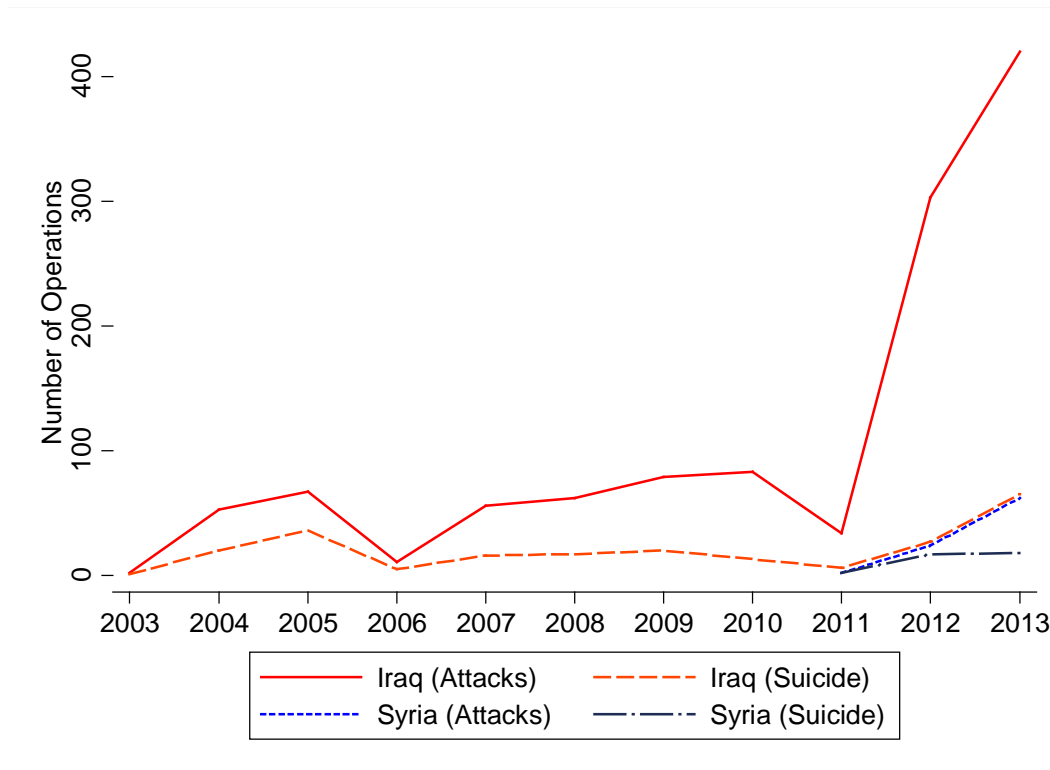
With that understanding, we present a longer view of the activities of the IS using the GTD. Figure 3 shows a longer view of the operational history of the IS from 2003 to 2013. This examination helps drive home the realization that this organization has had an operational presence in Iraq for a number of years, with the only recent decline in their operational tempo coming in 2011, the last year that U.S. troops were present in Iraq.[133] Of course, that same year, revolutions in Syria created a new opportunity for the

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[133] The dip in operations in 2006 is potentially intriguing, particularly given the fact that traditional narratives of the defeat of AQI/ISI suggests that 2006 was actually a highpoint, with a decline after that. This dip should be viewed with a skeptical eye, as the overall amount of activity in Iraq was steadily increasing over this time period. The challenge in coding the data was that, given the chaotic environment and the large number of organizations operating in theater, assigning attacks to specific groups was difficult. In fact, 2006 was the year in the GTD's coding of Iraq events where the proportion of incidents in which the group was labeled as "Unknown" was at its highest.

IS to inject new vigor into its organization, especially as the flow of foreign fighters from abroad increased into Syria. Since that point, the IS's operations, both in Iraq (red lines) and Syria (blue lines), have only increased.

Foreign Fighters in Military Operations

An extensive discussion of how foreign fighters have been a part of what the IS is doing is beyond the scope of this document. However, it is clear that the IS has benefited greatly from the thousands of foreign fighters that have answered its call to join its ranks. The influx of foreign fighters into the Syrian conflict is one reason that the IS was able to increase its power in Syria, but these same fighters also provided a boost to its operations in Iraq as it transferred foreign fighters to the Iraq fronts in greater numbers in 2013 and into 2014.[134] This free flow of foreign fighters between these two battlefronts is only more greatly facilitated by the alleged dissolution of the Iraqi—Syria border by the IS in June 2014.[135]

In earlier years, these borders had been an impediment to easy flow of foreign fighters, requiring the use of smugglers and sympathetic locals.[136] While AQI/ISI was able to overcome this impediment, the use of such intermediaries created challenges such as fewer resources for the organization due to fees charged by these intermediaries and fighters being misinformed about the nature of their own role in jihad.[137] Overall, the control of such a large space of key territory, coupled with boosts to recruitment in foreign fighters, has allowed the IS to operate more efficiently across Syria and Iraq.

One particular battle in which the IS demonstrated not only the ability to transfer fighters from one part of its territory to another, but also a strategic mindset in doing so, is the battle of Kobani, a city on the Turkey/Syria border. The IS has shown renewed interest in taking the city since early July 2014.[138] In unofficial videos posted of these operations, fighters are seen speaking in the Kurdish language. Furthermore, unconfirmed discussions online among supporters of the IS suggest these fighters may

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[134] Aaron Y. Zelin, "The Return of Sunni Foreign Fighters in Iraq," Washington Institute, 12 June 2014.

[135] "Breaking Down the Boundaries, Sykes-Picot," http://justpaste.it/kasr_hodod, 11 June 2014.

[136] Anonymous, "Smuggling, Syria, and Spending," in *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: Al-Qa`ida's Road In and Out of Iraq*, ed. Brian Fishman, CTC Report, 14 July 2008, Chapter 4.

[137] Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-612449, "An Analysis of the State of ISI," 4—10.

[138] Fehim Tastekin, "Islamic State moves to capture another Turkish border crossing," *Al-Monitor*, 10 July 2014.

have been transferred from Iraq to the battlefront in Kobani.[139] If true, the use of such fighters would have the potential not only to provide a tactical benefit to the IS, but also to help in establishing governance if the IS can succeed in winning the battle.

Evolution in Response to Airstrikes

On 7August 2014, President Obama made an address in which he authorized airstrikes against the IS in Iraq.[140] Less than two months later, the campaign of airstrikes expanded into Syria.[141] We do not yet have good open-source data on IS operations since the beginning of airstrikes, but there are indications that there has been a tactical shift in how the IS is operating in response to them.[142] This speaks not just to the efficacy of the airstrikes in forcing the IS to change its operations in the near term, but also to the potentially limited impact of airstrikes alone over the long-term. As the IS shifts its practices, it will become increasingly difficult to roll the group back through air power alone, and the risk of civilian casualties will increase.[143] The IS knows this and will continue to adapt its practices in order to achieve its goals.

Additionally, there needs to be caution about assessing any particular strategy to be effective or not just because the short-term military picture changes. Even if the IS experiences setbacks due to U.S. and coalition airstrikes (a point on which there is

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[139] Some media reporting has suggested that there are Kurds helping the IS in its fight against Kobani. See Bassem Mroue and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Kurds help Islamic militants in battle for Kobani," *Associated Press*, 4 November 2014.

[140] Helene Cooper, Mark Lander, and Alissa J. Rubin, "Obama Allows Limited Airstrikes on ISIS," *New York Times*, 7 August 2014.

[141] Craig Whitlock, "U.S. begins airstrikes against Islamic State in Syria," *Washington Post*, 23 September 2014.

[142] A recent video posted online by a Jordanian military expert suggests that the IS has done at least nine unique things in response to the airstrikes, including using decoys, moving weapons and personnel through smaller vehicles, reducing (at least temporally) usage of official social media networks and cell phones, reducing the size of headquarters, and hiding information about losses. See "Means of deception used by the organization of the Islamic State to avoid aircraft," JBC News, 28 September 2014. This information appears to be corroborated in part by media reported based on eyewitness accounts. See Raheem Salman and Yara Bayoumy, "Wary of air strikes, ISIS militants change tactics," *Al-Arabiya*, 27 September 2014, and Dalshad Abdullah, "ISIS no threat to Erbil: Peshmerga official," Asharq Al-Awsat, 18 September 2014.

[143] The combination of airpower and ground advances, particularly involved Kurdish forces in Iraq, seems to have achieved some successes against the IS. See "Islamic State: Militants 'pushed back' in Iraq," BBC News, 25 October 2014. This pairing of airstrikes where capable ground forces exist seems to have also been successful at holding off the IS in Kobani. See Phil Stewart, "Syria's Kobani less at risk but could still fall: U.S. officials," *Reuters*, 23 October 2014.

debate), it is clear that this organization does not see the campaign as ending anytime soon and it does not view itself as constrained by geographic borders.[144] Despite tremendous successes by coalition forces and local allies against AQI/ISI in 2007 and 2008, the IS was able to revitalize its organization after the withdrawal of U.S. troops. To highlight its longevity, the group is keen to cite al-Zarqawi when he remarked that "[t]he spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify — by Allah's permission — until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq."[145] As we discussed earlier, that spark was lit in part by Iraqi government actions. Until political solutions are enacted, the situation may be somewhat contained through airstrikes, but it is unlikely to be ultimately resolved.

Vulnerabilities and Strategic Considerations

That the IS has demonstrated capability on the battlefield is clear. However, there are a number of weaknesses already apparent from its operations or that will become apparent as it continues to be tested and pushed by its growing list of enemies.

Earlier, the difficulty of operating in Shi'a-dominated areas was mentioned. As an illustration of the difficulty of this Sunni force in moving toward Baghdad, consider the immense difficulty of a company that wants to ship goods from Jordan to Baghdad by way of the International Highway. Companies doing this must often have two drivers: one Arab Sunni for the first leg of the journey, and the other a Shi'a who takes the truck on the second part of the journey. The Shi'a driver becomes necessary as security forces at checkpoints close to Baghdad are able to easily detect and prevent entry of Arab Sunnis.[146]

If it is this difficult to get commercial merchandise into Baghdad and other Shi'a-dominated areas, it will certainly present hurdles to the group if it seeks to advance militarily into the area. In short, the IS, as strong as it is, is a force limited by the narrow sectarian nature of its worldview.

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[144] For an illustration of this, see the 9 October 2014 video put out by the Islamic State showing the villiages and cities it had recently "liberated" near Aleppo, Syria. In the video, a Google Earth map of villages is shown, with flags of the IS popping up as the screen moves from one village to the next.

[145] Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, as quoted in *Dabiq*, the official English-language magazine of the IS, June 2014, 5.

[146] Interview with a local Iraqi merchant, October 2014.

Beyond the sectarian difficulty, the IS has also benefited from not having to face the reality of continuing to appeal to those who already have joined its ranks and those who may still come. Promises of exciting combat and a good life afterward are one thing, but the harsh realities of combat paired with the possibility of facing increasingly capable adversaries, as well as the often challenging transition period from soldier to citizen, may ultimately lead to defections and diminished appeal.[147] Beyond combat, continuing to get soldiers excited about the mundane realties that foreign fighters sometimes face may also undercut future strength.[148]

Finally, we should not confuse battlefield capability with omnipotence and omniscience. While the military component of the IS is capable, it is subject to the traditional challenges of war: overreach, overconfidence, and plain old mistakes. Attacking Erbil in the summer of 2014, as well as the prolonged offensive against Kobani, are prominent examples of this. In the case of Erbil, the advance of the IS's fighters led to a fierce reaction from the United State and a strong push by the Kurds.[149] In the case of Kobani, the emphasis on taking the town has cost the IS its image of quick success, hundreds of its fighters, and increased global focus on its efforts.[150]

Communicating Fear and Vision: The Media Organization of the IS

In a 2007 speech, then Secretary of Defense Robert Gates quoted Kishore Mahbubani in asking, "How has one man in a cave managed to out-communicate the world's greatest

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[147] Consider the example of al-Shabaab in this regard. What was once the only other al-Qa'ida (AQ) affiliate to control territory on a large scale has seen its territorial hold and military fortunes reduced because of poor leadership and the increased difficulty of fighting against AMISOM troops. See Isma'il Kushkush and Jeffrey Gettleman, "As Power of Shabab Declines, Once Feared Fighters Leave Terror Group Behind," *New York Times*, 4 November 2014. Of course, reduced strength does not equal defeat or the lack of ability to carry out large-scale terrorist attacks. This lesson is applicable to both of these circumstances as well.

[148] An alleged recent example of this comes from India, where a former foreign fighter who was asked to fetch water and clean toilets quickly became disenchanted with the idea of the IS. See "I cleaned toilets while in ISIS, Kalyan youth Areeb Majeed tells NIA," *Times of India*, 30 November 2014.

[149] See Kenneth M. Pollack, "Iraq: Understanding the ISIS Offensive Against the Kurds," *Brookings*, 11 August 2014; Rod Nordland and Helene Cooper, "Capitalizing on U.S. Bombing, Kurds Retake Iraqi Towns," 10 August 2014.

[150] On the deaths of fighters of the IS against Kobani, see Nick Paton Walsh, Zeynep Bilginsoy, and Chandrika Narayan, "More than 800 killed in 40 days of clashes in Syrian city of Kobani," *CNN*, 26 October 2014.

communication society?"[151] Of course, this was a reference to Usama bin Ladin and his organization's ability to use the media to further the group's goals. While AQ stood as first among equals in terms of its media communications, among terrorist and insurgent organizations the use of media by the IS has over the last several years been without equal. From Twitter to YouTube, the IS has sought to publicize its message, spread fear, and reach out to new recruits. Just like AQ, the media front is a central pillar of IS's strategy and it is clear that the group invests heavily in this area. Its success is seen in the appeal that the group has to thousands of foreign fighters, the fear that it inflicts upon its adversaries, and how international media outlets and various governments respond to the material the group releases.

Evolution of an Already Capable Media Arm

Such success is not a result of a few entrepreneurial IS members utilizing their Web skills to the greatest extent possible. Rather, the media proficiency of the IS exists because of an extensive media infrastructure that allows it to produce high-quality, timely products in different languages to different audiences that fit the narrative that the group wishes to convey. In addition to the production side, the IS is also capable of pushing this narrative out along a number of mediums, to include the internet, broadcast airwaves, and traditional publications.

It is important to note that the IS has a long history in organizing its media efforts. When the IS was the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), it likewise had an extensive focus on media efforts. Figure 3 contains a media organizational chart for the ISI that provides an example of the complex media organization that this group was running several years ago.[152] Notice the multi-tiered environment that introduces structure into the group's media operations. It is upon this type of organization that the IS has continued to innovate, which makes their current-day media savvy less surprising when viewed in this context.

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[151] Robert Gates, Landon Lecture, Kansas State University (2007). Available at http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1199.

[152] One scholar's review of AQ's media apparatus noted that Zarqawi was already taking the media side of terrorism to new levels. See Philip Seib, "The Al-Qaeda Media Machine," *Military Review* 88, no. 3 (May-June 2008), 75. By noting the historical precedent of AQI/ISI's media operations, the savvy and sophistication shown by the IS is much less surprising. All the media side of the organization has done is build on its successes and continue to refine its products. The speed and volume of what is being produced by the IS is perhaps more surprising than the quality of the product.

Figure 3: Islamic State of Iraq Media Organizational Chart, December 2008[153]

هيكلية هيئة الإعلام في قواطع العمليات
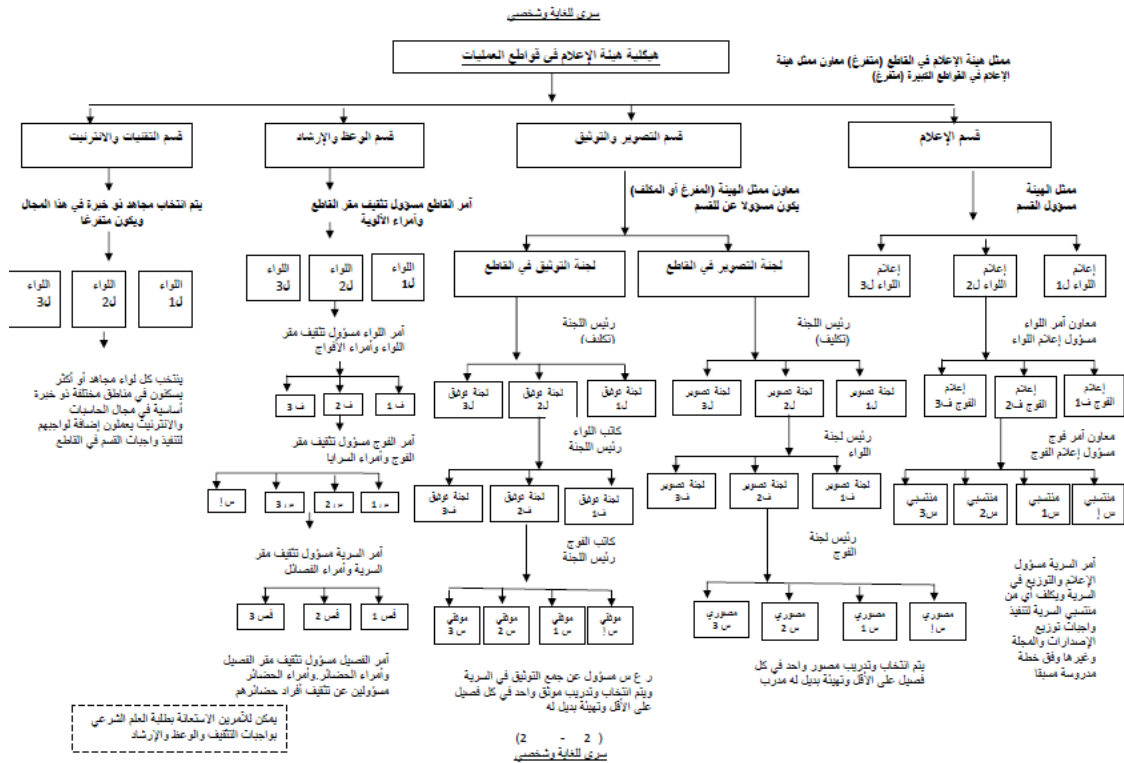
In addition, what Figure 3 shows is a robust, multi-level organizational structure designed to exercise central control over the organization's external messaging, while also doing the best it can to harvest important content from all different geographic areas of its operations. The prominent use and availability of social media has created new opportunities but also added challenges to the IS's ability to manage its own message. The IS has had some successes in navigating and taking advantage of these new technologies, but again, there are challenges inherent in running an insurgent organization with such a public face.

Laying Out the IS Media Landscape

Figure 4 illustrates this landscape, the several different actors that populate it, and the relationships between those actors. As can be seen from this figure, there are a number of producers and distributors of content within the IS media landscape. Our understanding of this landscape is based on observation of their media activities, not

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[153] The translated version of this document is available in the appendix at the end of this report.

necessarily upon any pronouncement or documents unless otherwise cited. The Ministry of Media of the IS is the central hub for all creation and distribution of official IS content, to include videos, statements, photos, etc.[154] It is made up of four different components: al-Furqan, al-Hayat, al-I'tisam, and Ajnad Foundation.

Figure 4: The Islamic State's Media Landscape
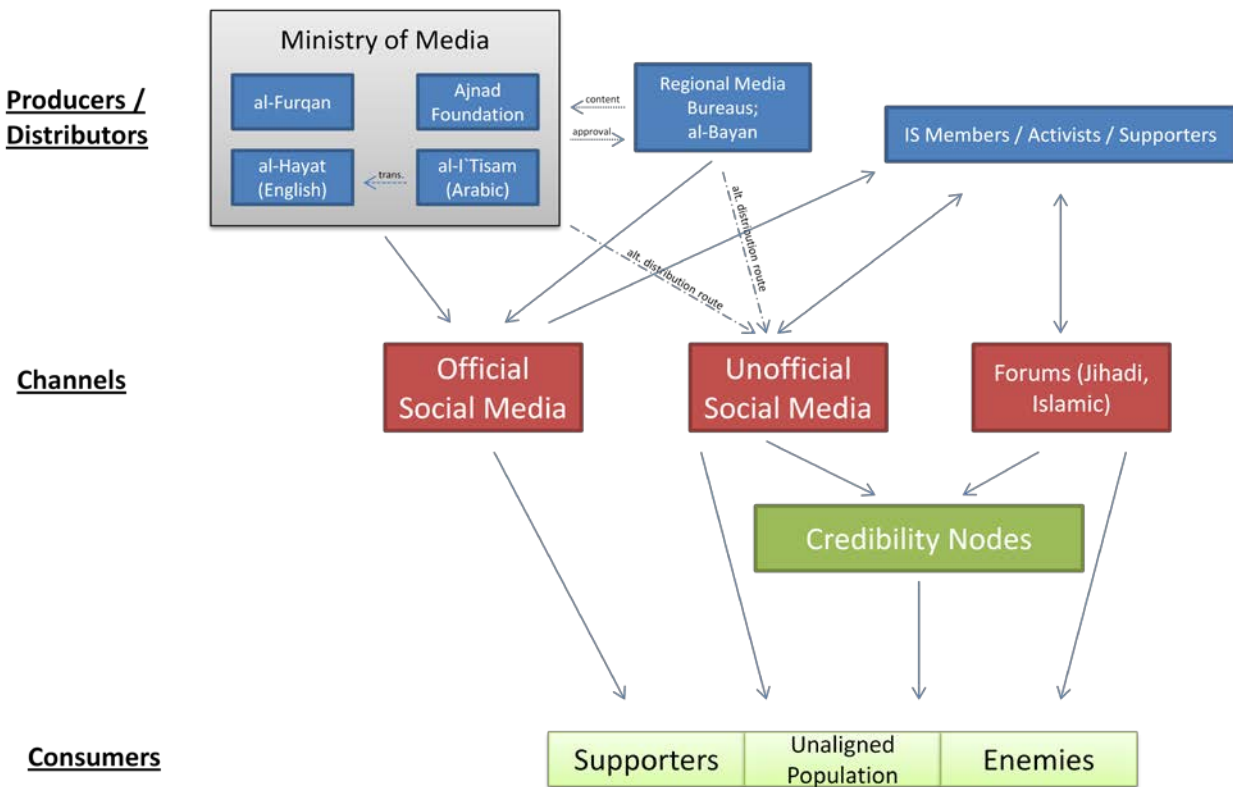
Note that each of the *wilayah* (provinces) within the IS has its own regional media bureau, all of which can produce and distribute their own content. For example, the media bureau in Nineveh created a photo montage that showcased the creation of a local IS police force.[155] However, it is most likely the case that these regional media bureaus do not have complete autonomy and are required to receive approval from the Ministry of Media for some of their releases. There is one other media communications medium utilized by the IS which is very traditional in the sense of mass media. In June

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[154] The observations contained in this section about the IS's media landscape are not attributable to any single source of material or information. Rather, the construction of the landscape comes as the result of careful observation by and discussion among CTC faculty/staff of this media landscape, with a special thanks to Muhammad al-'Ubaydi for his help in translation.

[155] Johnlee Varghese, "Islamic State 'Army Police' Takes Charge of Security in Mosul [PHOTOS]," *International Business Times*, 19 September 2014.

2014, IS started the al-Bayan radio station in Mosul. Since its inception, it has been broadcasting readings of the Quran, lectures, and battlefield updates touting operations of the IS. The IS also controls several TV stations in Iraq and Syria.[156] These constitute the only official sources of content related to the IS.

However, there is a large unofficial creator of content in the IS media landscape, and this comes from activists and supporters of the IS. The low cost of entry on the internet allows individuals to post content with relative ease in the name of the group, even though they have no official capacity within it. This becomes problematic when mass media do not distinguish between these different sources of content creation and report unofficial content as representing the views and threat presented by the IS. To experienced observers of IS media products, the differences between official and unofficial content are often easy to see, but caution is needed. What is also interesting is that the IS itself is trying to exercise control of these types of incidents to the extent possible, which is difficult for any organization to do. As the issue of control is a significant challenge for the IS, we discuss it in more detail at the end of this section.

In addition to producing and distributing original content, the IS supporters fill another valuable role in the IS's propagation efforts. This is represented in Figure 4 by the arrows that point back to the activists and supporters from various channels on which content is distributed. Often supporters and activists of the IS serve to recycle and disseminate content that they find in various places, magnifying the reach of the IS's media content. This network of online supporters is larger than anything that has been seen before in terms of an insurgent organization.

Moving down to the various channels of distribution, it is important to note that the IS relies on a number of different channels. This reliance is increased as counterterrorism efforts close some channels down. For example, until recently each of the provinces of the IS in Iraq and Syria had its own official social media page on VKontakte (VK), a social networking site. Each of these pages represented the official channel for news, statements, and content within the provinces. When each of the province sites was shut down, it forced the IS to rely on unofficial social media channels to post content. However, from time to time, even these unofficial channels are shut down, forcing the

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[156] Lucas Tomlinson, "Welcome to Islamic State TV: US officials battle to counter 'slick' ISIS media arm," *Fox News*, 11 October 2014.

IS to find other avenues for distributing content.[157] More recently, the IS appears to have temporarily abandoned official social media channels in favor of relying on unofficial channels and the forums. All of this makes tracking the IS on social media a challenge, as the content they put out on unofficial forums becomes mixed in with the large amount of unofficial content produced by activists, supporters, etc.

Prior to the emergence of the IS, there were three main internet forums for jihadis in which they could post messages and other content while engaging with other like-minded individuals: Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam, Shabakat al-Fida al-Islamiyya, and the Ansar al-Mujahidin Arabic Forum.[158] People on these forums were allowed to post messages on many different groups and subjects, but the explicit purpose of the forums was not to take sides. In other words, the online forums were not affiliated with any particular group.

However, since the ISIL was announced and differences with JN intensified, a steady polarization of the online atmosphere of the forums has taken place. In late April 2014, Shumukh published a set of rules that prohibited the public discussion of "disagreement[s] between the mujahidin."[159] However, as the disagreement between ISIL/IS and JN continued to intensify, Shumukh reversed course about a month later and issued a call for questions regarding the disagreement in the Levant.[160] Most recently, Shumukh seems to have been populated mainly by supporters of the IS, while al-Fida has become the forum of choice for those with less enthusiasm for the IS. Ansar, on the other hand, fell victim to the bitter infighting between members of the IS and JN, even before actual fighting broke out on the battlefield. It was eventually taken down, although its Twitter account continued to repost related videos and news.

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[157] The IS is very used to being chased off and on social media. Prior to VK, they used to have Twitter accounts that were suspended and came back to service many times. Then they migrated their accounts to Joindiaspora.com, and again, they were kicked out from there. Then they finally joined VK.

[158] For an in-depth analysis of the state of the online jihadhi landscape prior to the emergence of the IS, see Aaron Y. Zelin, *The State of Global Jihad Online: A Qualitative, Quantitative, and Cross-Lingual Analysis*, New America Foundation, January 2013. Of particular note is the table on page 18 that shows the number of posts per subsection on one internet forum. The archive of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) had only six posts in January 2013. Its prominence has certainly changed.

[159] Forum post by the Shura Council of *Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam* Network on 30 April 2014. Translation by Muhammad al-`Ubaydi.

[160] Forum post by the Shura Council of *Shabakat Shumukh al-Islam* Network on 22 May 2014. Translation by Muhammad al-`Ubaydi.

At the same time as this transition has been going on between al-Fida and Shumukh, other alternatives have grown to new prominence and become part of the IS's media outreach. Prominent among this is the online forum al-Minbar al-I`lami al-Jihadi. This forum, which emerged in September 2011, first professed independence from all jihadi groups. However, shortly after the declaration of the establishment of the caliphate, a large banner was posted on the homepage that stated that the forum was announcing *bay'a* to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. As was to be expected, the popularity of al-Minbar rose among members of the IS, to the point where it rivals any of the other online forums in terms of the number of posts.[161] This discussion illustrates the transformative event that the emergence of the IS was in terms of the traditional online jihadi landscape.

The final component of the IS's media landscape is what we refer to as credibility nodes. Because there is so much content generated on behalf of the IS, it has become necessary from time to time for certain members of the online community to serve as quality control mechanisms. For example, one unofficial video that was posted to forums through an unofficial channel purported to show IS fighters massacring a number of Arab Sunnis. While the IS is known for being brutal, such overt targeting of Arab Sunnis would have been problematic for the group. Within a short time of the video being posted, respected (but unofficial) forum members criticized the video and demonstrated that it actually showed the IS targeting Syrian military forces, not Arab Sunnis. While these members are not active on every false claim, they do appear occasionally and serve as a check on information.

A Small Sample of IS Products

While forums and social media are populated by large amounts of member-generated content (discussion, pictures, etc.), the IS also makes sure to use these online distribution channels to push out its own official media projects, to include videos and magazines. This is particularly true when it comes to English-language content. For example, in early June 2014, the IS began publishing a high-quality English language publication called *Islamic State News* (and later *Islamic State Report*), which contained brief descriptions of key battles and initiatives of the IS. Each of these issues was about

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[161] This paragraph represents a compilation of a number of posts and events on the al-Minbar al-I`lami al-Jihadi internet forum from April 2013 onward. Translations of these posts were done by Muhammad al-`Ubaydi.

eight pages in length, had very little text, and was dominated by graphics depicting battles, prisoners (and at times their execution), and governance activities of the IS.

Then, in early July 2014, the IS, through al-Hayat, released a new English-language magazine called *Dabiq*.[162] The first issue claimed that *Dabiq* was a response to feedback that al-Hayat had received on its previous publications. The new magazine, typically about forty pages in length, contains a larger quantity of speeches and articles, while incorporating the sections that have appeared in previous publications. While *Dabiq* is not much different in quality of presentation than those put out by other organizations (e.g., AQAP's *Inspire*), the fact that this innovation in publication style and format took place in the space of less than a month shows how well developed the media operation of the IS actually is.

Another aspect of the well-developed media side of the IS has to do with the many different types of videos that it has produced. While an in-depth exploration of these videos is beyond the scope of this project, a brief example will illustrate the adeptness of the IS at using these videos to further its goals. Compare and contrast the IS video *Flames of War* with the series of videos showing John Cantlie, the captured British photojournalist. Both videos demonstrate careful and skillful production, including the integration of graphics, current news items, and sharp filming quality. The use of different settings and modes of presentation by the IS shows their appeal to audiences through a mixture of fear and reason, a potent combination indeed.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the IS also has an extensive operation geared towards the production and distribution of materials offline, especially when it comes to Arabic content. Indeed, recent evidence has shown that the IS has an extensive internal operation geared towards producing media for those living within its territorial boundaries.[163] This operation distributes DVDs of videos and hard copies of its writings,

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[162] For more discussion of *Dabiq*, see Terrence McCoy, "The apocalyptic magazine the Islamic State uses to recruit and radicalize foreigners," *Washington Post*, 16 September 2014.

[163] That the IS has an extensive media operation for distributing materials offline is apparent from two sources. The first is the numerous pictures of such products that have appeared on unofficial social media accounts of supporters and detractors. The second are declassified captured battlefield documents. For example, one such document highlighted the distribution of CDs containing "PowerPoint educational program[s]," various videos, wanted posters, etc. See NMEC-2010-175512.

including official statements, religious material, fliers, etc.[164] Also, the IS uses big screens in the public parks and squares in both Syria and Iraq to show its recent video releases to the public.[165]

Vulnerabilities and Strategic Considerations

One area in which the IS seems to recognize that it may have a future challenge is the relatively public nature of this conflict. Use of social media by fighters and supporters can be a great way to publicize the group's efforts, but it can also lead to content that distracts from the group's overall message. Perhaps worse than getting off message, particularly for a security-minded organization, is the possibility that operations or personnel are endangered because of content that is posted by individuals on the ground. Whatever the reasons, a recent statement posted by an IS member online in the name of "the General Committee" appears to recognize this problem:

> The committee has decided to prohibit filming or taking pictures with cell phones, cameras or other devices during the battles or to document anything related to the battles, except for the official media representatives who are assigned to document and film the battles. All those who disobey will be punished…Please distribute these orders to all headquarters and main and subdivision centers of the wilayat [provinces].[166]

There is some recent evidence that the IS may find it difficult to control its members and supporters. In September 2014, after official IS social media feeds were shut down on the VK site, a message began circulating on unofficial accounts asking supporters of the IS not to post information about the IS. This resulted in some backlash a few days later, with some online adherents asking why they should stop posting about the great things the IS has done. A response to the backlash came from another unofficial supporter, who said that it was never asked of supporters to not post *any* information about the IS, but that such information should be about past victories, not future operations.[167] These

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[164] Many of these different products find their way onto Twitter and other social media platforms as a consequence of having been posted by supporters or detractors of the movement.

[165] Interviews with citizens living in territory controlled by the IS, 18 October 2014.

[166] This statement actually came in the form of a photograph of a written document that was posted on an internet forum, suggesting that it may have been a formal written order that was distributed among IS personnel. It was posted to the al-Minbar al-I`lami forum on 9 September 2014.

[167] "Tips and guidance to supporters," http://justpaste.it/hgqn, 7 October 2014.

kinds of disagreements highlight the difficult for the IS in the online space and present opportunities to foment and exploit these disagreements.[168]

Given the sophistication of the IS's media organization, a concerted effort needs to be made to engage in a public relations campaign against the IS in addition to other measures that are taken to stop the organization. If not, the IS will continue to exploit its ability to talk to the public. In the aftermath of coalition airstrikes, a video was produced by the al-Raqqa Media Bureau that showed an individual explaining in both Arabic and English how the destroyed location in which he was standing was a school, not a staging ground for fighters.[169] Without a counter narrative, it remains the only statement for potential sympathizers and enemies to consider irrespective of its veracity. The IS makes mistakes and has disagreements; these need to be a part of the public discussion of this group.

One element of this campaign needs to recognize that there appears to be a generational difference in the foreign fighters flowing to support the IS and those who would have supported al-Qa'ida in the past, with the IS attracting younger recruits.[170] In part, this is because the propaganda of the IS, in contrast to that of al-Qa'ida, features an array of tactical-level foreign fighters as opposed to leadership figures. The appearance of foreign fighters, some speaking in the native languages of target populations, potentially conveys a message to the listener of "this could be you too." This perception of adventure does not meet with reality and could be countered, potentially leveraging those who have returned from the region disenchanted by their experience.[171]

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[168] Another example of this comes in the aftermath of shooting incident at the Canadian War Memorial and Parliament Building in Ottawa. At least one, but possibly two prominent individuals have questioned the wisdom of the IS in encouraging attacks against Western targets, arguing that such will likely only strengthen alliances against the IS and increase distrust of Islam. Forum post by the two members of al-Minbar al-I`lami Network on 23 October 2014. Translation by Muhammad al-`Ubaydi.
[169] Al-Raqqa Media Bureau, "Locations targeted by the global alliances air raids," posted online on 2 October 2014.
[170] Anthony Faiola and Souad Mekhennet, "Denmark tries a soft-handed approach to returned Islamist fighters," *Washington Post*, 19 October 2014; Holly Yan, "Why is ISIS so successful at luring Westerners," CNN, 7 October 2014; Eric Schmitt, "U.S. Is Trying to Counter ISIS' Efforts to Lure Alienated Young Muslims," *New York Times*, 4 October 2014.
[171] "I cleaned toilets while in ISIS, Kalyan youth Areeb Majeed tells NIA," *Times of India*, 30 November 2014; Sherko Omer, "'It Was Never My Intention to Join ISIS': Interview with a Former Member of Islamic State," *Newsweek*, 6 November 2014; Harriet Sherwood, Sandra Laville, Kim Willsher, Ben Knight, Maddy

Unfortunately, such a media campaign will likely have to emerge from outside the territory held by the IS.[172] This stands in contrast to earlier in the organization's history, when one of the key facilitators of the decline of AQI/ISI in 2007 was the fact that local Sunni groups were able to use media to show the world the true face of AQI/ISI.[173] Part of the reason such "virtual resistance" was possible was that AQI/ISI did not exercise complete control over the geographic territory in which these groups lived. However, the challenge today is that the IS exercises a near-total control over the media within its territory and it is very adept at putting out the messages that it wants.[174]

The Diverse Financial Portfolio of the Islamic State

One clear conclusion that can be reached by an examination of the history of military operations of the IS is that the organization had (and continues to have) a significant amount of resources at its command. It is impossible to keep up such a high operational tempo over a long period of time without access to money and equipment. In this section, we take a brief look at what is known about the finances of the IS before discussing some of the financial sources and challenges the group faces today.

Previously captured battlefield documents shed light on how earlier iterations of the IS financed their activities.[175] Focused on one part of the then-ISI's organization, these documents showed that the ISI in Sinjar relied primarily on incoming foreign fighters to donate funds, followed by internal transfers from other ISI provinces, and lastly on money given to the organization by locals and loot from conflict.[176] From other

French, and Lauren Gambino, "Schoolgirl jihadis: the female Islamists leaving home to join Isis fighters," *Guardian*, 29 September 2014.

[172] This does not mean that such an effort has to be U.S.-led. There are plenty of other actors within the region that could take part in a media campaign against the IS. This campaign will need to include more than just moderate figures in the community speaking out against the IS, but also an effort to show failures in the IS in terms of governance, treatment of foreign fighters, etc.

[173] Brian Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside Al-Qa'ida In Iraq*, CTC Report, 16 March 2009, 30.

[174] For more information on the dearth of independent reporting within the territory controlled by the IS, see Reporters Without Borders, "Areas Controlled by Islamic State Are News 'Black Holes,'" 23 October 2014.

[175] Jacob Shapiro, "Smuggling, Syria, and Spending," in *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: Al-Qa'ida's Road In and Out of Iraq*, ed. Brian Fishman, *CTC Report*, 14 July 2008, Chapter 3; See Benjamin Bahney, Howard J. Shatz, Carroll Ganier, Renny McPherson, and Barbara Sude, *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq*, RAND Corporation, 2010.

[176] Ibid., 74.

documents, we know that the other provinces had a different distribution of revenue, to include income from oil, agricultural production, ransom for hostages, and external donors.[177] In other words, not only does the IS have an extensive operational history, but it also has a significant history of managing and dealing with finances as well.[178]

A brief note about the relative importance of each is important here. Estimating the relative contribution of each of these different sources of income is next to impossible, particularly in the absence of primary source documents similar to those that were captured and used in previous CTC reports. Thus, while one component may be more "important" (oil) than others, it is hard to get a good sense in open sources of how the relative contribution of each of these components to the overall organization.[179]

Oil

Oil revenues are reported to make up a large portion of the overall revenue of the IS. Some estimate that the IS controls production facilities in Syria that produce a maximum of 200,000 barrels of crude oil each day, while maximum production capacity in oil fields controlled by the IS in Iraq is about 80,000 barrels of oil each day.[180] However, there is some uncertainty regarding two critical factors. The first is the actual amount of production coming out of these facilities. The second is the black market sales price that the IS can receive, as the group has to pay a number of different interlocutors to get oil to the black market or to sell it to people living within its borders.[181] It is estimated that the price the IS can receive ranges from $18 to $60 per

[177] Anonymous, "An Analysis of the State of ISI," 23; NMEC-2009-634444; NMEC-2009-634823; John F. Burns and Kirk Semple, "U.S. Finds Iraq Insurgency Has Funds to Sustain Itself," *New York Times*, 26 November 2006; Richard A. Oppel Jr., "Iraq's Insurgency Runs on Stolen Oil Profits," *New York Times*, 16 March 2008.

[178] The RAND organization will soon release a report detailing how a trove of documents captured from ISI further illuminate how the organization managed its finances and expenditures.

[179] For example, a recent article cited Masrour Barzani (head of Iraqi Kurdistan's intellingence services) as stating that the IS was making $6 million a day. At this level, even if oil is a primary source of funding, it is clear that it is not the only source of funding. See Janine Di Giovanni, Leah McGrath Goodman, and Damien Sharkov, "How Does ISIS Fund Its Reign of Terror," *Newsweek*, 6 November 2014.

[180] For information on Syria oil field capacity, see Luay Al-Khatteeb and Eline Gordts, "How ISIS Uses Oil to Fund Terror," *Brookings,* 27 September 2014. For information on the Iraqi oil field capacity, see Nayla Razzouk, "Militants Hold Seven Iraq Oil Fields After Syria Blitz, IEA Says," *Bloomberg News*, 12 August 2014.

[181] Such interlocutors include operators of mobile refineries, smugglers at the border, and potentially government officials. See United Nations Security Council (UNSC), *Letter dated 13 November 2014 from the Chair of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 1267 (1999) and 1989 (2011) concerning Al-*

barrel.[182] Putting all of this information together, Table 2 represents a hypothetical calculation of how much money the IS could be receiving from oil.

Table 2: Possibly Daily Revenue to the IS Contingent on Production and Price

		Black Market Oil Price (Per Barrel)		
	Barrels/Day	$18	$30	$60
Iraq	20,000	$360,000	$600,000	$1,200,000
	40,000	$720,000	$1,200,000	$2,400,000
	80,000	$1,440,000	$2,400,000	$4,800,000
Syria	20,000	$360,000	$600,000	$1,200,000
	50,000	$900,000	$1,500,000	$3,000,000
	200,000	$3,600,000	$6,000,000	$12,000,000

The red shaded areas in Table 2 should not be considered as realistic estimates of what the oil fields controlled by the IS could produce if at maximum production. Due to conflict and the age of the facilities, among other factors, maximum production is unreachable. Despite the fact that the IS cannot achieve maximum production, looking at these numbers highlights four issues in trying to address the oil component of the IS's portfolio.

First, even if the IS is getting the low end in terms of the estimates presented here regarding production and price in Iraq and Syria, it will still bring in approximately $263 million a year in oil revenues alone. This amount of money would still place the IS in the upper tier of insurgent organizations.[183] Funding at these levels can still provide a

Qaida and associated individuals and entities addressed to the President of the Security Council, 14 November 2014; Mike Giglio, "This Is How ISIS Smuggles Oil," *Buzzfeed,* 3 November 2014; David E. Sanger and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Struggling to Starve ISIS of Oil Revenue, U.S. Seeks Assistance From Turkey," 13 September 2014; Luay Al-Khatteeb, "Will U.S. Strikes Hurt ISIS' Oil Riches," *CNN,* 25 September 2014; Luay Al-Khatteeb, "How Iraq's black market in oil funds ISIS," *CNN,* 22 August 2014.

[182] Estimates on what the Islamic State is able to garner from the sale of oil per barrel vary greatly. Estimates of per-barrel sales price have come in at $18 (see Suleiman al-Khalidi, "Here's How ISIS Uses Oil to Fuel Its Advances," *Business Insider,* 18 September 2014), $30 (Karen Leigh, "ISIS Makes Up To $3 Million a Day Selling Oil, Say Analysts," *ABC News,* 2 August 2014) and $25–$60 (Bassem Mroue, "Syria, Iraq Oil Controlled by Islamic State Group," *ABC News,* 25 September 2014).

[183] The Colombian insurgent organization FARC has been estimated to bring in anywhere from $342 million to $3.5 billion annual from the drug trade. See Geoffrey Ramsey, "FARC 'earns $2.4 to $3.5 billion' from drugs, says Colombian government," *Christian Science Monitor,* 25 October 2012.

significant boost to both military and governance activities of the IS. However, the point that a large amount of funding still might remain does not diminish the fact that any reduction in funding, particularly given the breadth of the IS's governance activities and the cost to the organization of employing a large number of fighters and administrative personnel, will harm the organization's fiscal health.

Second, these estimates cover what the IS can make by selling crude oil on the black market. A significant portion of the coalition airstrikes, however, have been targeting mobile refineries, some of which are reportedly privately owned, instead of being in the possession of the IS.[184] The result has been a reduction in available supply of refined oil products and a rise in the price of fuel to customers within Syria.[185] For the IS, the removal of mobile refining capability may simply mean that they have to sell crude oil elsewhere, which may slow, but not eliminate, their funding source. If this is the case, then it reemphasizes the importance of regional partners in cracking down on smuggling of crude/refined products out of Syria.[186]

Third, the IS's oil business occurs in both Iraq and Syria. A significant focus has been placed on the Syrian side of the IS's oil business, although public reporting shows that some portion of the IS's oil revenue comes from Iraq.[187] According to press reporting, the first series of airstrikes were effective in limiting most of the Islamic State's oil business to Iraq.[188] More recently, pressure has been placed on oil facilities in Iraq through airstrikes and advances on the ground, placing the Iraqi side of the IS's oil business under pressure as well.[189] This combined pressure should be effective in reducing the IS's ability to thrive based on its oil revenues, but will increase the importance of other components of the IS's financial portfolio.

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[184] See Phil Stewart, "New airstrikes in Syria take aim at Islamic State's oil money," Reuters, 25 September 2014. On private ownership of mobile refineries, see Scott Tong, "These are the ISIS refineries we're bombing," *Marketplace.org*, 25 September 2014.

[185] Mariam Karouny and Ayla Jean Yackley, "RPT-UPDATE 1-Air strikes hit makeshift refineries in Syria - monitoring group," *Reuters*, 28 September 2014.

[186] Benoit Faucon and Ayla Albayrak, "Islamic State Funds Push into Syria and Iraq with Labyrinthine Oil-Smuggling Operation," *Wall Street Journal*, 16 September 2014.

[187] Steve LeVine, "ISIL has added a lucrative new business line in Iraq: Oil smuggling," *Quartz*, 10 July 2014.

[188] Matthew Philips, "Islamic State Loses Its Oil Business," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, 14 October 2014.

[189] International Energy Agency, *Oil Market Report: 14 October 2014*, 14 October 2014.

Building on this idea, the fourth point is that, based on available reporting, the earliest time that the IS (at that time operating in Syria as Jabhat al-Nusra) took control of any oil fields in Syria was in late 2012.[190] This date is probably too early to use as the starting point from which the IS was able to extract significant financial resources. After the breakdown in relations between JN and the IS that began in April 2013 and continued on through early 2014, the IS managed to consolidate control over a number of oil fields.[191] Nevertheless, even using the earlier date of late 2012, it is clear from the earlier discussion of military operations that the IS was a capable and lethal organization well before it seized oil fields.[192] Thus, while depriving them of oil revenue is likely to weaken the group, it should not be assumed that it will be defeated as a result.

War Loot

When the IS took over Mosul in June 2014, reports began emerging that they had possibly made away with more than $400 million from the city's main bank, although doubts have emerged about the veracity of that claim.[193] At any rate, one of the clear benefits to the IS's balance sheet has been the large amount of war loot that it has received as a result of its military victories over the Iraqi and Syrian militaries, as well as over other rebel groups. Previous research had shown that, for one sector of the ISI's organization, weapons and related equipment had consumed about 40 percent of the sector's budget.[194] If similar patterns hold for the IS today, then capturing U.S. military

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[190] For discussion regarding the al-Ward oilfield, see Barbara Surk, "Syrian rebels capture oil field, but oil not marketable," *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 November 2012. Other rebel victories in oil fields came in February 2013 (See "Syria rebels capture oil field and military base," *Guardian*, 14 February 2013) and November 2013 ("Erika Solomon, "Islamist rebels capture Syria's largest oilfield: activists," Reuters, 23 November 2013).

[191] Damien McElroy, "Islamic State seizes key oil fields after defections from al-Qaeda ally," *Telegraph*, 3 July 2014.

[192] Previous research confirms the diverse nature of the ISIS's finances long before 2014. For example, ISI, at least in one sector of its operation, appears to have received significant amounts of funding from the sale of stolen items (50 percent), donations from other sectors (21 percent), sales of automobiles and spoils of war (10 percent), and donations (5 percent). See Bahney, Shatz, Ganier, McPherson, and Sude, 2010: 34-39.

[193] For stories detailing doubts about the Mosul bank heist claim, see Robert Windrem, "U.S. Official Doubts ISIS Mosul Bank Heist Windfall," *NBC News*, 24 June 2014; Rod Nordland and Alissa J. Rubin, "Iraq Insurgents Reaping Wealth as They Advance," *New York Times*, 20 June 2014; Jeremy Bender, "Iraqi Bankers Say ISIS Never Stole $430 Million from Mosul Banks," *Business Insider*, 17 July 2014.

[194] Jacob Shapiro, "Smuggling, Syria, and Spending," in *Bombers, Bank Accounts, and Bleedout: Al-Qa`ida's Road In and Out of Iraq*, ed. Brian Fishman, *CTC Report*, 14 July 2008, Chapter 3.

Humvees, artillery, small arms, and other equipment not only gives the IS a military advantage, but represents the equivalent of a small financial windfall for the organization.[195]

Military equipment is not the only kind of war loot that the IS has received; it has also benefited from the trafficking in stolen goods and captured individuals. The stolen goods (historical artifacts) have enabled the IS to make millions of dollars on the black market all around the world, although the method of this financing is not clear. It may be through the sale of such goods, but it also occurs by levying taxes on smugglers who find and move such goods out of the territory of the IS.[196] Ransom paid to release hostages taken by the IS or taken by other groups and then transferred to the IS also provides a non-trivial source of funding to the organization that is rumored to be in the millions of dollars.[197]

Zakat, Donations, and Taxation

Another important component of the IS's funding strategy is the receipt of "donations" from local merchants and business people in territory that it controls or has a large presence in. The IS justifies the collection of money from locals as *zakat*, an obligatory "tax" paid as one of the pillars of Islam. Western media and governments often refer to this collection by the IS as extortion.[198] Whatever the name, the practice is lucrative for the IS. Even before the city of Mosul fell into the hands of the IS, reports were that the IS received $1 million a month from this city alone.[199] One Iraqi government official

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[195] Jeremy Bender, "Al Qaeda Offshoot Captures American Humvees and Transfers Them to Syria," *Business Insider*, 10 June 2014; Martin Chulov and Paul Lewis, "Isis jihadis using captured arms and troop carriers from US and Saudis," *Guardian*, 8 September 2014.

[196] Mark Vlasic, "Islamic State sells 'blood antiquities' from Iraq and Syria to raise money," *Washington Post*, 14 September 2014; Amr Al-Azm, Salam Al-Kuntar, and Brian I. Daniels, "ISIS' Antiquities Sideline," *New York Times*, 2 September 2014; Heather Pringle, "ISIS Cashing In on Looted Antiquities to Fuel Iraq Insurgency," *National Geographic*, 26 June 2014.

[197] Joseph Lawler, "Treasury: Islamic State raking in millions from oil, ransoms," *Washington Examiner*, 23 October 2014.

[198] As noted in previous research by the CTC, it is unclear from captured documents if such contributions were voluntary or not. See Jacob Shapiro, "Smuggling, Syria, and Spending," in Fishman, 72.

[199] Alice Fordham, "For Extremists in Syria, Extortion Brings Piles of Cash from Iraq," *National Public Radio*, 21 April 2014.

reported this total could have been as high as $8 million a month.[200] From information published by the IS, one can assume that the collection of such money is standard practice across its territory.[201]

Beyond *zakat*, the group also collects "donations" in the form of taxes on trucks shipping goods, exit taxes as trucks leave territory of the IS, and a tax on bank withdrawals.[202] Not only does the collection of these taxes represent a source of income, but it also shows the sophistication of the organization in terms of governance (a subject addressed in more detail later). The taxes on trucks occur at an initial checkpoint, but the IS transmits that information to other checkpoints down the road, in addition to issuing a paper receipt. This enables fighters of the IS at subsequent checkpoints to simply wave vehicles on that have already paid the tax.[203]

Another form of donation that had benefited the IS in the past has been money given to the organization by individuals in other countries who are sympathetic to the IS's efforts. However, analysis of captured documents from the group's history shows that this amount of money is relatively small: potentially as small as 5 percent of the group's overall revenue.[204] It should be noted, however, that this estimate was based on data that ended in 2010. Even if it remains a small part of their overall financial portfolio, there is evidence that as the Syrian civil war heated up, so too did funding from private donors to jihadi organizations, including the IS.[205] This recent activity has led both the

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[200] See Harith al-Qarawee, "Al-Qaeda Sinks Roots in Mosul," *al-Monitor*, 24 October 2013. Of course, there is plenty of incentive for government officials to inflate these numbers as a way to bring focus on the threat.

[201] A report prepared by the IS's media arm in Aleppo noted that the responsibility of the office was to collect such donations. See "Mandate of Aleppo," http://justpaste.it/HalabReport, 6 June 2014. Other news reports have noted that such collection occurs in al-Raqqa from merchants at the rate of 1,500 Syrian lira (eight dollars) a month. See Dominique Soguel, "Heard at Syria's border: Life in the Islamic State is orderly, but brutal (+video) ," *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 September 2014.

[202] Scott Bronstein and Drew Griffin, "Self-funded and deep-rooted: How ISIS makes its millions," CNN, 7 October 2014; Dilshad Hamid, "What is behind the Islamic State's decision to reopen banks in Mosul?," *al-Akhbar*, 12 September 2014.

[203] Interview with Charles Seidel, former CIA chief of station in Baghdad and currently director of global intelligence for Strategic Risk Management, October 2014.

[204] This estimate is based on documents which have been declassified through the CTC's Harmony Program and are being used by RAND in a forthcoming study. For a description of the documents and some of the key findings, see Hannah Allam, "Records show how Iraqi extremists withstood U.S. anti-terror efforts," *McClatchy DC*, 23 June 2014.

[205] U.S. Department of Treasury, *Treasury Designates Twelve Foreign Terrorist Fight Facilitators,* Press Release, 24 September 2014; Giovanni, Goodman, and Sharkov (2014); Robert Windrem, "Who's Funding

United States and Great Britain to challenge several Gulf states to improve in preventing such donations from reaching the IS.[206]

If the dynamics of foreign fighter flows are similar to what they were in Iraq in 2006 and 2007, the IS could also be receiving donations from foreign fighters who come into the organization from abroad.[207] Estimates of the number of foreign fighters flowing into the Syria/Iraq conflict zones range from 11,000 to 15,000, although some media reports have incorrectly stated that all of these fighters have joined the IS.[208] To the best of the authors' knowledge, there is no reliable estimate of the breakdown of foreign fighters between the IS and other groups. This makes assessing the financial impact of foreign fighter donations difficult. However, assuming that half of the foreign fighters joined the IS and brought in the mean contribution per fighter that was the case in Iraq in 2006 to 2007 ($178), the net gain to the IS would approximately be a couple of million dollars since the sharp increase of foreign fighters from 2012 onward. This amount, while important, is certainly not enough for donations from foreign fighters to play a pivotal role now that the IS has diversified sources of revenue. However, if the group were to be rolled back and lose control of territory, such contributions could increase in importance.

Vulnerabilities and Strategic Considerations

The military success of the IS has allowed the organization to diversify its financial portfolio in a way that has provided some insulation again the loss of any individual component. This is not to suggest that the group is financially impregnable, but it does mean that a comprehensive strategy that addresses its varied revenue sources is

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ISIS? Wealthy Gulf 'Angel Investors,' Officials Say," NBC News, 21 September 2014; Lori Plotkin Boghardt, "Saudi Funding of ISIS," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 23 June 2014; Elizabeth Dickinson, "ISIS advance in Iraq forces Gulf donors to rethink their patronage," *Christian Science Monitor*, 18 June 2014.

[206] Robert Mendick, "David Cameron urged to press Emir of Qatar on terror funds," *Telegraph*, 25 October 2014; William Mauldin, "U.S. Calls Qatar, Kuwait Lax Over Terror Financing," *Wall Street Journal*, 23 October 2014.

[207] Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, "Becoming a Foreign Fighter: A Second Look at the Sinjar Records," in Fishman, Chapter 2.

[208] Despite a large number of estimates, there is a fair amount of uncertainty about the actual number of foreign fighters going from each country. See "CIA Says IS numbers underestimated," al-Jazeera, 12 September 2014; Richard Barrett, *Foreign Fighters in Syria*, Soufan Group, June 2014; Aaron Y. Zelin, "Up to 11,000 Foreign Fighters in Syria; Steep Rise Among Western Europeans," *ICSR Insight*, 17 December 2013.

necessary to do serious harm to the group over the long term. This section's discussion has highlighted weaknesses, opportunities, and points of caution in dealing with the financial aspect of the IS's organization. Four of these are worth specific mention.

First, the international community needs to exercise some caution in the ways that it seeks to financially undercut the IS. Because the IS is the de facto government in a number of places in both Iraq and Syria, reducing its external sources of funding may have the unintended effect of harming the populations that live under its control. While it may be correct to assign blame to the IS for any harm that come to the people living under its control, the reality of who is blamed for suffering is much more complicated. This is not to say that opportunities to attack the IS's finances should not be taken; finances are the lifeblood of any organization and should be constricted wherever and whenever possible. The key point here is simply that, as was discussed in the media section, the IS has a near monopoly on the information that people living under its territory receive. It may be able to turn financial constrictions into a propaganda success. We should be prepared to counter such a misinformation campaign.

Second, despite the difficulty of cutting off certain aspects of IS funding in the region (smuggling of oil), there are a number of steps that states can take to limit the funding in their own countries that goes to IS. Financial payment to the IS to release hostages is perhaps the most notable area in which this applies, although there is considerable international debate about such policies. Taking steps to limit the ability of smugglers to sell war loot such as antiques is a less prominent, but still important, area in which states could limit some portion of the IS's finances.[209]

Third, because a significant portion of the group's revenue comes from local donations (*zakat* or extortion), it will ultimately be impossible to undercut that portion of the group's funding without physically displacing the IS out of the towns and territories that it currently controls. And it is important to remember that a large amount of the money collected from locals came even when the IS was not formally in charge of territories, like Mosul. Displacing the IS is not just about switching the flag flying over a town's government buildings; it is about making sure that it does not remain in the shadows, which is a much harder and more enduring task.

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[209] Philipp Jedicke, "Germany attracts trade in looted artifacts," *DW*, 24 October 2014.

Fourth, much has been written and said about the IS as "the world's richest insurgent/terrorist organization." While true in some sense, such a characterization understates the financial challenges facing this group over the long term. Repair of military vehicles that now yield battlefield success may become costly or impossible; continued provision of generous salaries to fighters may create tensions between the soldiers and citizens of the state, in addition to the ability of the group to continue to attract recruits vis-à-vis other organizations fighting in Syria.[210] All of these challenges will only become more acute over time. Michael Knights may have put it best; "They've gone from being the world's richest terrorist organization to the world's poorest state."[211] In light of these financial challenges, how the group succeeds or fails at the challenge of governance will tell us a lot about the group's staying power.

After the "Fighting" Is Over: The Struggles of the IS to Establish Governance

One of the things that distinguishes the IS from most other terror groups is that it has evolved from being just a purveyor of violence to being a social service provider as well. That transition provides the group with new and other venues to illustrate its value to local citizens, yet there is also a dangerous duality that exists for the group. Given the establishment of the "state," the group now must govern and provide services to the local populace. Thus, given that IS is now accountable to its subjects, one of the IS's mid to long-term challenges is in the continued delivery of those services.

A recent study on governance by insurgent organizations highlighted an important concern that bears on our understanding of the IS's governance activities. That concern was that academics and policymakers tend to focus on the extreme behavior of

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[210] Estimates of the salary of IS fighters to be anywhere from $400 to $1,000 a month. A very rough estimate of the financial burden of fighter salaries based on the CIA's estimate of the group's size (20,000 – 31,500) comes out to anywhere from $8 million to $31.5 million a month. This does not count payments to families of martyrs. Even assuming that the low end is an overestimate, continuing to provide such high salaries as resources become scarce will be a challenge. See Michael Weiss and Faysal Itani, "Doubling Down on Disaster in Syria," *Politico,* 20 October 2014; Kitco News, "ISIS Entices Youth with High Salaries — King of Jordan," *Forbes*, 22 September 2014; Martin Chulov, "Syrian city of Raqqa gripped by fear of US airstrikes on Isis," *Guardian*, 15 September 2014; Ceylan Yeginsu, "ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits From Turkey," *New York Times*, 15 September 2014.
[211] Keith Johnson, "The Islamic State Is the Newest Petrostate," *Foreign Policy*, 28 July 2014.

organizations in trying to assess their ability to govern effectively.[212] This focus on extreme behavior often leads to statements such as "people would never want to be governed by an organization like *that*."

These statements undervalue the choice that locals often have when it comes to governance. Previous chapters have highlighted the tension that exists between Sunni communities on one hand and a Shi'a-led government on the other, particularly in Iraq.[213] These conditions have allowed the IS to step in to provide an alternative governance structure.[214] Our goal here is to illustrate how the IS has already made some effective steps into the realm of governance.[215]

IS's Long-standing Governance Aspirations

Despite the fact that the IS is viewed by some as an organization that does not care about public opinion, it certainly recognizes that governance is critical to maintaining its bases of support, and a case can be made that — despite some of its grotesque public actions — it actually cares about certain public opinion. This focus on governance is something that happens long before the territory is taken and continues well after the battle is over. As noted in a previous section of this report, such a focus on governance is something that appears to have been a part of Abu Mus`ab al-Zarqawi's thinking even as early as 1999, according to Sayf al-'Adl.[216]

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[212] Zachariah Cherrian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 6–7.

[213] Of course, this tension between these communities in Iraq and Syria has various sources. For example, individuals may feel that they do not see a valuable return in contrast to what they give the state, to corruption among state officials (who are often of one particular religious party), and to the potential lack of access to justice mechanisms and the perceived lack of efficiency associated with those systems.

[214] We very consciously have chosen to speak of the governance structure of the IS as already being in place. While the IS will most likely continue to refine its approach to governance, it is clear that this task is well under way. Continuing to label the IS as a terrorist organization while ignoring the other activities in which it is engaged risks misunderstanding the policies needed to roll the group back.

[215] In doing so, we do not wish to detract from work done by others in this area. In particular, the Institute for the Study of War conducted a detailed study of the IS's governance in Syria. See Charles C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds, *ISIS Governance in Syria*, Institute for the Study of War, July 2014.

[216] This recognition of the importance of governance should not be construed to indicate that the IS (and its predecessor organizations) has simply followed a plan that it created from its inception to the current day. That would give the IS far too much credit in shaping its own destiny. Were it not for many unplanned and unintended events (see the section of this report on the group's historical evolution), the IS likely would not have achieved what it has.

Such a focus on governance continued even as al-Zarqawi's organization increased in prominence in Iraq. In July 2005, Ayman al-Zawahiri sent a letter to Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi regarding the progression of Zarqawi's fight against the Iraqi government and coalition forces. Much of the focus on this particular letter has been on al-Zawahiri's criticism of al-Zarqawi's actions in killing large numbers of Iraqi civilians. What is seldom discussed, however, is that Zawahiri's criticism was founded on the belief that some measure of public support would be necessary to ultimately govern and establish the caliphate. Specifically, al-Zawahiri noted that

> the establishment of a governing authority… does not depend on force alone. Indeed, it's imperative that, in addition to force, there be an appeasement of Muslims and a sharing with them in governance.…[217]

Clearly, given the bloodletting that later occurred between AQI and other groups in Iraq, al-Zawahiri's advice regarding a system of "inclusive" political governance was not put into practice. This lesson, however, was not lost on observers of the group. One detailed account about the reasons for failure in 2007 written by an individual that was intimately familiar with the ISI noted that "governments will [rise] and fall based on the sympathizers from the citizens or at least having those citizens in a neutral place during our battles."[218] This individual's criticism along these lines dealt mostly with breaches of security procedures that placed the local sympathizers in danger, but it seems clear that relationships with the public have always been on the mind of the IS and its predecessors.

In this light, it is not surprising then that we see the IS trying to do its best to turn to governance in the immediate aftermath of victories. For example, within hours of the fall of Mosul in June 2014, the IS sent personnel around the city and used loudspeakers to encourage public workers to return to their jobs.[219] In addition, the IS goes to great lengths to highlight its attempts to bring successful governance to the people living within the territory it controls.[220] Using the media framework described in the previous

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[217] Ayman al-Zawahiri, Letter to Zarqawi, 12 July 2005, http://ctc.usma.edu/harmony/harmony_docs.asp, 4–6.

[218] Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-612449, "An Analysis of the State of ISI," 24.

[219] Interviews with some residents, June 2014. See also MEE Staff, "Islamic State issues wages to government employees in Mosul," *Middle East Eye*, 2 July 2014.

[220] This point cannot be overemphasized. In examining the governance of the IS, we rely in part on their own words and material. This is clearly a picture that they would want to portray publicly. However, the

section, the IS produces and distributes media related to governance in numerous areas, to include public utilities, education, health care, security, and food. Figure 5 contains a snapshot of several areas in which the IS has highlighted its efforts at governance.

Figure 5: Governance Activities of the IS

Upper left: IS members passing out sharia curriculum to local teachers (29 September 2014); upper right: repairing electricity transmission lines in al-Furat (22 September 2014); lower left: gathering food products from farmers for distribution to the needy in Al-Barakah (June 2014); lower right: a newly decorated police vehicle on the streets in Nianawa province (18 September 2014). Sources: various IS publications and posts.

Evaluating IS's Governance and Service Provision

It is difficult using open source materials alone to assess the magnitude and scale of what the IS is doing in terms of governance, but what cannot be overstated is the fact that it is attempting to govern, although only time will tell how successful (or not) it

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IS portrays what outsiders would consider both positive and negative aspects of their governance. We attempt to show both of these sides as part of the overall effort to better understand this group.

will be. In addition, the more successfully it does so in terms of the provision of public services, the more likely it is to gain supporters, despite what is viewed from the outside as a brutal method of governance. For this reason, it is not particularly surprising to find reports of families and individuals immigrating to territory held by the IS to live, not necessarily to fight.[221] While the magnitude of people leaving territory controlled by the IS almost certainly outweighs the number coming in, the fact that more than just fighters are going to the IS-controlled territories is a cause for concern.

Despite what is being propagated by the IS on forums and social media, not everything is going smoothly. Since the beginning of U.S. and coalition airstrikes, there have been reports of increasing food prices in al-Raqqa, Syria, the main city that has been mostly under control of the IS since January 2014.[222] From individuals inside Mosul, we hear of troubles maintaining the provision of electricity on a consistent basis.[223] In addition, there have been numerous reports of interviews with people living in territory under the control of the IS that emphasize the failures of the IS in terms of governance.[224] Highlighting such failures (of which there appears to be plenty of evidence) as opposed to its brutality may be a better way to damage its image in the eyes of sympathizers and potential recruits.

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[221] Alev Scott and Alexander Christie-Miller, "Exclusive: ISIS Starts Recruiting in Istanbul's Vulnerable Suburbs," *Newsweek*, 12 September 2014; Berza Simsek and Raphael Satter, "Turks Leave for 'Family-Friendly' IS Group," *Associated Press*, 24 September 2014; "Two more Dutch families head for Syria, taking their children," *Dutch News*, 6 September 2014. Aside from families immigrating, the flow of females to the IS has been particularly prominent. For a discussion of this topic, as well as several profiles of females who have attempted to join the IS, see Harriet Sherwood, Sandra Laville, Kim Willsher, Ben Knight, Maddy French, and Lauren Gambino, "Schoolgirl jihadis: The female Islamists leaving home to join Isis fighters," *Guardian*, 29 September 2014.

[222] On the rising food prices and discontent in al-Raqqa, see Elizabeth Palmer and Khaled Wassef, "ISIS losing hearts and minds in its heartland," *CBS News*, 3 October 2014, and "Economic Stagnation in al Raqqa," *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, 3 October 2014. On the IS controlling al-Raqqa since January 2014, see Khaled Yacoub Oweis, "Group linked to al Qaeda regains ground in northeast Syria," *Reuters*, 12 January 2014.

[223] Interviews with some residents in Mosul, October 2014.

[224] Dominique Soguel, "Heard at Syria's border: Life in the Islamic State is orderly, but brutal (+video) ," *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 September 2014; Peter Kenyon, "Life Under the Islamic State: Sharia Law and Few Services," *National Public Radio*, 29 August 2014; Tim Arango, "Tears, and Anger, as Militants Destroy Iraq City's Relics," *New York Times*, 30 July 2014; Jenna Lefler, "Life Under ISIS in Mosul," Institute for the Study of War, 28 July 2014.

Figure 6: Dark Side of the Islamic State's Governance

Upper left: a public-flogging taking place in Aleppo; upper right: the destruction of religious sites in Mosul (July 2014); lower left: execution of highway robbers in al-Raqqa; lower right: a public beheading in Aleppo. Sources: various IS publications and posts.

However, one must be careful to recognize that what are viewed as failures in governance by the outside are viewed as successes to a certain extent by the IS. For example, Figure 6 contains a number of stills from official products of the IS. To many, the behavior represented in each of these photos is prima facie evidence of poor governance. Nevertheless, the IS took each of these photos or videos and published them in the online sphere. While broad publication of these punishments may represent an attempt to intimidate the population, it is also possible that publishing these images is an attempt to attract people who believe this form of governance to be correct.

And, despite what the IS does publicly broadcast about the brutal side of its governance, it is clear from recent reporting that the repulsive nature of such actions goes much deeper. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human

Rights recently published a report detailing extra-judicial killings, abductions, violence against women and children (including sexual violence), and the recruitment of child soldiers by the IS.[225] For its part, the IS sees these crimes as legitimate actions against infidels and apostates. Regardless of how it views them, the IS will have to continue to deal with the potential fallout, internationally and locally, from its abuses.

An important caution is in order regarding the IS's governance. The UN report also noted that a number of violations were alleged to have been committed by Iraqi security forces.[226] There is also increasing concern about the role of Shi'a militias in Iraq and the resurgence of Assad's forces in parts of Syria.[227] Caution needs to be taken so that solutions to the problem posed by the IS do not end up being worse than the disease, particularly over the long term. In other words, actions taken to roll back the IS need to avoid perpetuating the underlying grievances that have allowed such groups to have influence in the first place.

In short, while the IS has made efforts to maintain governance, it is still locked in its own battle to win the "hearts and minds" of those living under its control. This paradox is nicely illustrated by recent footage that has appeared online that purportedly shows a female living in al-Raqqa carrying a concealed camera.[228] At one point, she is stopped by police and asked to cover up more because "we can see your face." Later on, while she is in an internet café, her camera records a conversation a French woman who has come to live the IS is having with her family in France. The woman says to her aggrieved family, "I don't want to come back, mama, because I'm happy here…Everything you see on TV is fake."

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[225] UNOHCHR and UNAMI, "Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq: 6 July – 10 September 2014," 2 October 2014.

[226] Ibid., 18–21.

[227] For more discussion on Shia militias, see Tirana Hassan, "The Gangs of Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, 3 November 2014, and Patrick Cockburn, "Iraq descends into anarchy: Shi'a militias 'abducting and killing Sunni civilians in revenge for Isis attacks,'" *Independent*, 14 October 2014. On the resurgence of Assad's forces, see Ian Black, "Syrian rebel leader: US-led attacks on Isis are undermining anti-Assad forces," *Guardian*, 10 November 2014, and Guy Taylor, "Syria airstrikes spur White House infighting over benefit to Assad," *Washington Times*, 30 October 2014.

[228] "Video: French women living under IS control in Syria," *France 24*, 27 September 2014.

Vulnerabilities and Strategic Considerations

Like many of the other vulnerabilities this report has identified, the challenge for the IS to carry out effective governance will only increase with time. Emblematic of this challenge is Lake Assad, a reservoir in the al-Raqqa province under the control of the IS. In addition to providing water for drinking, Lake Assad also provides water for power generation.[229] When the IS took over military control of the plant, it increased the number of turbines producing electricity from no more than two operating part-time to all eight operating full-time.[230] Combined with pressure from airstrikes and low rainfall, the result has been a reduction in electricity provision to avoid emptying the lake.[231] The attempt of the IS to please people living under its control by increasing the electricity production may end up being a short-term move that makes them weaker over the long term.

The provision of electricity is one way that the IS may try to endear itself to locals, but another basic necessity may be even more important: food. As was the case early on with electricity, reports have suggested that the IS has used grain from facilities it has taken over to help locals enjoy cheaper food prices than they have had previously.[232] However, there are also reports of destroyed stores of grain and fleeing farmers.[233] Combined with other factors, the governance of the IS has made the outlook bleak for food availability in Iraq.[234] Given this potential future, the words of Usama bin Ladin in the context of the lack of support for an Islamic state-type movement in Egypt seem particularly appropriate: "How long would the public tolerate having to go without? That has nothing to do with whether the…public liked or disliked the Islamic state. A

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[229] "Syria: The Struggle for Electricity," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 3 October 2014.

[230] Danya Chudacoff, "'Water war' threatens Syria lifeline," *Al-Jazeera*, 7 July 2014.

[231] Zaid Al Fares, "Frontline Isis: Popular Resistance Grows in Jihadi Capital of Raqqa as Coalition Air Strikes Harass Islamic State," *International Business Times*, 17 October 2014; Fred Pearce, "Mideast Water Wars: In Iraq, a Battle for Control of Water," *Yale Environment 360*, 25 August 2014; Chudacoff.

[232] Maggie Fick, "Special Report: Islamic State uses grain to tighten grip in Iraq," *Reuters*, 30 September 2014.

[233] Ibid.; "ISIS controls 40% of Iraq's wheat, selling it back to govt on black market — report," *RT*, 14 August 2014.

[234] Maggie Fick and Maha El Dahan, "Exclusive: Islamic State militants grab new weapon — Iraqi wheat," *Reuters*, 13 August 2014.

dangerous shortage of food causes death and people do not want to see their children die of hunger."[235]

Another weakness of the IS is in the way in which it administers captured territories, particularly those where it does not have a great deal of strength. While the organization appears to exercise strong control over larger cities like Mosul and al-Raqqa, there is some evidence to suggest that it allows locals to govern other places to a certain extent.[236] This dual strategy for governance is born of necessity: despite the large number of fighters fielded by the IS, they cannot exercise complete control over their entire territory.

Consequently, when these local groups act beyond what the IS finds acceptable or in direct contradiction to the IS, the results can be brutal.[237] Such events, while tragic, are signals of an opportunity to push back at the IS. They also serve as a reminder of the fact that there is resistance to the IS, but such resistance will need external assistance if it is to challenge the IS. In the end, it is clear that the IS, just as most analysts do, sees these Sunni tribes as a key to maintaining governance control. Favorable gains against the IS have resulted when these disaffected tribes have access to weapons and funding from the outside.[238] Replicating these gains more broadly may prove difficult in both Iraq and Syria, but given the governance style of the IS, the weakness will likely remain indefinitely.

The Sum of the Parts: How the Islamic State Brings Everything Together

The Islamic State's reemergence and success has caused considerable discussion regarding how an insurgent organization, once pushed to the edges of society has managed to successfully transform itself into an organization that controls territory, attracts recruits from around the world, and continues to make gains against other rebel groups and national armies. We would argue that a large piece of this puzzle is the ability of this organization to learn from the past and implement changes that allow

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[235] Harmony Document, SOCOM-2012-0000017-HT, 4.

[236] Siobhan Gorman, Nour Malas, and Matt Bradley, "Brutal Efficiency: The Secret to Islamic State's Success," *Wall Street Journal*, 3 September 2014; Caris and Reynolds, 14.

[237] "ISIS' mass executions of Sunni men, women and children in Iraq continues," *CBS News*, 2 November 2014.

[238] Kirk Semple, "Wary Tribal Alliances, Born of Necessity, Offer Hope in Iraq," *New York Times*, 6 October 2014; Suadad al-Salhy, "Iraq's Sunnis ready to fight IS group," *Al-Jazeera*, 31 August 2014.

them to attempt to avoid repeating previous mistakes. At the same time, another key to the success of the IS is its ability to leverage its capabilities in different areas in order to extract the maximum benefit possible from each of its activities. We provide several examples of this phenomenon here as a way to tie the discussion of the IS's activities together.

One of the areas that have not received much public attention is the strides that the IS has made designing and developing intelligence practices to assist its military, financial, and governance activities. From the personal experiences of some Iraqi citizens, we know that they have been investigating individuals' backgrounds to identify people living within their territory who are not Sunni.[239] One helpful aspect in conducting these operations has been their ability to exploit the military and financial side of their operations for derogatory information on individuals whom they later target in an effort to strengthen governance by removing potential threats.

For instance, in one of the group's propaganda videos, *Sounds of the Swords Clashing Part 4*, which appeared in May 2014, ISIL fighters are shown manning a checkpoint in an effort to search for people who they would consider to be a threat.[240] As the video progresses, the fighters are shown checking the names of occupants of cars against a database contained on a laptop computer. It is explained that the database contains names of individuals who were either Arab Sunnis who fought against the ISIL or were other collaborators. While it is not explicitly stated where the information on this database came from, there are a number of anecdotes that suggest that the group uses material taken in military operations and captured financial records (deposits, contracts, etc.) to populate this database.[241] These efforts that seek to fuse intelligence gains in one area of their activities to another are a sobering reminder about the capabilities of the IS.

In trying to govern their territory more effectively, the IS has also tried to learn from lessons of the past in which they may have emphasized the military side of the organization to the exclusion of other activities. One problem that was previously identified with the ISI in 2006–2007 was a lack of ability to match incoming foreigners to

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[239] Interviews with some Iraqi citizens, June 2014.

[240] See Price, Milton, al-`Ubaydi (2014).

[241] For instance, the much-publicized raid on the Central Bank in Mosul has been suggested as a source of intelligence information. Interview with Charles Seidel, October 2014.

jobs appropriate for their skills.[242] For example, one foreign fighter with experience counterfeiting was prevented from using his skill to the betterment of the organization, eventually being killed by a sniper after at least five months of sitting idle. In the limited evidence that has emerged, the IS has been very calculating in its usage of incoming foreigners, placing individuals with important governance skills in offices instead of on the front lines. In al-Raqqa, the head of the telecommunication sector reportedly holds a relevant Ph.D. from Tunisia.[243] Recognizing the need for governance, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made a call in late June 2014 for "scholars, the judges, as well as people with military, administrative, and service expertise, and medical doctors and engineers of all different specializations and fields" to migrate to the IS.[244] Other reporting has corroborated both the call for skilled foreigners and the IS's use of them in important governance positions.[245]

The IS has also utilized military operations to strengthen its hand in governance. For instance, when the IS was seeking to make military gains in Mosul in 2014, it was reported that they relied to a certain extent on alliances with former Iraqi Ba'athist military officers.[246] Later, other sources reported that after taking over Mosul, some of those military officers thought they could take advantage of the chaos to establish themselves as governing figures. This was contrary to the governance strategy of the IS, which quickly rounded up these individuals and executed them.[247] If this information is accurate, it shows the danger to groups of allying with and helping the IS. It also shows how the IS is willing to use violence to eliminate threats to its ability to govern.

One of the most visible areas in which the IS is effective is in leveraging its media organization for gains in other areas. There is very little that happens within the territory controlled by the IS that does not have a media component to it. This allows

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[242] Harmony Document, NMEC-2007-612449, "An Analysis of the State of ISI," 7-8.

[243] Mariam Karouny, "Life under Isis: For residents of Raqqa is this really a caliphate worse than death?," *Independent*, 5 September 2014.

[244] Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, "A Message to the Mujahidin and the Muslim Umma," posted to the *al-I`tisam* official Twitter page, 7 July 2014.

[245] Anonymous and Ben Hubbard, "Life in a Jihadist Capital: Order with a Darker Side," *New York Times*, 23 July 2014. For more details on the roles of foreign fighters in governance under the IS, see Caris and Reynolds, 23-24.

[246] On the on-again, off-again alliance between the Ba'athists and the IS, see Tim Arango, "Uneasy Alliance Gives Insurgents an Edge in Iraq," *New York Times*, 18 June 2014 and "Islamic State rounds up ex-Baathists to eliminate potential rivals in Iraq's Mosul," *Reuters*, 8 July 2014.

[247] Interview with Charles Siedel, October 2014.

the IS to maximize the value it extracts from all of these activities. Hence, tactical operations to take out key targets not only have kinetic value, but also psychological value once the footage of the operation is publicized to a wider audience.[248] Efforts to build roads and improve schools not only benefit the local population, but serve as signals to outsiders of the viability of the IS. This effective media organization allows the IS to select the good and omit the bad in the image it portrays. However, it is clear from our brief discussion here that there are multiple failures of the IS across its varied activities, especially governance. Highlighting these failures is an important part of diminishing the IS's appeal.

Finally, perhaps the most overlooked observation is the fact that the IS blends its activities at all. There is no doubt that the IS carries out a large number of attacks, many against civilians. In this sense, the IS carries out activities traditionally associated with a terrorist organization. However, it also carries out a large number of operations against military and government forces in both Iraq and Syria. In addition to these operations, it also has set itself up as the governing authority in territory that it has captured and held. The attacking of military targets and the setting up of governance structures are activities much more akin to those conducted by an insurgent organization, as opposed to a terrorist organization. Recognizing that the IS is, in large measure, an insurgency that uses terrorism in addition to other activities, is an important step in creating policies that deal with it.[249]

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[248] See Price, Milton, al-`Ubaydi (2014).

[249] For a greater discussion on the importance of distinguishing terrorism from insurgency, see Assaf Moghadam, Ronit Berger, and Polina Beliakova, "Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent: Labeling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 5 (2014), 2-17.

The Strategic Implications of Combating the IS

Bryan Price

The first three sections of this report detailed the evolution of the group and its wide array of activities in recent years, including activities that extend well beyond the highly publicized and barbaric violence that has captivated the media's attention. The purpose of this final section is to highlight and analyze some of the strategic challenges the United States and its allies face in combating the IS. In doing so, this section focuses on three specific areas: the strategic ends involved with countering the group, the multiple threats associated with the foreign fighter problem, and regional considerations that will affect U.S. counterterrorism strategy in the future.

Means, Ends, and Countering the IS

Ever since the group conducted its major offensive in June 2014, most of the world has been engaged in an effort to understand the threat posed by the Islamic State (IS), as well as the best way to deal with it.[250] Such an effort is very important, and not without historical precedent. However, there is danger in thinking about the best way to fight an organization without carefully considering the end one wants to achieve. In 2006, one prominent academic weighed into the debate of what to do about al-Qa'ida (AQ) by saying, "Major powers regularly relearn a seminal lesson of strategic planning, which is that embarking on a long war or campaign without both a grounding in previous experience and a realistic projection of an end state is folly."[251] It is important not to allow the strong wording of this sentiment to cloud the broader point that considering the long-term goals in fighting against any adversary, including the IS, is critical to strategic success.

While there's been considerable debate about the ways and means required to combat the group (e.g. the debates about "boots on the ground" and the efficacy of air strikes), there has not been a similar level of discussion about the ends the United States hopes

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[250] Mark Mazzetti and Helene Cooper, "U.S. Officials and Experts at Odds on Threat Posed by ISIS," *New York Times*, 22 August 2014.

[251] Audrey Kurth Cronin, "How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups," *International Security* Vol. 31, No. 1 (2006): pp. 7-48.

to achieve. Much of the focus in policy discourse has been around two key, but distinct concepts: degradation and destruction.[252] In operational terms, *degrading* the IS involves reducing the group's will and capacity to fight. *Destroying* the group would require the US to physically render it "combat-ineffective unless it is reconstituted."[253] There should be continued vigorous debate about the best ways and means to combat the IS, but before that takes place there should be a deliberate policy debate about the desired ends. The goals of degrading and destroying the group present unique challenges and opportunities to the many nations fighting against the IS. Critically analyzing these in the context of the IS will be instructive.

To echo President Obama's warning, "It will take time to eradicate a cancer like ISIL. And any time we take military action, there are risks involved."[254] The world would like to see a quick resolution to the IS, but patience, sacrifice, and analysis will be key to combating this organization.

Considering Ends: Degrading and Destroying the IS

Since 9/11, the United States and its coalition partners have invested large amounts of blood and treasure to combat terrorist groups around the globe. Because of these efforts, many of the terrorist groups targeted by the worldwide CT efforts now operate in a significantly degraded capacity. Specifically in the case of the United States, none of America's terrorist adversaries has been able to successfully execute a strategic attack against the homeland in thirteen years, an impressive feat considering the dire predictions made by many following the 9/11 attacks. Nevertheless, despite this successful record, destroying these terrorist groups has proven extraordinarily difficult.

The United States, according to a recent article in the *Washington Post*, has failed to destroy "any of the Islamist adversaries it has faced since Sept. 11, 2001."[255] Such an assessment can likely be extended to most other nations involved in fighting transnational organizations. Even if one disagrees with this assessment, today the threat from jihadism destabilizes more state regimes and is more geographically diffuse than

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[252] President Barrack Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL," September 10, 2014. Access speech at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1.

[253] FM 101-5-1 Operational Terms and Graphics, p. X.

[254] Obama (2014).

[255] Greg Miller and Craig Whitlock, "U.S. Weakens al-Qaeda Groups Around the World but Hasn't Wiped Any Out," *Washington Post*, 11 September 2014.

ever before.[256] Jihadism's attractiveness appears to be growing rather than declining.[257] This state of affairs has less to do with the efficacy and execution of U.S. counterterrorism policy and more to do with the challenges of fighting an empowering extremist ideology that resonates with a small (but potentially threatening) number of disenfranchised Muslims around the world, especially in failed and failing states that are politically corrupt.

During the past thirteen years of war, the United States has arguably come closest to destroying al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI), the precursor to ISIS and the IS. One intelligence estimate indicated that the group had lost 95 percent of its strength by the time the United States left Iraq in 2011.[258] It should be said, however, that past estimates which placed AQI on the brink of extinction may have been overly optimistic. The fact that the organization was able to rebound after it was severely degraded illustrates the challenge associated with combating the IS today, a challenge the United States must meet without the vast military and financial assets that were readily available in theater during the last decade. Today, the IS has an estimated 20,000 to 31,500 fighters,[259] governs a swath of territory the size of Pennsylvania, and has tapped into a deep and accommodating river of Sunni resentment that is especially prominent in Iraq and Syria. Given these circumstances, destroying the IS is ambitious, especially since success ultimately depends on reversing some of the causes of its development that we discussed in the previous section, over which the United States has little control.

Although the United States was able to successfully weaken AQI/ISI in the late 2000s, thanks in part to the Surge, the conditions that put the group on the brink of defeat from 2007 to 2011 during the Sunni Awakening are not present in the areas the IS now

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[256] Seth Jones, *A Persistent Threat: The Evolution of al Qa'ida and Other Salafi Jihadists*, RAND Corporation, 2014.

[257] Polling of public attitudes toward the IS, especially in the Middle East, is sparse. One poll by a Russian outlet found that 16 percent of 1,006 respondents in France supported the IS. See Madeline Grant, "16% of French Citizens Support ISIS, Poll Finds," *Newsweek*, 26 August 2014. In addition to open-source reporting that suggests young disenfranchised Sunni Muslims are "flocking" to Iraq and Syria to fight with the IS, other outlets highlight the support that Muslim citizens in the Gulf states have shown for the IS, despite the anti-IS statements made by their governments. See Abigail Hauslohner, "Jihadist Expansion in Iraq Puts Persian Gulf States in a Tight Spot," *Washington Post*, 13 June 2014; Margaret Coker, "The New Jihad," *Wall Street Journal*, 11 June 2014.

[258] Miller and Whitlock.

[259] Jim Sciutto, Jamie Crawford and Chelsea J. Carter, "ISIS Can 'Muster' Between 20,000 and 31,500 Fighters, CIA Says," *CNN*, 12 September 2014.

controls in Iraq and Syria. During the birth of the Sunni Awakening, self-interested Sunni tribal sheikhs in Anbar province had grown tired of the ISI and were looking for ways to restore their power and autonomy. They did not have the funding or the military might required to force the ISI out of its strongholds. What these sheikhs lacked in military and financial firepower, however, they made up for in local legitimacy and intelligence that the United States and the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi government sorely lacked. It proved a powerful combination — U.S. funding and military might coupled with local Sunni legitimacy and intelligence on the ground — and one that was highly effective in combating the ISI.[260] Supported by a fully bankrolled Sons of Iraq (*sahwa*) security program, which was an attractive antidote to the allure of Sunni jihadist groups because it both empowered Sunni military-aged males and offered them jobs with steady paychecks, the Sunni populace in Anbar and other provinces pushed ISI out of the cities. As the popular narrative goes, these actions forced the group into the open desert, where it allegedly struggled to remain relevant. We say "allegedly" because as the last section showed, the IS boasts that it had been operationally active during this time. As more scholarly attention is focused on this time period, it is possible that information may emerge that challenges this popular Western narrative about the trajectory of the group.[261]

Today, the Sunni tribal leaders in IS-controlled territory are every bit as self-interested as they were at the dawn of the original Sunni Awakening; their desire for more power and autonomy remains unchanged. This time, however, Sunni leaders cannot rely on American military might, funding, and leverage over a Shi'a-dominated government to execute a reprise of the Sunni Awakening. More important, thanks to several years of Maliki's harsh treatment and systematic disenfranchisement of Sunni Iraqis since 2003

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[260] Brian Fishman, *Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from al-Qa'ida n Iraq*, Combating Terrorism Center, 16 March 2009, 30. As Fishman described it, "American commentators tend to exaggerate the central role of U.S. troops in destroying AQI. This is a mistake. U.S. troops did play an important role destroying AQI. Nonetheless, the story of AQI's demise is more practical and mundane than usually described, and it is mostly the story of local tribes getting fed up with outsiders dictating to them. U.S. troops did exactly what they should do in such circumstances; they facilitated AQI's decline by killing and capturing key leadership, disrupting communications and logistics processes, and giving the local tribes a legitimate path to political participation. But it was the rejection of AQI by local Sunnis that discredited and degraded the organization." See also Marc Lynch, "Explaining the Awakening: Engagement, Publicity, and the Transformation of Iraqi Sunni Political Attitudes," *Security Studies* 20, no. 36 (2011), 36-72.

[261] Daniel P. Bolger, "The Truth About the Wars," *New York Times*, 10 November 2014.

and especially so since 2011, Sunni leaders in IS-controlled territory have largely given up on their central government, as it has displayed neither the will nor the capability to help them. Without the deep pockets and full-spectrum military capabilities of the United States, it is unlikely a Sunni-led, grassroots campaign to oust the IS will emerge anytime soon in Ninawa, Salah al-Din, or Anbar provinces, at least one on the scale of the movement that brought the IS's precursor to the brink of defeat in 2011. As a result, all of these factors make the destruction of the group a nearly impossible objective, at least in the short term.

Kennan, Containment, and the IS

The public debate over the ways and means of combating the IS has overshadowed the fact that no military solution alone can fix the IS problem.[262] As noted in the previous section, airstrikes have had an effect on the IS's capability, including the group's command and control, maneuverability, and infrastructure used to make money (e.g. its mobile refineries). Airstrikes will put pressure on the group and provide both time and maneuver space for the United States and its allies in this fight, but airstrikes are unlikely to prove decisive in the defeat of the IS.[263] Given the current socio-political dynamics in Iraq and Syria and the limited means by which the United States can affect them at the moment, it may be worthwhile to approach the problem posed by the IS and jihadism *writ large* as a chronic long-term problem, similar to how George Kennan conceptualized the threat of Soviet communism in the late 1940s.

To be clear, there are significant differences between the threats posed to the United States by contemporary jihadism and by Soviet communism in the Cold War. There are, however, important similarities in the time and commitment it will take to combat both threats. In his July 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article that formed the intellectual basis for America's containment strategy against the Soviets, Kennan ascribed the appeal of Communist power as being "the product of ideology and circumstances," and he explicitly tempered any expectations of a quick, decisive victory by the United States in the Cold War. To counter Soviet expansion, Kennan noted "it would be an exaggeration

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[262] Andrew Tilghman, "CENTCOM Chief: More Troops Not the Answer in Iraq," *Military Times*, 7 November 2014. General Austin, commander of U.S. Central Command, recently stated, "If the Iraqi leadership cannot . . . be inclusive of the Sunnis and Kurds, no matter how many troops you put on the ground, it isn't going to work."

[263] For one of several sources, see Jack Sommers, "ISIS Will Not Be Beaten by Airstrikes, Former General Lord Richards Says," *Huffington Post UK*, 28 September 2014.

to say that American behavior unassisted and alone could exercise a power of life and death over the Communist movement and bring about the early fall of Soviet power in Russia."[264] Instead, he called for "a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant" approach.

Like communism, jihadism's appeal to many economically and politically disenfranchised Sunni Muslims is indeed "a product of ideology and circumstances." Judging by the number of foreign fighters who have flocked to fight in Syria and Iraq for jihadists groups such as the IS and AQ's affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), jihadi ideology's popularity is on the rise.[265] Estimates for the number of foreign fighters thought to have fought in the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan/Pakistan during the 1980s and 1990s range from 3,000 to 10,000.[266] While there are no reliable estimates of the number of foreign fighters who fought in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2003 to 2011, a reasonable estimate using several data points would be between 1,000 and 6,480.[267] These foreign fighter flows from earlier conflicts pale in comparison to the number of foreign fighters flooding into Syria and Iraq today. According to one scholar studying this phenomenon in June 2013, "Already, in three years, more foreigners have gone to fight in Syria than went to Afghanistan in the entire period of unrest between the Soviet invasion at the end of 1979 to the fall of the Taliban at the end of 2001."[268]

The appeal of jihadism may be growing,[269] but its appeal alone is insufficient to explain the success enjoyed by the IS. As was discussed previously in this report, the IS would not have been able to succeed in securing so much territory without the "accidents" or circumstances in Syria, Iraq, and the region more broadly. Both states are battlegrounds for the sectarian interests of their neighboring state and nonstate actors. In Syria, the

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[264] George Kennan, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947.

[265] Jones, 26-34.

[266] For the lower estimate, Vahid Brown references Pakistani intelligence estimates. See Vahid Brown, "Foreign Fighters in Historical Perspective: The Case of Afghanistan," in Fishman. For the latter estimate, see Richard Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria," Soufan Group, June 2014, 14.

[267] The Sinjar records obtained by the CTC included over 600 foreign fighter records during 2006 and 2007. See Brian Fishman and Joseph Felter, *Al Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq*, Combating Terrorism Center, January 2, 2007. Other estimates approximate between 40 and 90 foreign fighters entering Iraq every month during peak times. To develop the high number of 6,480, we assumed a foreign fighter flow of 90 per month for the first four years and half that for the last four years of the U.S. operation in Iraq. It is our opinion that most experts would put the estimate more toward the low end than the high end. See Karen De Young, "Fewer Foreign Fighters Crossing into Iraq From Syria to Fight," *Washington Post*, 16 September 2007.

[268] "TSG Intel Brief: Foreign Fighters in Syria—A Growing Threat," *Soufan Group*, 3 June 2014.

[269] Jones, 26-34.

three-year-long civil war and the atrocities committed by President Assad against the largely Sunni opposition have created a fertile environment for future fighting of all stripes, by both sectarian and nonsectarian groups. In Iraq, the purposeful disenfranchisement of Iraqi Arab Sunnis by the Shi'a-dominant Iraqi central government and the incompetence of the Iraqi security forces created a governance vacuum that the IS ultimately filled. Thus, the popularity of jihadi ideology coupled with the circumstances on the ground in Iraq and Syria provided a perfect storm that the IS exploited and continues to exploit to great effect.

Although there are some commentators who are calling for a repeat of the containment strategy promoted by Kennan in the Cold War, [270] there are some important differences to consider before implementing such a strategy. At the dawn of the Cold War, the US was willing to concede the territory the Soviet Union controlled at the time, and American foreign policy focused on fighting the USSR wherever it attempted to expand. Today, in the fight against the IS and jihadism, the United States cannot afford to concede territory like it did in the Cold War and allow the IS and other capable anti-American jihadists unfettered rule. The United States learned some painful lessons from the fateful attacks of 9/11, including the risks at stake when it allows safe haven to jihadist groups who wish to do Americans harm. If the United States is going to pursue a containment strategy against the IS, it must apply consistent pressure using both kinetic and non-kinetic means in order to prevent the organization from having the time and maneuver space to plot and execute attacks against the United States and its allies. Adhering to a pure Kennan-esque Cold War containment strategy and allowing the IS to consolidate in the territory it now controls is too dangerous and risks creating a permissive environment like the one that AQ was allowed to exploit in Afghanistan prior to 9/11.

Takeaways for Combating the IS: "A Long-Term, Patient but Firm and Vigilant Approach"

The applicable takeaways from Kennan's piece in today's fight against the IS are found in the long-term framing of the conflict and the modest, yet achievable ends to pursue. Proponents of the Cold War's containment strategy believed communism to be a failing

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[270] See, for example, Dov S. Zakheim, "The Best Strategy to Handle ISIS: Good Old Containment," *National Interest*, 24 September 2014; David Motadel, "The Ancestors of ISIS," *New York Times*, 23 September 2014.

ideology that would eventually be trampled by the inevitable march of time. While jihadism is vulnerable to the same fate,[271] it will be more difficult to convince those sympathetic to the jihadist movement that the modern-day caliphate is a failing enterprise and not worth pursuing.

This is because this generation of Sunni jihadists has never seen its utopian vision of the global caliphate put into practice, and as a result, they have never witnessed it fail. This fear was palpable in many of Usama bin Ladin's writings to ideologically aligned groups like AQI in Iraq and AQAP in Yemen when they considered declaring a caliphate. No shrinking violet, Bin Ladin worked actively against these declarations. He feared the damage these nascent caliphates would inflict on the broader jihadi movement should they prematurely fail.[272] In response to AQAP's proposal to declare a caliphate in Yemen, bin Ladin wrote:

> It seems to me that being deliberate in this matter is a good thing, and to explain further, establishing the state before the elements necessary for success are put in place most often will lead to aborting the effort wherever it takes place, because establishing a state and then toppling the state represents a burden that exceeds the energy of the people.[273]

As a warning to those wanting to hastily establish the caliphate, bin Laden cites the Muslim Brotherhood's hurried and unsuccessful attempts to establish a caliphate in Syria in the early 1980s before the "elements necessary to success [were] in place."[274] Bin Ladin bemoaned the costs: "The winds of Jihad were still for nearly twenty years in Syria until a new generation came along that had not experienced that shock."[275]

Moreover, recent history suggests that for popular alternative political ideologies to die out, they first have to be decisively defeated. For example, the Allies militarily defeated fascism and totalitarianism during World War II. The Allies forced both German and Japanese forces to capitulate, producing iconic images of defeat such as the Japanese delegation surrendering aboard the USS *Missouri*. Similarly, the West defeated communism in the Cold War, this time through primarily economic means. The defeat

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[271] Motadel.

[272] SOCOM-2012-0000019.

[273] Ibid., 23.

[274] Ibid., 24.

[275] Ibid.

of communism had its own iconic images, including the fall of the Berlin Wall and the long, winding convoys of Soviet military forces limping out of Afghanistan after a decade of bloody conflict.

Given the opportunity to not only exist but to compete in open practice against other sociopolitical ordering systems, these political ideologies eventually failed in dramatic fashion and suffered decisive defeats in the public eye. Because some of today's jihadists aspire to establish a wide-reaching global caliphate, a fanciful goal that will never be allowed to come to fruition, its adherents will never see their ideology fail in practice. In fact, any Western attempts to suppress the establishment of the global caliphate play directly into the hands of jihadists leaders who use these short-term obstacles to call for more commitment, more resolve, and ultimately more violence to achieve this utopian end. As a result of this dynamic, there will be no iconic images of the IS's unconditional surrender ceremonies on a U.S. warship anytime soon. Furthermore, jihadist groups like the IS do not evaluate their struggle in terms of years or even decades. In the eyes of Sunni jihadists, they have been fighting to achieve their ultimate goal, a far-reaching global caliphate, since the 7th century.

As a result of the multiple factors addressed above, the fight against jihadism in general is going to be a long-term conflict, perhaps as long as or longer than the Cold War. Destroying an amorphous transnational terrorist organization that is fueled by an attractive (albeit implausible) end state that appeals to a small number of disenfranchised Muslims living in a region that jihadists perceive to be led by corrupt regimes is an onerous task. "Degrade and manage" may not be as definitive and ambitious as "degrade and destroy," but it better reflects the challenges and long-term horizon the United States faces in fighting this war.

Winning the War of Ideas

"When people see a strong horse and a weak horse, by nature, they will like the strong horse."[276]

Usama bin Ladin, 2001

"More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our umma."

Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, 2005

To successfully combat the IS, the United States and its coalition partners will have to puncture the perception of invincibility, which the group has meticulously crafted via the sophisticated propaganda campaign discussed in the previous chapter. For those in the region who are consuming and comparing the propaganda produced by both the West and the IS, the latter looks like the "strong horse" in this conflict. The IS delivers timely, high-quality products using multiple platforms that speak to multiple audiences. The IS's propaganda machine has been a force multiplier for the group, intimidating foes and fence-sitters and motivating and mobilizing foreign fighters from around the globe.

As noted in the previous discussion on the IS's media environment, the level of support the IS has been receiving on the main jihadi Web forums has thus far surpassed that of AQ. In addition, the group has attracted thousands of foreign fighters, including those that would have likely joined JN, AQ's affiliate in Syria. Moreover, several groups that were either loyal to or loosely affiliated with AQ are now showing support to the IS, including some that have sworn *bay`a* to al-Baghdadi.[277] In other words, there appears to be a "bandwagoning" effect taking place as several groups in the broader jihadi

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[276] Usama bin Ladin, 13 December 2001. The transcript of this speech can be found at http://www.npr.org/news/specials/response/investigation/011213.binladen.transcript.html.

[277] J.M. Berger, "The Islamic State vs. al Qaeda," *Foreign Policy*, 2 September 2014; Nelly Lahoud and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, "The War of Jihadists Against Jihadists in Syria, *CTC Sentinel*, March 2014; Aaron Y. Zelin, "The War Between ISIS and al Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," Research Note No. 20, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2014; Abdallah Suleiman Ali, "Global Jihadists Recognize Islamic State,"al-Monitor, 3 July 2014.

movement are starting to shift to IS's side. Borrowing Bin Ladin's words, it is likely that these groups view the IS as "the stronger horse," not AQ or its affiliate in Syria.[278]

The IS used its slick social media campaign to psychologically prepare the battlefield in the provinces ISIS took over in June 2014. The IS's propaganda videos, especially *Sounds of the Swords Clashing Part 4*, served notice to those who had supported the Iraqi government and intimidated those considering doing so in the future. As noted earlier, the video showcased the long reach of ISIS's intelligence capability, and scenes of the group's interrogation, harassment, and murder of prominent Sunni politicians and counterterrorism officials were partially to blame for the weak resistance put up by Iraqi security forces as the IS advanced towards Baghdad.[279]

Although there have been prominent efforts by U.S. elements to counter the IS in the social media sphere, these efforts are underfunded, underemphasized, and fail to match the IS in terms of size, scope, quality, and influence.[280] The IS has a knack for producing strategic effects from seemingly tactical events, while the West fails to exploit the IS's tactical failures to achieve its own strategic effects.

For an example of the former, consider the strategic effects the IS produced with the beheading of its American and British hostages. These beheadings became instant international news, prompted justified outrage in the West, and led to an intensified air campaign against the IS's positions in Syria and Iraq. When Western media reported on the airstrikes, most of the coverage included stock footage of Tomahawk missile launches from U.S. ships and long-range camera shots of explosions in the distance, giving the viewer little context about the extent of the damage on the ground or the effects that the airstrikes were having. The IS, on the other hand, was relentless in its messaging, posting videos illustrating the return to normal, everyday life on the streets of al-Raqqa less than twelve hours after the airstrikes in Syria. In another popular video, an English-speaking IS member walks through an attack site while it is still smoldering, claiming the attacks failed to do any damage to the IS's military capability but instead damaged schools and hospitals.

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[278] In this sense, terrorist groups may be behaving like states. For an international relations paper that explains this interstate behavior, see Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (Summer, 1994), 72-107.

[279] See Price, Milton, al-`Ubaydi (2014).

[280] For an article addressing many of these points, see Philip Seib, "Counterterrorism Messaging Needs to Move From State to CIA," *DefenseOne*, 27 October 2014.

For an example of the West's inability to exploit similar events on the ground for strategic gain, consider a recent video that was initially filmed by the IS and ostensibly leaked to *al-Arabiya*, a prominent Arabic news outlet popular in Iraq and other places throughout the Middle East. In the video, members of the ISIS (the flag and writing in the corner of the video indicate this took place prior to the group's establishment of the caliphate) stone a young Syrian woman to death as punishment for alleged adultery after her husband was away from the family for an extended period of time. More disturbing, the video interviews the woman's father who lobbied for her punishment. The father binds his daughter's hands and feet and puts her in the shallow hole used in this barbaric practice. The video then shows in grisly detail several men stoning the woman to death, including her father, who is shown picking up the largest rock to deliver the fatal blow before the video fades to black.[281]

While there may be some Muslims who support or at least tolerate beheadings and other violent attacks against Westerners, it is difficult to imagine how this particular video would not illicit a negative response in any human being, including those who may even be sympathetic to the IS. The video shows the brutality of this group better than any Western-produced anti-ISIS product could. Although other media outlets reported that the IS released the video, the CTC cannot find any evidence on either the IS's social media platforms or the jihadist Web forums that suggests this is the case. Instead, it is the CTC's belief that it was first shown by *al-Arabiya*. The possible reasons why the IS did not release the video are countless, but one reason may be because it feared a prospective backlash from fellow Muslims.[282] According to another news report in August 2014, the group tried to encourage local Syrians living in al-Raqqa to participate in another public stoning, but the Syrian citizens refused.[283] Instead, the woman was stoned to death by the IS, including foreign fighters who were allegedly from Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, which upset the locals. Another activist reported Syrians refusing to participate in a third stoning in Tabqa.[284] These events have received

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[281] John Hall, "ISIS Releases Sickening Video Clip Showing Syrian Woman Being Stoned to Death by Group of Men — Including Her Own Father," *Daily Mail*, 21 October 2014.

[282] For an influential report that got significant play in the Middle East, see Muhammad al-Obaidi, Nassir Abdullah, and Scott Helfstein, *Deadly Vanguards: A Study of al-Qa'ida's Violence Against Muslims*, Combating Terrorism Center, 1 December 2009.

[283] Abdulrahman al-Rashed, "A Father Stoning His Daughter to Death…ISIS's New Trailer," *al-Arabiya News*, 24 October 2014.

[284] "Woman Stoned to Death in Syria for Adultery," *al-Arabiya*, 9 August 2014.

scant attention from Western media and may represent wasted opportunities to puncture the IS's self-projected image of righteousness.

As shown in the previous chapter, the savvy propaganda campaign waged by the IS plays an important role in crafting its current perception of steady, inevitable forward progress. Unless the United States and its coalition partners invest more time, energy, and attention toward countering the IS's relentless propaganda campaign, the IS will continue to dominate the public discourse in the region. This dominance not only facilitates the IS's recruitment efforts but also makes it more difficult for the United States and its coalition partners to present a credible and attractive alternative narrative to the one provided by the IS.

The Foreign Fighter Threat

There is significant concern regarding the vast numbers of Western European and North American foreign fighters who are now fighting with the IS and other jihadists groups in Iraq and Syria. Foreign fighters from these areas who return to wage jihad in their native countries pose a potentially serious national security threat to the United States and its Western allies. According to public estimates, there are approximately up to 2,000 foreign fighters from Western Europe and approximately 135 from the United States.[285]

How significant is the foreign fighter threat?

Foreign fighters often increase the capability of jihadist groups fighting in these conflicts, and they do so in many different ways. They increase the numbers of fighters these groups can employ in combat, and often bring non-kinetic skills that enhance group capability in other important areas. Examples include foreign fighters in JN and the IS who have advanced skills in information technology (as shown in the previous section on the IS's finances), propaganda, language translation, teaching, and various other technocratic skill sets.

A majority of today's discussion about the foreign fighter threat focuses on Western fighters who return to wage jihad in their home countries, but scholarly analysis on this topic is relatively thin and ripe for additional attention. For example, in a study of

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[285] Jomana Karadsheh, Jim Sciutto and Laura Smith-Spark, *"How foreign fighters are swelling ISIS ranks in startling numbers," CNN*, 14 September 2014.

Western Islamist foreign fighters in t0he 1990s and 2000s, less than one in nine returned to their home country to conduct attacks.[286] However, the same report found that attacks conducted by former foreign fighters are more lethal than those conducted by nonveterans.[287]

The positive news is that there are several factors in place today that likely mitigate the threat. First, Americans and their Western European counterparts who depart their home countries to fight abroad in Syria and Iraq receive significantly more attention from U.S. and international intelligence agencies than those who left to fight overseas in the 1980s and 1990s. Additionally, although by no means seamless, communication and information sharing between governments regarding foreign fighters are much improved in the post-9/11 world.[288] Some Western European states have established new laws, policies, and tracking mechanisms that make it harder for these foreign fighters to move across borders, move money, plan, and execute attacks.[289] The United States and others have increased their ability to monitor and track foreign fighters to make it more difficult to return undetected.[290] These measures are not fool-proof, but compared to the measures in place prior to 9/11, they create a much more inhospitable environment for foreign fighters to operate.

Related Foreign Fighter Threats Receiving Less Attention

It is understandable why the West would be concerned about foreign fighters returning to conduct attacks at home, but there are also reasons to suggest that the most dangerous manifestation of the foreign fighter threat may not present itself in accordance with the dominant narrative. For starters, there are estimates of hundreds of foreign fighters in the West who have already returned to their countries of origin, yet they have conducted few attacks. Moreover, the "bleedout" that was supposed to result in widespread attacks in the United States by migrant jihadis after the Iraq occupation

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[286] Hegghammer, 10. His best estimate of Western foreign fighters between 1990 and 2010 is 945.
[287] Ibid.
[288] One prominent example of this occurred in the late 2000s when U.S. counterterrorism policymakers such as Ambassador Dell Dailey shared evidence the United States had obtained about foreign fighters in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula with his foreign counterparts in many of these states. Interview with Ambassador Dell Dailey, 31 October 2014, West Point.
[289] Somini Sengupta, "Nations Trying to Stop Their Citizens from Going to Middle East to Fight for ISIS," *New York Times*, 12 September 2014.
[290] Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, "Homeward Bound? Don't Hype the Threat of Returning Jihadists," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2014.

from 2003 to 2011 never occurred.[291] To date, there have been several attacks in Western nations that were conducted by returning foreign fighters operating in Syria and Iraq. The most notable of these is the attack that killed four at the Jewish Museum in Belgium in May 2014.[292] While many focus on the security threats posed by returning foreign fighters who have been battle-hardened in the crucibles of Iraq and Syria, recent history suggests the greatest threats to the homeland may manifest themselves quite differently.

Foreign Fighters Who Get Diverted from Their Theater of Choice

For example, there are numerous examples of foreign fighters who go overseas but never see any combat action; instead, certain individuals get diverted by the group to receive skills and training to conduct attacks in their home countries. They are then sent back home or to another country of interest to the group that trained them.

The so-called Hamburg cell that included several 9/11 hijackers, including Mohammad Atta, who was the operational commander of the "planes operation," serves as a prominent example. These aspiring foreign fighters from Germany expected to wage jihad in Chechnya or Afghanistan but instead were diverted to participate in the 9/11 plot after a brief trip to Afghanistan in 1999.[293] Najibullah Zazi, an Afghan-born permanent resident of the US, initially travelled to Pakistan hoping to fight against American forces in Afghanistan, but he was diverted by the group to conduct an attack on the New York City subway in 2009.[294] Similarly, Faisal Shazad left the United States to fight in Afghanistan, but instead of fighting there, he was ultimately trained by the Pakistani Taliban to conduct what turned out to be the failed 2010 bombing in Times Square in New York City.[295]

None of these foreign fighters fought overseas nor (as far as we know) did they have the intention of conducting attacks in their homelands when they left. Instead, all were persuaded to do so by their respective terrorist groups once overseas. Thus far, there

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[291] Aki Peritz, "The Frightening Logic of Bleedout," *New Republic*, 24 June 2014; Byman and Shapiro.

[292] John-Thor Dahlburg and Elaine Ganley, "French Suspect Held in Belgian Jewish Museum Shootings Spent a Recent Year in Syria, Prosecutor Says," *Washington Post*, 1 June 2014.

[293] National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: Norton, 2004), 160-169.

[294] Peter Bergen and Bruce Hoffman, *Assessing the Terrorist Threat*, Bipartisan Policy Center, 10 September 2010, 33–34.

[295] Andrea Elliot, "Militant's Path from Pakistan to Times Square," *New York Times*, 22 June 2010.

have not been any known cases of the IS diverting would-be foreign fighters from the West to conduct attacks in their home countries, but it would be surprising if the group was not devising plans to do so given its anti-American rhetoric.

Foreign Fighter Wannabes Who Never Leave Home

Another associated threat comes from homegrown fighters who never travel to the region but are radicalized by the propaganda produced by jihadists like the IS and choose to conduct attacks at home. As the United States and other Western countries make it harder for citizens to travel to Syria and Iraq to fight for the IS and other jihadist organizations, would-be foreign fighters may turn to conducting domestic attacks in order to help the cause.[296] In September 2014, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, the spokesperson for the IS, encouraged IS supporters to wage individual jihad in their home countries. While this modus operandi is not new to jihadist organizations,[297] there have been several attacks in Western countries in the immediate aftermath of al-'Adnani's call to arms that suggest wannabe IS jihadis are listening and complying with his call to arms.

For example, an Algerian militant group called Jund al-Khilafah kidnapped and beheaded a French citizen, Hervé Gourdel, three days after al-'Adnani's speech. [298] At the beginning of the group's propaganda video of the murder, the opening scene shows the actual message from al-'Adnani to "defend the Islamic State each one from his location."[299] In the message, al-'Adnani calls for IS supporters to "kill a nonbelieving American or European, especially the spiteful and filthy French, or an Australian, or a Canadian."[300]

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[296] One prominent example of this is Michael Zehaf-Bibeau, who attacked the Canadian Parliament building in October 2014. According to Canadian security officials, his radicalism was motivated in part by the fact that his request for a passport (allegedly to travel to Syria) was not moving along smoothly. See "Ottawa shooting suspect Michael Zehaf-Bibeau had 'very developed criminality'," *CTV News*, 23 October 2014.

[297] One of the most notable global calls to arms comes from Syrian-born AQ strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri's "The Call to Global Resistance," a 1600-page manifesto published in December 2004. In his piece, al-Suri advocates for prospective fighters throughout the world to conduct what he called "solo jihad."

[298] Rukmini Callimachi, "French Hostage in Algeria Is Beheaded in Video Released by Militants," *New York Times*, 24 September 2014.

[299] "Message in Blood to the French Government — Slaughtering a French Hostage in Algeria," YouTube, 24 September 2014.

[300] Ibid.

In another incident in September 2014, Australian security officials arrested fifteen individuals in an alleged plot to execute and behead several members of the public on behalf of the IS.[301] The following day, government officials put the country on high alert after intelligence officials received evidence of another plot to behead several Australian lawmakers.[302]

Four days after al-'Adnani's call to kill Westerners by IS supporters, one IS activist took a picture of an American contractor working in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and sent a tweet that read: "This is a photo of an American Crusader who was walking in the streets of al-Riyad few minutes ago. We need somebody to stab him with a knife in his back or shoot him in the head using a silenced [weapon]." Importantly, the end of the tweet included the hashtag "#Al-Adnani is calling upon all the supporters." Several weeks later on October 14, 2014, an IS activist posted a picture of the same American contractor after he was murdered in his vehicle. Another American contractor was also shot but survived.[303] Although Saudi Arabian officials claim the attack was workplace violence after the suspect was allegedly fired from his job working with the American contractor,[304] it does not explain the suspicious tweet three weeks earlier.

Though investigations are ongoing, the Canadian attacks of October 2014 appear to be examples of this phenomenon as well. On 20 October, Martin Couture-Rouleau waited in the parking lot of a Canadian government office complex south of Montreal, Quebec, until he saw two soldiers walking by and then attempted to run them over, killing one and wounding the other. Couture-Rouleau's passport had been revoked by Canadian officials after Couture-Rouleau was caught trying to fly to Turkey in order to fight for ISIS.[305] Media accounts speculated that he was motivated by al-'Adnani's call to kill Westerners, including the specific method of using cars to run them over.

Less than a week later, Michael Zehaf-Bibeau executed an attack in the Canadian capital, killing a soldier at the National War Memorial and then entering the Canadian

[301] Rob Taylor, "Australia Foils Alleged Beheading Plot Linked to Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 September 2014.

[302] Rob Taylor, "Australia on Alert After Alleged Plot by Islamic State Supporters," *Wall Street Journal*, 18 September 2014.

[303] "American killed east of Saudi capital Riyadh," *al-Arabiya News*, 14 October 2014.

[304] Ben Hubbard and Michael R. Gordon, "American Is Fatally Shot in Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, 14 October 2014.

[305] Michele Mandel, "Homegrown Terror Strikes at Heart of Canada," *Toronto Sun*, 22 October 2014.

Parliament, where authorities shot and killed him. Canadian authorities had been concerned about Zehaf-Bibeau, a Muslim convert, and ultimately had revoked his passport for fear that he would leave the country to wage jihad overseas.[306] In both of these cases the individuals were prevented from traveling overseas to wage jihad, which might have initially been seen as a positive achievement and certainly the intended outcome from a Canadian counterterrorism perspective. What was not considered, however, was what these individuals would do with their undeterred desire to wage jihad. As Western states make it harder for its citizens to travel abroad to fight in Syria and Iraq, the likelihood that homegrown attacks will continue remains high.

While the smaller, more isolated, and purportedly independent attacks like the ones Canada recently endured are certainly tragic, they are also likely to be less sophisticated and less capable of producing mass casualties on the scale of 9/11, the London bombings, and the Madrid train bombing. Unfortunately for Western counterterrorism officials, these attacks are also the least likely to be prevented by law enforcement and counterterrorism agencies.

Asylum Seekers from Syrian Conflict Along U.S.-Mexico Border

The fears related to the IS's ability to strike outside of Iraq and Syria have focused on the threat of foreign fighters returning home, recruits diverted from training camps in Iraq and Syria to conduct attacks, or individuals inspired by the IS's call to jihad conducting attacks without ever leaving their home soil. Before leaving this discussion of the ways in which the IS poses a threat, one other potential threat should be mentioned.

Because the IS is likely well aware of the attention Western foreign fighters have drawn and will continue to draw from their home governments, it is possible the group may conclude that the costs of sending Western foreign fighters back to conduct jihad in the United States and elsewhere in the West are too high. One unconventional means by which the IS and other jihadist groups could insert foreign fighters into the United States and other Western countries to conduct attacks is through exploitation of the U.S. immigration asylum process.

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[306] Randall Palmer, David Ljunggren, and Leah Schnurr, "Canadian Parliament Gunman Had Planned Travel to Syria," *Reuters*, 23 October 2014.

According to a February 2014 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) reported 118 cases of Syrian refugees seeking political asylum from the civil war in fiscal year 2013.[307] In FY2010, there were only 5 such cases. In the first quarter of FY2014, there were 30 cases. Such an uptick is not surprising, particularly given the deteriorating situation in Syria. The United States has always stood as a shelter for those escaping situations like that found in Syria.

What is potentially concerning is that these Syrian political asylum cases are being approved at a rate that is above the 84 percent average for other "credible-fear" political asylum cases. In FY2013, 94 percent of the Syrian cases were approved. In the first quarter of FY2014, 100 percent of the 30 cases were approved.[308] Because the United States has subsequently begun denying more visas from Syrians hoping to come to America via normal immigration processes, "hundreds of Syrians . . . have begun to show up at the U.S.-Mexico border prepared to seek asylum."[309]

It is likely that an overwhelming majority, if not all, of these Syrian asylum seekers are legitimate refugees seeking safe haven in the United States. It is likely these refugees pose no security threat to the homeland. Additionally, previous entrepreneurial terrorist organizations have not had to resort to these kinds of backdoor methods to get group members into the United States to conduct attacks. For example, all of the nineteen AQ suicide hijackers came into the United States with officially issued U.S. visas.[310] The challenge is what to do if groups such as the IS seek to exploit this process. The problem becomes more complicated when potential asylum seekers arrive at U.S. borders with no paperwork and no verifiable trace of their refugee history, which often leads to immigration officials having to make difficult judgment calls and trust the word of the political refugee. "The uncomfortable truth is there is no surefire way to prevent fraud."[311]

It is important to note that at the time of this writing there are no cases where the IS has tried to infiltrate the United States in this manner. That being said, one case in particular

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[307] Miriam Jordan, "Syrians Seek U.S. Asylum in Mexico," *Wall Street Journal*, 20 February 2014.

[308] Ibid.

[309] Ibid.

[310] Craig R. Whitney, "Introduction," *The 9/11 Investigations: Staff Reports of the 9/11 Commission* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004), ix.

[311] Keegan Hamilton, "Detention and Deportation Await Those Seeking Asylum in America," *Phoenix New Times*, 10 April 2014.

points to the security risks of this kind of scenario. In 2011, FBI agents arrested two Iraqi-born refugees who had been granted asylum and were living in Bowling Green, Kentucky, after their fingerprints were discovered on IEDs used against U.S. soldiers in Iraq in 2005.[312] FBI officials shared evidence at their hearing of a surveillance tape where the two suspects discussed using a bomb to assassinate a U.S. Army captain they had gotten to know in Bayji, Iraq, who was now back home in the United States. The pair also discussed attacking other targets in the homeland.[313]

The West is justifiably concerned about the threat posed by "battle-hardened fighters [who] could return to their home countries and attempt terror attacks,"[314] but as the examples above demonstrate, there are other angles to the foreign fighter threat that receive less attention but deserve more. The United States and its partners should continue to watch returning foreign fighters closely, but should also be prepared to deal with diverted foreign fighters, homegrown terrorists who never fight abroad, and fighters sent from the IS and other jihadist groups to the West through other creative means.

Regional Considerations

As the U.S. government has acknowledged, America is not capable of combating the IS on its own. As a result, the United States will require the help of regional partners to effectively counter the IS. Furthermore, any efforts the United States takes to counter the organization will involve tradeoffs, including some that may be difficult to swallow and some that run counter to U.S. foreign policy objectives in other policy areas. The following section highlights the challenging regional (and even global) considerations that the United States and its partners will face when it comes to countering the IS.

Perhaps the two most difficult scenarios for the coalition of countries fighting the IS involve Iraq and Syria. As discussed in the previous sections of this report, events in both Iraq and Syria have helped the IS grow into what it is today. To truly undercut the IS as an organization, changes in both countries will need to happen. Many of these changes have to do with governance, albeit in different ways. In the case of Iraq, the

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[312] James Gordon Meek, Cindy Galli, and Brian Ross, "Exclusive: U.S. May Have Let 'Dozens' of Terrorists into Country as Refugees," *ABC News*, 10 November 2013.
[313] Ibid.
[314] Mark Hosenball and Warren Strobel, "U.S. Weighs Passport, Border Changes in Wake of Canada Attack," *Reuters*, 23 October 2014.

steady and systematic disenfranchisement of Arab Sunni Iraqis since the United States left in 2011 created a ripe environment for the IS to exploit. Prime Minister al-Maliki's violent crackdown of Sunni protestors in Hawija in April 2013, which killed thirty-nine Sunni citizens, may have been a turning point.[315] The damage and distrust created by al-Maliki in the Sunni populace may be irreversible without significant reform that grants Arab Sunni Iraqis meaningful political power and security assurances.

While there may be some hope of political reconciliation in Iraq, in Syria the regime of president Bashar al-Assad remains the motivating cause for the conflict that has encouraging the inflow of foreigners and the consolidation of the IS. Regardless of what happens to the IS in Iraq, the group will be able to draw upon a large pool of recruits from all over the world as long as Assad remains in power.[316] The situation is further complicated by the fact that any moves the United States and its allies make to combat the IS, especially in Syria, are likely to strengthen the hand of president al-Assad's regime. This runs counter to the U.S.'s preferred end state in the Syrian civil war which aims to remove Assad from power,[317] and U.S. policy is currently evaluating which is the lesser of two evils.[318] In the end, as one of our colleagues put it, the IS and other groups are like mosquitoes and Assad is the swamp. Unless one gets rid of the swamp, it will be difficult to get rid of the mosquitoes. Even if the IS somehow gets pushed out of Iraq, the group will likely seek refuge in eastern Syria, where it enjoys a strong foothold, especially in cities like al-Raqqa, where it has governed since the spring of 2013.[319]

The countries that share borders with Iraq and Syria also have important (although not always convergent) security interests when it comes to the IS. For many of these countries, the foreign fighter problem is both prominent and persistent. Turkey, a critical ally of the United States in this conflict,[320] is the primary way station for foreign fighters entering Syria and Iraq (some have referred to Turkey as a "jihadist

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[315] Tim Arango, "Dozens Killed in Battle Across Iraq as Sunnis Escalate Protests Against Government," *New York Times*, 23 April 2013.

[316] Benny Avni, "Coalition of Unwilling and Unsavory Battles ISIS," *Newsweek*, 22 September 2014.

[317] "U.S. Says Wants Syria's Assad Out Despite Focus on Islamic State," *Reuters*, 1 October 2014.

[318] Elise Labott, "Sources: Obama Seeks New Syria Strategy Review to Deal with ISIS, al-Assad," *CNN*, 13 November 2014.

[319] Robert Windrem, "ISIS Creating 'Safe Haven' for Terrorists in Syria, Say Officials, *NBC News*, 12 July 2014.

[320] Interview with Francis Ricciardone by Scott Simon, *National Public Radio*, 25 October 2014.

highway"[321]). While Turkey's concerns center around the fact that many foreign fighters come through its territory, other regional actors are concerned about the return of fighters. This is particularly true for Jordan, which analysts have referred to as the "crown jewel" for the IS's caliphate.[322] The concern over foreign fighters led the king of Saudi Arabia to issue a proclamation making it a crime to fight abroad.[323]

The IS poses a threat to all of these countries, but a shared vision of how to best combat the group is going to be difficult to reach. This is particularly the case when considering Iran, Russia, and China. Each of these countries has publicly expressed support for the Assad regime's continued existence. Nevertheless, they also face threats from foreign fighters and encroachment of the IS on their borders.[324] These conflicting interests have led to the potential for perverse outcomes, such as the Iranian regime supporting Kurdish forces fighting the IS,[325] while supporting Lebanese Hezbollah and other Shi'a proxy groups operating in Syria and Iraq.[326]

The discussion of these regional considerations could continue, from the challenge of managing the immense number of refugees fleeing the brutality of the IS to the need to financially constrict the IS through closing down smuggling routes.[327] Some of the specific issues at play among so many different countries may change, but the general point is that the fight against IS is not simply a local issue, but one that will require

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[321] Kardi Gursel, "Turkey Paying Price for Jihadist Highway on Border," *al-Monitor*, 13 June 2014.

[322] Nikita Malik and Abdullah Shami, "Jordan: The Jewel in the ISIS Crown," Carnegie Endowment for Peace, 24 June 2014.

[323] Somini Sengupta, "Nations Trying to Stop Their Citizens From Going to Middle East to Fight for ISIS," *New York Times*, 12 September 2014.

[324] For more on the threat of foreign fighters to Russia and China, see Lizzie Dearden, "Chechen Isis fighters under Omar al-Shishani threaten to take fight to Putin," *Independent*, 10 October 2014 and Edward Wong, "Iraqis Identify Prisoner as Chinese Islamist Fighter," *NY Times*, 4 September 2014. Iran's concern over encroachment of the IS on its borders recently led to Iranian airstrikes inside Iraq. See "Iran confirms it carried out air strikes in Iraq," *Al-Arabiya*, 6 December 2014.

[325] Alessandria Masi, "Russia, Iran Considering Joining the Coalition to Fight ISIS," *International Business Times*, 22 September 2014.

[326] Sadjadpour.

[327] On the refugee challenge, see James Novogrod and Ammar Cheikh Omar, "Border Crisis: Refugees Leave Everything Behind to Flee ISIS," *NBC News*, 30 September 2014 and Malik and Shami (2014). On the importance of stopping smuggling, see Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Enforcer at Treasury Is First-Line Defense Against ISIS," *New York Times*, 21 October 2014; Rhiannon Meyers, "Terror Group ISIS May Make $3 Million a Day Selling Oil," *Houston Chronicle*, 19 September 2014.

coordination, cooperation, and concessions from a wide range of actors in order to achieve progress towards any endstate.

The Way Ahead

This report has highlighted the history, current status, and strategic issues associated with combating the IS. However, while the United States and its Western partners face significant obstacles in this fight, so does the IS. While highly capable, dangerous, and equipped with an impressive propaganda machine that makes it appear that it is "punching above its weight," the IS is far from invincible. It is now fighting on multiple fronts against multiple enemies, and its ability to secure arms, funding, and other material support is limited, especially in the long term. Amid this pressure the IS is trying to govern, and governing is hard. At the time of this report, the IS is incapable of defeating the Assad regime without significant support from outside actors, and it is highly likely that neither the United States nor Iran will allow it to take down the Iraqi regime.

Although history is not on the side of jihadism, it will take time for the United States and its partners to degrade the IS to the point where it is no longer a security threat to America and its interests overseas. Even if the coalition was able to destroy the group, which is improbable in the short-term, another jihadist organization would likely step up and fill the void, especially if the political conditions in the region that allowed the IS and like-minded groups to emerge remain unaltered. In time, the United States and its partners will learn better ways of combating the group over a number of fronts – militarily, financially, diplomatically, and ideologically in the "war of ideas." But like the Cold War, the fight against jihadism will be a generational conflict. Victory in this fight, moreover, will not look like victory in previous conflicts against state actors. There will be no surrender ceremony from the IS aboard a U.S. battleship, nor will there be definitive scenes like those of East and West Berliners tearing down a wall. Victory in this conflict is more apt to resemble that of the American civil rights movement. Extremists like the KKK who want to turn back the clock and fan old flames will continue to exist, but history and society march on regardless, with each succeeding generation making these extremists and their ideology more and more irrelevant.

Appendix

Islamic State of Iraq Media Organizational Chart, December 2008

Translated document available on subsequent page

Top Secret (TN: ISI Designation)

Organizational Chart of the Media Committee in the Operation Sectors

Media Committee's representative (full time)
The deputy of Media Committee's representative (Full time)

Internet and Technology Section

3rd Brigade | 2nd Brigade | 1st Brigade

A mujahid with expertise in this field should be elected, and he should be a full time [employee]

Each brigade elects one mujahid or more who live in various regions and have basic expertise in computer and internet. Besides their duties, they should carry out the duties of the section in the sector.

Preaching and Guiding Section

3rd Brigade | 2nd Brigade | 1st Brigade

The commander of the sector [should be] in charge of educating the [members of the] sector's headquarters and the brigade commanders

3rd Regiment | 2nd Regiment | 1st Regiment

The commander of the brigade [should be] in charge of educating the [members of the] brigade's headquarters and the regimental commanders

Company A | 3rd Company | 2nd Company | 1st Company

The commander of the regiment [should be] in charge of educating the [members of the] regiment's headquarters and the company commanders

3rd Platoon | 2nd Platoon | 1st Platoon

The commander of the company [should be] in charge of educating the [members of the] company's headquarters and the platoon commanders

The commander of the platoon [should be] in charge of educating the [members of the] platoon's headquarters and the squad commanders. The squad commanders [should be] in charge of educating the members of their squads

Commanders can use the help of shari'a men in the duties of educating, preaching, and guiding

Filming and Documenting Section

Documenting Committee in the Sector | Filming Committee in the Sector

The deputy of the committee's representative (full or part time) should be in charge of the section

The head of the committee (Part time)

3rd Brigade's Documenting Committee | 2nd Brigade's Documenting Committee | 1st Brigade's Documenting Committee

[The brigade's clerk [should be] the head of the committee]

Regiment's Documenting Committee | 2nd Regiment's Documenting Committee | 1st Regiment's Documenting Committee

The regiment's clerk [should be] the head of the committee

3rd Company's Clerk | 2nd Company's Clerk | 1st Company's Clerk | Company A's Clerk

R. A. S. [it could be an acronym for: company's staff sergeant] should be in charge of all the documentation of the company. At least one clerk should be elected and trained in each platoon, and prepare a trained substitute for him

3rd Brigade's Filming Committee | 2nd Brigade's Filming Committee | 1st Brigade's Filming Committee

The head of the committee (Part time)

3rd Regiment's Filming Committee | 2nd Regiment's Filming Committee | 1st Regiment's Filming Committee

The head of the brigade's committee

3rd Company's Photographer | 2nd Company's Photographer | 1st Company's Photographer | Company A's Photographer

The head of the regiment's committee

At least one photographer should be elected and trained in each platoon, and prepare a trained substitute for him

Media Section

The representative of the committee [should be] in charge of the section

3rd Brigade's Media | 2nd Brigade's Media | 1st Brigade's Media

The deputy of the brigade's commander [should be] in charge of the brigade's media

3rd Regiment's Media | 2nd Regiment's Media | 1st Regiment's Media

The deputy of the regiment's commander [should be] in charge of the brigade's media

3rd Company's members | 2nd Company's members | 1st Company's members | Company A's Members

The company's commander [should be] in charge of the media and distribution of the company's releases]. He should assign the duties of distributing releases, magazines, and other [materials] to any of the company's members based on a previously studied plan