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JESSICA LEWIS MCFATE

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 27

THE ISIS DEFENSE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA: COUNTERING AN ADAPTIVE ENEMY



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Cover: Smoke rises behind an Islamic State flag after Iraqi security forces and Shiite fighters took control of Saadiya in Diyala province from Islamic State militants, November 24, 2014. Iraqi forces said on Sunday they retook two towns north of Baghdad from Islamic State fighters, driving them from strongholds they had held for months and clearing a main road from the capital to Iran. There was no independent confirmation that the army, Shi'ite militia and Kurdish peshmerga forces had completely retaken Jalawla and Saadiya, about 115 km (70 miles) northeast of Baghdad. Many residents fled the violence long ago. At least 23 peshmerga and militia fighters were killed and dozens were wounded in Sunday's fighting, medical and army sources said. Picture taken November 24, 2014. REUTERS/Stringer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 27 | THE ISIS DEFENSE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA | JESSICA LEWIS MCFATE | MAY 2015

The U.S.-led campaign to degrade ISIS in Iraq is experiencing early success. However, ISIS is the kind of adaptive and resilient enemy that is difficult to defeat outright. ISIS is an outgrowth of al-Qaeda in Iraq, an organization that survived the Surge and reconstituted fully despite grave military losses. ISIS has greater conventional capability than its predecessor demonstrated, but it is a hybridized force that will likely draw upon lower-profile tactics now that it is faced with a strong anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq. Hybridized warfare gives ISIS resilience and flexibility to adapt and evade defeat. ISIS's strategy is to outlast its enemies by remaining in Iraq and Syria and expanding beyond those areas. The U.S.-led coalition will incur risk if it mistakes ISIS's low-profile tactics as actual losses to its overall military capability.

ISIS is on the defensive inside Iraq and Syria. A defensive strategy is not a sign of organizational weakness, but rather a sign that ISIS intends to preserve its holdings in Iraq and Syria and keep its claim to a caliphate. ISIS's defensive strategies include expanding elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa, while also maximizing combat power and future opportunities to launch offensives inside Iraq and Syria. Iraq and Syria are the physical foundation for ISIS's expanding caliphate.

The destruction of ISIS's physical caliphate there can translate for a time to its strategic defeat. ISIS's fighting force will remain a violent threat, and it will continuously renew attempts to establish its caliphate, unless effective states in Iraq and Syria arise to prevent its return. Reconstituting these states is necessary to diminish the sectarian polarity of the Middle East, already charged by the proxy war between Arab states and Iran that is evident in Syria and Yemen.

Regional sectarianism, like disorder, cements ISIS's survival. The social mobilization of the Arab world against Assad and Iran has already given ISIS and al-Qaeda greater freedom of action. Iran is a higher priority than ISIS for many Arab states that are members of the anti-ISIS coalition. These states are prioritizing military action to contain and push back Iran and its proxies in Syria and Yemen over anti-ISIS action.

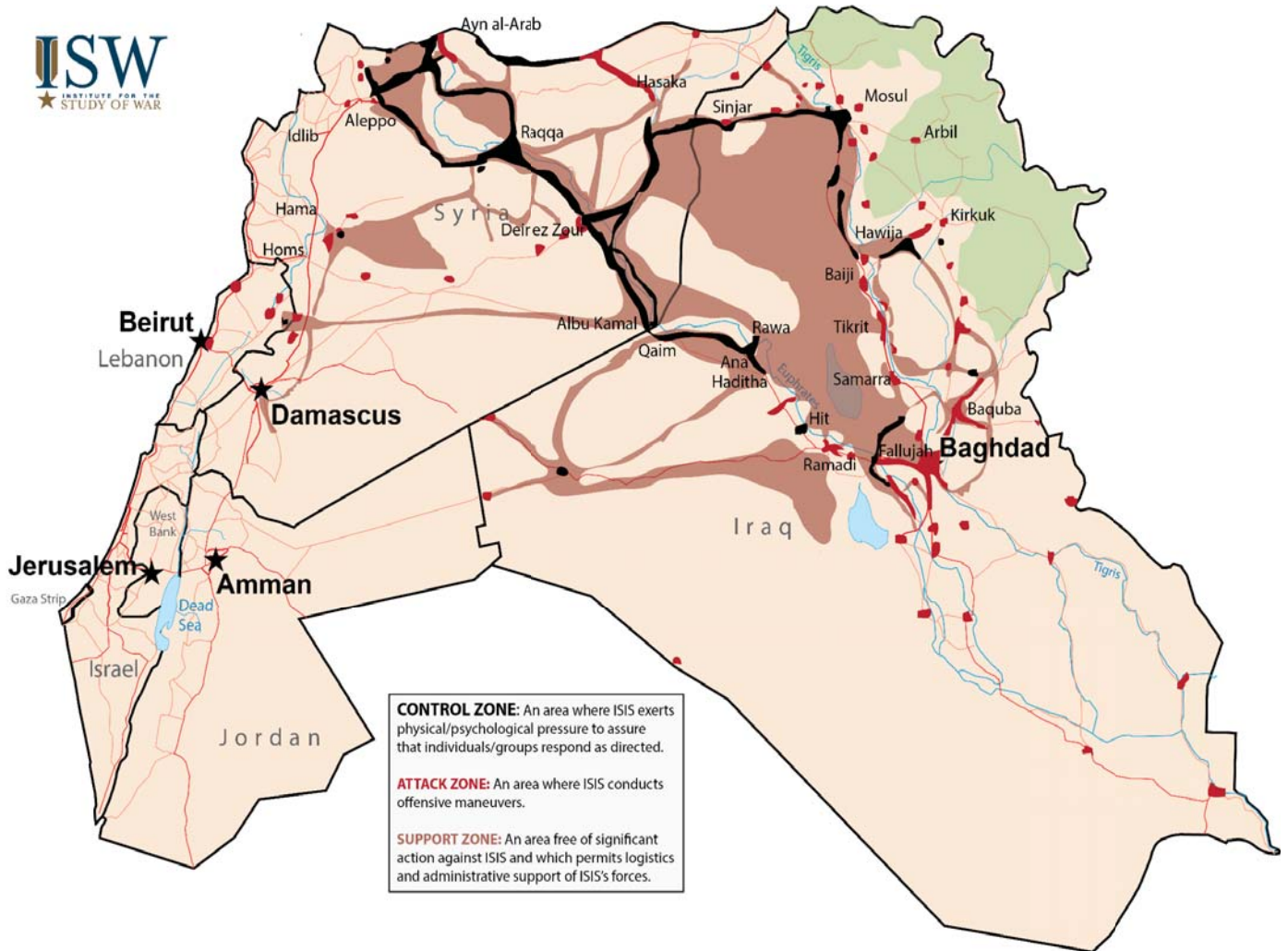
Regional strategies for the Middle East that focus surgically upon ISIS and Iran but leave al-Qaeda untouched will increase the net power of global jihadist networks. Al-Qaeda groups in Syria and Yemen are on the rise and gaining ground, and anti-ISIS strategies that allow their ascent will fail at their core objective.

The U.S. must recognize that its policy of defeating ISIS is insufficient. American national security requires a regional policy to stabilize the Middle East. Syria is a failed state, and policymakers must make plans that assume that disorder in Syria will continue into the future. Like Assad, ISIS has done much to undermine the paradigm that statehood yields security, a condition once reinforced by the international system. The further growth of ISIS is one among many threats that will emerge in as other states in the Middle East become vulnerable.

The only way to defeat ISIS, which is necessary for U.S. national security, is to guarantee a ground force that will occupy, secure, and rebuild Syria, and Iraq to a lesser extent. Washington may have little desire to pursue the construction of such ground forces through U.S. partnership. More limited solutions leveraging regional actors, however, are insufficient to shape ground conditions that promote stability and reduce the opportunity for groups like ISIS to remain.

The U.S.-led anti-ISIS campaign may succeed strategically if states cross ethnic and sectarian boundaries in order to form durable coalitions and alliances to counter ISIS that instead inure the region against the sectarian effect that ISIS desires to provoke. This outcome is not likely to occur naturally in Syria, as long as Assad remains and his brutal style of warfare continues. Iraq, on the other hand, is more stable, cosmopolitan, and has a national identity that can transcend the sectarian influences of ISIS, Ba'athist insurgents, and Iranian proxy militias. Iraq's success against ISIS, if Iraq can subsequently function independently of Iran, will likely have a stabilizing effect upon the regional sectarian dynamic, which can begin to reverse the trends currently lingering on the horizon.

ISIS SANCTUARY MAP



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By Jessica Lewis McFate

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. mission to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, also known as ISIL) is at risk of achieving tactical successes that do not translate to strategic victory. ISIS challenged the recovery of both Iraq and Syria as states when its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, declared a “Caliphate” in June 2014.¹ ISIS’s so-called caliphate is the key to its global ambitions, the key to ISIS’s strategy to remain in Iraq, and therefore the key to the U.S. mission to defeat ISIS. The United States and its allies formed a coalition to fight the Islamic State, opening the campaign with U.S. airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq in August 2014.² ISIS in 2015 is expanding to new battlefronts elsewhere in the region and attempting to radicalize supporters in the West, efforts designed to divert attention away from ISIS’s defenses inside Iraq and Syria. The ground war to deny ISIS the opportunity to maintain a caliphate inside Iraq and Syria is still the center stage of the campaign to defeat ISIS in 2015. It is important to examine how ISIS is fighting its ground war there in order to ensure the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition succeeds in overcoming ISIS’s defenses.

There are reasons to anticipate success in the anti-ISIS campaign in Iraq. ISIS lost control of Tikrit, Iraq on March 31, 2015.³

Early signs of Iraq’s progress in Tikrit add to the optimism expressed by U.S. leaders in early 2015 that ISIS is beginning to lose. President Obama declared on February 11, 2015 that “ISIL is on the defensive, and ISIL is going to lose.”⁴ This assessment followed earlier battlefield successes against ISIS. First, Syrian Kurdish forces with U.S. air support halted ISIS’s offensive to seize the Syrian-Turkish border town of Kobane in October 2014,⁵ effectively forcing ISIS’s summer 2014 campaign to culminate. Second, the Iraqi Security Forces, Shi’a militias, and the Kurdish Peshmerga drove ISIS from numerous villages and small cities in Iraq before the fall of Tikrit, shifting the tide of the ground war.⁶ Finally, ISIS lost over 6,000 fighters and half of its leadership from August 2014 to January 2015, according to CENTCOM commander General Lloyd Austin, largely attributed to U.S.-led coalition airstrikes.⁷ The loss of operational leadership has the potential to at least temporarily impede ISIS’s ability to mount offensives equivalent to the one it launched to capture Mosul, opening an important window of opportunity for anti-ISIS forces.

These gains do not yet translate to ISIS’s defeat, however, which is why U.S. leaders have lately begun to express more caution. CIA Director John Brennan stated in March 2015 that “This will be a long-term struggle. ISIL will not be rolled back overnight.”⁸ Vice President Joe Biden stated on April 9, 2015 in reference to the war against ISIS that, “the jury is still out ... it’s not over yet.”⁹ Ambassador Brett McGurk also stated in April 2015 that “Da’esh [ISIS] remains an adaptive and formidable foe ... so this is a long-term campaign that

is going to take years, not months.”¹⁰ McGurk was speaking specifically of the battle for Ramadi, the capital of the Iraqi province of Anbar, where ISIS has been fighting to control the city since January 2014, with enduring presence in the city as of May 2015.

Their caution presages the challenges that lie ahead for the anti-ISIS coalition. ISIS is the kind of adaptive and resilient enemy that is difficult to defeat outright. Insurgencies and terrorist networks often present the same challenge, capitalizing upon time, the ability to inflict damage, and the ability to evade defeat as means to erode and collapse more sophisticated militaries. ISIS ceased to be the lesser force in Iraq and eastern Syria in 2014, when it mounted its conventional maneuver campaign to seize numerous major cities and military bases from multiple competing armies. This does not, however, dictate that ISIS will only conduct conventional warfare in the future. ISIS retains the option to vary its military configuration, which will make measuring its defeat more challenging.

ISIS’s “caliphate” structure makes ISIS different from other insurgencies and terrorist networks. ISIS has claimed to rule, and it must have land, cities, and populations to keep its claim. If ISIS loses control its cities and populations, it will fail at its core political objective to establish its own sovereignty as a caliphate. ISIS has entered a defensive phase to preserve its holdings, a measure of strength rather than weakness, given that ISIS controls cities that should be controlled by the Iraqi and Syrian states.¹¹ ISIS’s military defense may not be purely conventional, as ISIS’s

actions in April 2015 following the loss of Tikrit suggest. This defense will likely incorporate the full range of its offensive strengths, involving guerilla and terrorist tactics as well as expansion in areas where it can build further depth. ISIS's strategy is likely to maximize its flexibility to evade defeat and outlast its enemies while also retaining its claim to a "caliphate." ISIS's articulated mission as of October 2014 is "to remain and expand," a clear statement that ISIS will use its vast terrain and regional networks to aid in its survival.

The resulting challenges for the anti-ISIS coalition are apparent. First, ISIS will not in fact lose the strategic ground of its caliphate if it continues to hold the cities it controls in Syria, regardless of what happens in Iraq. Second, ISIS will renew itself strategically by expanding to new, occasionally non-contiguous territory as it has begun to do in Libya and the Sinai among other places. Third, ISIS will reinvigorate its campaign behind its opponents' lines in Iraq wherever it loses cities, much as its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) did in the 2008-2012 timeframe. ISIS began to carry out this type of campaign in April 2015 in Diyala and Salah ad-Din provinces in Iraq, in zones that the Iraqi Security Forces and Shi'a militias cleared in late 2014.¹² ISIS's expansion and terrorism in outlying areas enhance rather than compete with ISIS's defense of the cities under its control. Other exogenous challenges to the anti-ISIS coalition rise from the heightened risk of escalation in the Middle East as Arab states form coalitions to counter Iranian influence on new fronts such as Yemen. Escalating regional conflict benefits ISIS and al-Qaeda, both of which flourish in political vacuums created by conflict. Setting conditions for future regional security is an essential part of the war against ISIS, given that ISIS will seek to accelerate destructive trends to ensure its survival.

Out-pacing, out-maneuvering, and containing ISIS are critical in 2015 in order to keep ISIS from causing greater damage while it attempts to defend its caliphate. ISIS is now on the defensive, in that it must resist and defeat enemy attacks or destroy anti-ISIS actors in Iraq and Syria to remain.¹³ ISIS's version of defense will involve maintaining flexibility and evading defeat, whereas anti-ISIS operations in 2015 appear oriented to concentrate on the cities under ISIS's control, clearing one at a time. This mismatch may cause the U.S. to perceive early victory as individual cities like Tikrit are cleared when ISIS is simply exercising patience, a vulnerability that ISIS likely intends to exploit. ISIS can flex into low-profile stances and survive the loss of single cities, reclaiming them in the near or mid-term. ISIS will likely even survive the loss of every city in Iraq if its cities in Syria are left standing. ISIS can flex until it loses control of every city in Iraq and Syria at one time. Only if ISIS loses its claim to rule urban areas entirely will ISIS's caliphate be destroyed.

Destroying ISIS's caliphate can translate for a time to ISIS's strategic defeat. ISIS's failure to rule will likely undermine the will of the pro-ISIS global constituency, causing ISIS to revert back to a small and committed network of violent actors who seek to re-establish the caliphate at a later time or continue it on a smaller scale, compared to its current status as an apparently powerful alternative to modern states. ISIS will continue to adapt, using a wide range of tactics to evade defeat including strategic messaging to a global audience. The window of opportunity to defeat ISIS by reclaiming its cities may ultimately close, not only because violent actors worldwide have begun to emulate and in some cases join ISIS, but also because ISIS is trying to establish a global radicalization effort that can self-sustain even if ISIS's caliphate fails. Global radicalization is a generational threat that will move on a different timescale than the battle for Iraq's cities. This radicalization could accelerate, however, if states fail to recover the legitimacy they have lost through the territorial challenge posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS's strategy is to maximize its own resilience in the near and long term. ISIS's defensive concept is to outlast its enemies, especially the U.S., which may cause ISIS to devolve its tactics in 2015 to encourage the anti-ISIS coalition to withdraw. The anti-ISIS strategy will need to match the many ways in which ISIS fights in order to overcome its defenses. This report will outline ISIS's strategy and the terrain on which ISIS fights inside Iraq and Syria, the ways in which ISIS has adapted its military capabilities to its defense in 2015, how it likely frames the war within Iraq and Syria, and how it combines its styles of warfare to avoid defeat. The aim of this report is to show how the anti-ISIS coalition can overmatch and outpace ISIS's program and prevent dangerous contingencies from occurring. The contingencies that may follow ISIS's defeat are also introduced by this analysis, should ISIS survive as a local insurgency with international ties after losing its global resonance. The remnants of ISIS, possibly rejoined with al-Qaeda, will likely attempt to resurrect a caliphate in the future. The will of their hardcore and overlapping networks will likely never be broken. Establishing how ISIS adapts, defends, and re-gathers the initiative is therefore critical for U.S. national security beyond the current phase of the war.

ISIS'S STRATEGY TO REMAIN AND EXPAND

ISIS seeks a global caliphate, according to its propaganda. ISIS has articulated its global vision numerous times. Most powerfully in the fifth issue of ISIS's multi-language Dabiq magazine, ISIS stated the following:

“The flag of Khalifah will rise over Makkah and al-Madinah, even if the apostates and hypocrites despise such. The flag of Khalifah will rise over Baytul-Maqdis [Jerusalem] and Rome, even if the Jews and Crusaders despise such. The shade of the blessed flag will expand until it covers all eastern and western extents of the Earth, filling the world with the truth and justice of Islam and putting an end to the falsehood and tyranny of jahiliyyah [ignorance], even if America and its coalition despise such.”¹⁴

ISIS’s ultimate end is likely a global war, not a limited war for local control inside Iraq and Syria. ISIS’s vision for a prospering caliphate requires that it instigate a broader war to compromise states competing with it for legitimacy. Specifically, ISIS must maintain its physical caliphate within Iraq and Syria while it approaches this second objective to expand in an environment of regional disorder. Accordingly, ISIS assigned the title of “Remaining and Expanding” to the above-referenced issue of *Dabiq* published in November 2014.¹⁵

To “Remain and Expand” is a strategic mission statement with two goals. First, it supports ISIS’s defense inside Iraq and Syria, and second, it seeks the literal expansion of the caliphate. ISIS announced operations to expand to Libya, Sinai, and other corners of the Arab world in late 2014 while under duress, in a moment of weakness during which rumors arose of the death of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS’s leader.¹⁶ The timing of this announced expansion supported ISIS’s momentum while it faced counter-attacks inside Iraq and Syria. Global expansion is a motif that ISIS desires to propagate at times when it is experiencing tactical losses. Expansion into new territory is therefore a defensive supporting operation, but it is nevertheless also a concrete operational plan to make its caliphate larger. ISIS is framing its strategy across three geographic rings: the Interior Ring in Iraq and al-Sham, the Near Abroad in the wider Middle East and North Africa, and the Far Abroad in Europe, Asia, and the United States.¹⁷ ISIS’s strategic framework corresponds to a campaign with three overarching goals: to defend inside Iraq and Syria; to expand operations regionally; and to disrupt and recruit on a global scale.

Iraq is central to the origin of ISIS’s caliphate, and likely also central to many among ISIS’s leadership cadre. Iraq will likely remain the epicenter of ISIS’s campaign as long as its current leadership is alive. The physical caliphate in Iraq and Syria is still the source of ISIS’s power, unless ISIS’s operations in the Near or Far Abroad achieve momentum that is independent of ISIS’s battlefield success in Iraq and Syria. Iraq in particular holds unique and lasting significance for ISIS that it cannot easily replicate elsewhere. Expressing Iraq’s significance, ISIS issued the following quote from al-Qaeda in Iraq’s founder, Abu Mus’ab az-Zarqawi at the beginning of every *Dabiq* magazine issue it has published as of May 2015:

“The 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.” — Abu Mus’ab az-Zarqawi

Focusing anti-ISIS operations upon Iraq in 2015 therefore has merit. But it also raises questions about what the operational goal of the counter-ISIS strategy should be. Control of cities is the metric for the success or failure of states that are challenged by ISIS. Cities are also the key to challenging the legitimacy of ISIS’s caliphate. They are not, however, the metric by which to measure the defeat of ISIS’s fighting force. ISIS’s ability to remain as a violent group, albeit rebranded, has already been demonstrated, given the near-defeat of its predecessor AQI in 2008 and its resurgence over the intervening period. Nevertheless, ISIS in 2015 is a caliphate that has more to prove, and it likely desires to preserve the image of a vast dominion across Iraq and Syria. In this most dangerous form, ISIS is a counter-state,¹⁸ a state-breaker that can claim new rule and new boundaries after seizing cities across multiple states by force, an unacceptable modern precedent. ISIS would fail to remain as an alternative political order, however, if it lost all of the cities under its control, an important aspect of the U.S. plan to defeat ISIS strategically.

This analysis frames the question, what will ISIS lose if it loses Mosul? Mosul is ISIS’s largest urban prize. It is hundreds of miles from Baghdad and outside the current reach of the Iraqi Security Forces. It has been under ISIS’s overt control since June 2014, and it is a symbol of ISIS’s power. It is the city from which ISIS’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced his caliphate. When the ISF mount an effective counter-attack against ISIS in Mosul, ISIS will lose credibility, not only as a fledgling polity but also as a military that will have been outperformed by a more capable force. More so than Tikrit, ISIS likely cannot relinquish such a great city as Mosul outright. ISIS will likely fight harder for Mosul and allow it to be destroyed in order to deny it to the Iraqi government. It is a valid operational priority for the Iraqi government to reclaim Mosul before ISIS destroys it to ensure Iraq’s recovery. Mosul’s recovery will not be the end of the war against ISIS, however. In fact, ISIS will constitute a permanent threat to Mosul if its dominion over the Jazeera desert in western Iraq persists. This outcome is guaranteed while ISIS controls eastern Syria.

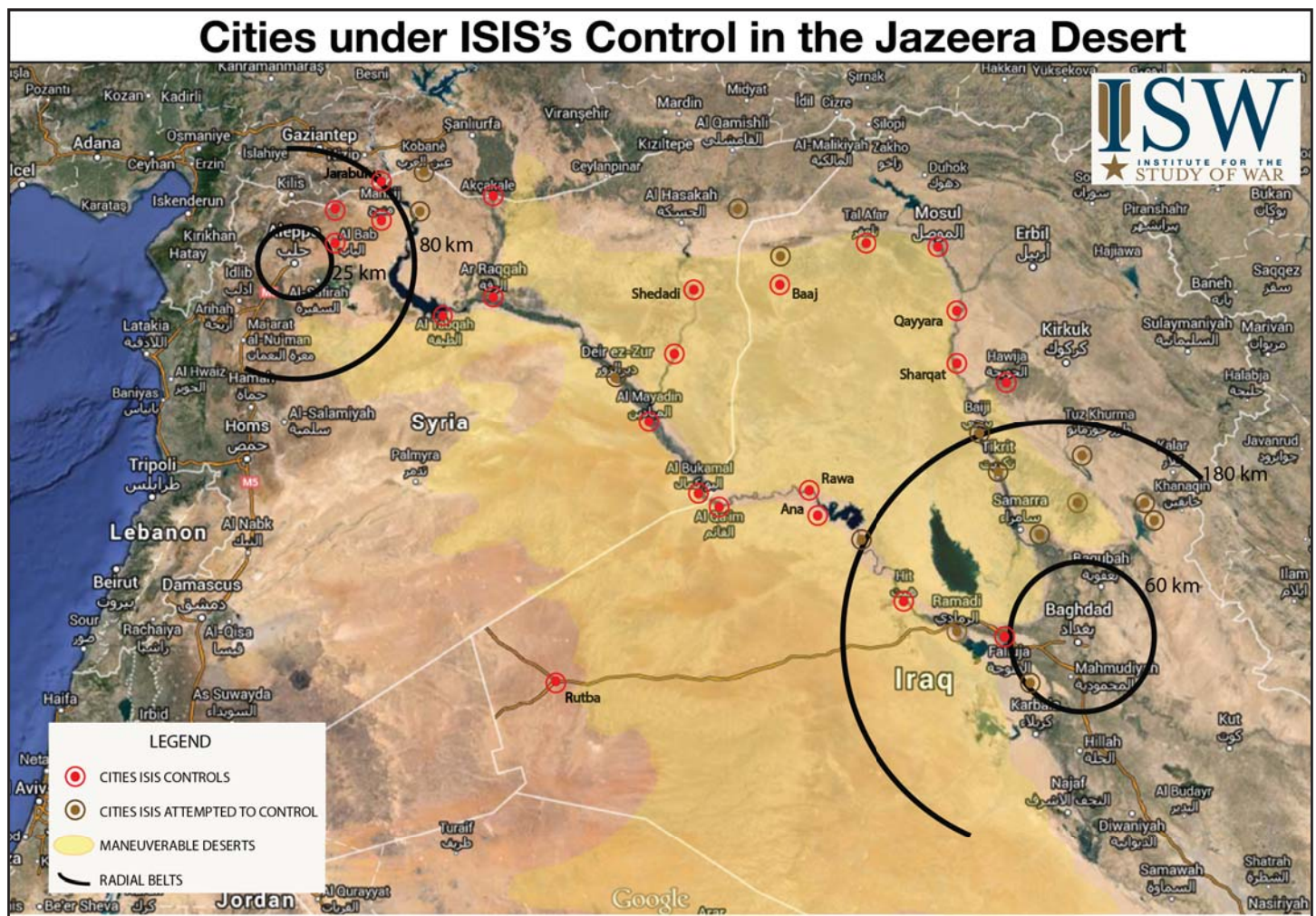
ISIS controls more than cities, and freedom of maneuver outside cities will allow ISIS to reset in nearby areas outside of them without altering its overall disposition. ISIS organizes itself internally through administrative and military units called *wilayats* that sub-divide its territorial claims. ISIS currently operates 19 known *wilayats* across Iraq and Syria as of May 2015, all but two of which posted their operations with photosets online in early 2015. The map above is a graphical interpretation of ISIS’s *wilayats* in Iraq and Syria, created by an ISIS supporter and possibly

front coordination across Iraq's deserts. AQI was able to synchronize attacks in these areas, illuminating a lateral movement pattern that crossed the Tigris and connected Iraq's western deserts to the historic Hamrin ridge passage in northeastern Iraq. ISIS used these terrain features to move off of Iraq's main roads at various distances from Baghdad to plan and coordinate attacks. This freedom of movement allowed AQI in 2012 and ISIS after its re-branding in April 2013 to out-manuever the Iraqi Security Forces in 2013-2014. This use of deserts also enabled ISIS to establish links among adjacent fronts without coming into unwanted contact with the Iraqi Security Forces. ISIS's signature usage of waves of Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) during its 2012-2013 *Breaking the Walls* campaign demonstrated ISIS's ability to move explosive precursors and personnel across all of Iraq's fronts and maneuver easily to Baghdad and its surrounding suburbs.¹⁹

ISIS was also able to link tactical, operational, and strategic effects at different distances from Baghdad, and its contest with the Iraqi Security Forces moved at different stages based

upon how near or far they were from the capital. These separate distances became particularly apparent after ISIS began to seize cities in January 2014. ISIS began with cities that were close to Baghdad in Anbar province, namely Ramadi and Fallujah, the latter of which is only 60 km from Baghdad to the west. These offensives supported ISIS's goals in areas far from the capital, including Mosul, by fixing the Iraqi Security Forces on one front. Mosul was especially vulnerable to isolation from Baghdad long before its fall to ISIS in June 2014 because ISIS had complete desert access to reinforce its ongoing urban operations there.²⁰ Meanwhile the ISF was made incapable of reinforcing its northern front by ISIS's prior campaign in Anbar, where the ISF expended much of its deployable reinforcements from southern Iraq in January 2014.²¹ The radial arcs outside of Baghdad depicted below notionally distinguish ISIS's actions at various distances from Baghdad.

ISIS brought its desert forces and its urban terrorist cells into a new operational framework after July 2013, when ISIS likely regained some of its leadership and cadre by successfully



ISIS maneuvers across vast deserts, particularly the Jazeera desert between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. ISIS controls numerous cities in close proximity to deserts, where ISIS retains enduring sanctuary.

attacking the Abu Ghraib prison and freeing roughly 500 prisoners.²² ISIS shifted tactics after the Abu Ghraib attack from terrorist attacks against civilians to ground assaults against military targets, a shift that speaks to the likelihood that the commanders responsible for ISIS's 2014 offensives in Iraq rejoined ISIS from prison at that time. ISIS established fighting positions throughout Iraq's depth in late 2013, assuming fighting positions at multiple distances from Baghdad. ISIS leveraged the geographic disparity of its elements in northern, eastern, and western Iraq and began to design phased campaigns that would allow them to function as mutually supportive fighting forces that could draw and divert the ISF.

Iraq's deserts allowed ISIS to cohere its operations in 2014 across broad swaths of terrain. The Iraqi Security Forces had attempted to deploy against ISIS in the Jazeera and Anbar deserts several times in 2013 to prevent ISIS from threatening Iraq's interior, but the ISF could not pin ISIS down in the deserts. Instead, it appeared after one particularly devastating attack by ISIS against the 7th IA Division in Anbar's remote Horan valley in late December 2013²³ that ISIS used the ISF's deployment to the desert as an opportunity to shift fire to Anbar's cities. ISIS began to attack Ramadi and Fallujah shortly thereafter in the first phase of ISIS's urban offensive in Iraq in January 2014.²⁴ In this way ISIS subverted the maneuver capability of the ISF by passively diverting security forces away from urban centers prior to attacking them. When the ISF attempted to move on roads to fight ISIS in Anbar's cities in early 2014, ISIS destroyed bridges and captured dams in order to shape and constrict the ISF's mobility further.²⁵ ISIS used this infrastructure throughout Iraq in 2013-2014 to maintain its mobility advantage.²⁶

Coalition airstrikes and Iraqi ground counter-offensives began shortly thereafter, and as of May 2015 ISIS's freedom of movement has likely been disrupted. ISIS's operations on different fronts are therefore likely more isolated, and ISIS likely enjoys less of a desert mobility advantage. ISIS selectively reinforced across fronts in such places as Anbar on February 25, 2015²⁷ and Baaj west of Mosul as of February 24, 2015,²⁸ suggesting that ISIS is still moving laterally across deserts in 2015 when possible, even as the airstrike campaign has continued. ISIS posted a photoset of a military parade in Baaj on January 19, 2015 to show its ability to move in large vehicle convoys under cover of weather, boasting in Arabic captions that ISIS's desert mobility can resist air power.²⁹ Unrestricted desert mobility is a historic advantage that ISIS will likely maximize again if airstrikes stop before ISIS has been defeated.

Maneuver limitations in Syria

ISIS's ability to maneuver in lateral arcs breaks down on the Syrian front, which widens the disparity between how ISIS conceptualizes and organizes the fights in Iraq and



ISIS Wilayat Ninewa Media Office published a photoset in January 2015 of a military parade in the rain in Baaj, Ninewa, asserting ISIS's ability to maneuver despite airstrikes.

Syria. The central desert in Syria contains mountains that separate western Syria from the open desert areas bordering Iraq. ISIS in eastern Syria has long behaved more like the rest of the Jazeera desert that runs across Iraq and Syria, both historically and in recent years, particularly after the Syrian regime lost control of most of Deir ez-Zour province in December 2012 and Raqqa in early 2013. The Jazeera is an area where ISIS's control is most dense, and also an area where the reach of competing militaries is most challenged. Syria's western geography is otherwise less maneuverable by desert forces such as ISIS. The desert east of Homs and Hama is a notable exception,³⁰ connecting Syria's central corridor east of the M5 highway to ISIS's stronghold in Raqqa. ISIS is likely using this desert as a maneuver corridor in 2015. ISIS is also active in eastern Qalamoun,³¹ a desert pocket northeast of Damascus across the M5 from Lebanon. ISIS's access to these interior deserts is constrained, but ISIS likely uses them to stage in support of its urban and suburban positions.

ISIS's access to deserts in Iraq and Syria points to a sobering observation. None among anti-ISIS forces is positioned to clear ISIS from the Jazeera desert. Syrian forces, on either side of the civil war, are likely to prioritize their campaigns in western Syria, tolerating ISIS in the east. Iraqi forces are likely to prioritize the campaign for Iraq's interior, making an exception to reclaim Mosul as its second largest city despite its distance. Syrian and Iraqi Kurds are likely to fight for control of the land they are already patrolling, seeking autonomy rather than offering forward projection into ISIS-held areas, again excepting Mosul. ISIS, however, is the dominant force within these de facto boundaries in the Jazeera and Anbari deserts. Anti-ISIS strategies to clear ISIS from priority cities in Iraq and Syria that nevertheless allow ISIS to traverse the deserts will give ISIS the sanctuary it needs to contest them frequently. ISIS will lose legitimacy if it loses all of its cities, but only temporarily if ISIS can continuously attack them from the deserts. Limited success at regaining some cities in Iraq but not those that border the deserts is equivalent to the status quo with a forecast that varies little from recent history.

ISIS will reset and reclaim what it has lost as it has done before. Clearing and holding the cities bordering deserts that are the farthest from sectors of established control by other security forces will be the most difficult challenge for anti-ISIS forces in the coming years.

Urban Centers- "Infiltration"

ISIS also specializes in urban operations. AQI in 2006-2007 conducted VBIED operations with attack cells based inside Baghdad, though coalition forces drove AQI from its positions inside Baghdad during the Surge. ISIS likely retained urban support networks inside of Mosul after the final November 2008 battle for Mosul, which likely explains how well ISIS was able to soften this objective prior to claiming the city in June 2014. ISIS also established support networks within disenfranchised Sunni communities in Iraq, especially during the anti-government protest movement from December 2013 to January 2014 in Hawija, Ramadi, and Fallujah. ISIS's attempts to conduct outreach within these communities were not expected to succeed, given the blood feud preexisting between AQI and Iraqi Sunnis after the 2007 Awakening movement. ISIS nevertheless capitalized upon this civil

unrest to gain control at the Iraqi Security Forces' expense. ISIS in 2015 may have infiltrated communities of displaced Iraqi Sunnis in gatherings near Baghdad once more. ISIS's infiltration into disenfranchised communities allows ISIS to position itself near its urban targets to conduct more lethal terror campaigns.

In contrast, ISIS is not the most powerful military force among anti-Assad forces everywhere in Syria. Rebel groups and Jabhat al-Nusra comprehensively cleared ISIS from areas west of Aleppo during that time. ISIS nevertheless retained positions inside neighborhoods in Damascus, which has become more apparent in 2015. ISIS is overtly present within Hajr al-Aswad and the Yarmouk refugee camp as of May 2015, with some reflections of growing operational presence south of Damascus.³² Infiltration into these locations may be a defensive tactic to help ISIS escape U.S.-led coalition airstrikes in the Jazeera and counter-attacks by the Syrian Kurds in northern Syria. But these positions around Damascus also enable ISIS to prepare future offensives. Demonstrated by ISIS's lack of equivalent access to much of northern Syria, ISIS will require a strategy to infiltrate the rebel populations that have already rejected ISIS in Syria outright. ISIS may attempt to ingratiate



The Baghdad Belts consist of towns and road networks surrounding Iraq's capital. The inset is a representation of former AQI Emir Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's battle plan for Baghdad, which took advantage of the belts to attack the city center. Source: MNC-I

itself with Syrian rebel groups by representing itself in 2015 as an anti-Assad partner.

Large Cities - "The Belts"

ISIS approached Baghdad in 2012-2013 through a surrounding network of suburban roads that connected surrounding towns to the capital. This ring of roads around Baghdad is commonly referenced as "the Baghdad Belts." ISIS's use of Baghdad's belts is an artifact of AQI's original campaign design, which converted Saddam Hussein's design for the defense of Baghdad into an offensive concept.³³ AQI founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's 2006 battle plan for Baghdad involved a deliberate belt design, clearly depicted in AQI documents recovered in the field at that time.³⁴ Abstractly, ISIS's offensive belt framework represents a way to organize a battle plan around a principal city using dispersed units, informal tactics, and freedom of maneuver to compromise the main defenses of a conventional enemy. The Baghdad Belts emerged again in February 2013 when AQI, not yet reflagged as ISIS, shifted the geographical focus of its signature campaign of Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Devices (VBIEDs) from nationwide attacks across Iraq to a tight concentration in Baghdad.³⁵

The Baghdad Belts are also tied to Iraq's deserts. ISIS's positions near Baghdad in Thar Thar, Jurf al-Sakhar, and Fallujah at the time of Mosul's fall in June 2014 were strong and constituted a direct threat to Baghdad, but this threat never clearly actualized in 2014. Rather, ISIS's activities near Baghdad paled after the fall of Mosul compared to ISIS's previous attack patterns. Other than mortar attacks from the north and south of Baghdad, ISIS did not launch an offensive in downtown Baghdad in 2014 as projected³⁶ likely because of the increased security of the capital provided by Shi'a militias during that time period. In addition, ISIS leaders may have decided to hold its forces in reserve, offsetting its battle plan for Baghdad from the main offensive occurring in the outer belt. An uptick in IED attacks in Baghdad in January 2015³⁷ and VBIEDs in April 2015³⁸ may indicate that ISIS has infiltrated the capital while air power and the ISF have been oriented elsewhere, positioning ISIS for future phases. The growing dominance of Shi'a militias within the capital also may have further isolated Sunni neighborhoods and Sunni displaced populations from outlying areas, accelerating ISIS's future opportunities to incite sectarianism as a means to undermine Iraq's recovery.³⁹ This risk may endure but never actualize if Iraq's security forces can reestablish unified state security faster than ISIS can undermine it.

ISIS may adapt its belt framework to Aleppo and Damascus, where large suburban areas surround these major cities. ISIS appeared intent upon increasing its positions north of Aleppo in April 2015.⁴⁰ ISIS is inherently constrained in its suburban approach in Syria, however, by resisters among the majority of Syrian rebels. Syrian rebels and JN ousted ISIS



ISIS Wilayat Ninewa Media Office published a photo of soldiers training at marksmanship and squad-level tactics, indicating a level of professional soldiery consistent with other indicators of previous military training within ISIS's ranks.

from major cities and surrounding areas in January 2014, rejecting ISIS's interpretation of Islamic law and lack of focus on defeating the Assad regime. ISIS likewise retreated into a low urban profile in Damascus in early 2014 due to similar pressures. ISIS did not set the terms of battle in the Syrian war the way it did in Iraq, and therefore ISIS has to fight around and through Syria's wartime landscape on terms that other militant groups have set. ISIS will likely consider ways in 2015 to take advantage of this situation, possibly by increasing its targeting of the Assad regime to gain support from Syrian rebels.

ISIS also faces an active northern enemy in Syria, the Syrian Kurds, and in some ways they represent the greater challenge to ISIS's expansion in Syria.⁴¹ ISIS acknowledged the existence of an active northern front in Syria by naming Abu Omar al-Shishani, a high-profile Chechen commander, "commander of the North" in early 2014. The prominence of Chechens within ISIS highlights another heterogeneous feature of ISIS's military organization: ISIS is Iraqi, Syrian, and international. Original AQI fighters and former Iraqi commanders may have one manner of fighting and one signature battlefield framework that maximizes belt maneuvers; Chechens and other international members of ISIS's military likely introduce others. Most foreign fighters within ISIS enter through northern Syria, and ISIS in Syria therefore likely absorbs a wider range of tactical influences. ISIS's battle plans in Syria may thus adhere less deliberately to its signature Iraqi belt maneuvers, though ISIS may adapt the framework as it expands toward Aleppo and Damascus in 2015. Adaptation raises the adjacent issue of the range of tactics conducted by ISIS within its geographic constraints.



ISIS's Hybridized Warfare

Conventional Maneuver Warfare

To attack enemy forces directly in order to destroy military threats and to seize terrain

VBIED, IED, SVEST, Artillery, Armor, Engineering, Small arms



Guerilla Warfare

To attack enemy forces indirectly in order to degrade, disrupt, and demonstrate; to infiltrate, isolate, and mobilize populations

VBIED, IED, SVEST, IDF, Small arms, targeted assassinations, Psychological operations



Terrorism

To intimidate security forces and inspire fear and insecurity among population

VBIED, IED, SVEST, IDF, Small arms, graphic terrorism



Two of the photos displaying a tank and a VBIED are taken from branded ISIS wilayat media offices inside Iraq and Syria. The photo of ISIS raising a flag during anti-government protests in Anbar in early 2014 is taken from local sources.

HYBRIDIZED WARFARE

ISIS evades decisive defeat by adopting a range of different styles of warfare. At its most conventional military state in 2014, ISIS used maneuver warfare to break the Iraqi Security Forces, allowing ISIS to overrun military bases and seize numerous cities. In its least sophisticated form after the Battle of Mosul in November 2008, AQI could not mount such offensives. AQI in 2008 was nevertheless an extremely lethal violent threat to local populations, and it steadily reacquired a wider range of capability over the course of just a few years. ISIS in 2015 may take many forms between these two historic phases, depending upon the success achieved and sustained by anti-ISIS actors. While ISIS possesses them all, it may choose which styles to use. Conventional maneuver warfare may not be well-suited to ISIS's current defensive phase. This is both a measure of success and a challenge for anti-ISIS forces. ISIS's many forms provide ISIS with a shape-shifting ability that will help it to evade defeat. ISIS will then be able to repeat its success in 2012-2014 cyclically, unless political solutions emerge in Iraq and Syria that result in lasting security.

Some would call ISIS's capability to flex among different styles of warfare "hybridized." Hybridized warfare is a historical norm, but it challenges conventional militaries with distinct doctrines for conventional war, irregular war, and counter-terrorism. Hybridized warfare combines elements of multiple styles of war, leveraging them selectively and integrating them over the course of a war to maintain the advantage given evolving battlefield conditions. Frank Hoffman captured the idea well in 2007, using Hezbollah as a case study:

Hybrid wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder.⁴²

Hoffman also theorized that hybridized forces consciously choose to leverage multiple means to be operationally decisive rather than simply to protract war, provoke overreaction, or degrade enemy forces, which are intents normally associated with less capable and sophisticated military organizations.⁴³ The hybridized enemy is therefore a formal structured organization that plans at multiple levels

of war in a conventional sense and elects at times, sometimes simultaneously, to employ multiple styles of warfare as specialized and combined means.

ISIS is a hybridized enemy. ISIS has leveraged multiple styles over the last three years in Iraq and Syria, including terrorism, guerilla warfare, and conventional warfare, often in combination. ISIS historically applied guerilla warfare when it was the lesser military force, especially before 2009, attacking U.S. and Iraq forces asymmetrically using explosive technologies to degrade and disrupt. ISIS applied terrorism by directing the same explosive technologies to attack civilians, intimidate security forces, and bolster messaging strategies designed to inspire fear and sectarian reaction in 2012-2013. ISIS applied aspects of conventional warfare by attacking military bases and fighting ground battles to seize urban terrain once it ascertained its military equivalence to the Iraqi Security Forces and competing groups in Syria. Each of these phases of ISIS's current war in Iraq and Syria demonstrated sophisticated military designs across multiple levels of war.

Freedom of action favors ISIS. It would be false to assume that ISIS will be overtaxed or constrained by its vast geography or elongated time horizon. ISIS will not expire or over-extend because of its range. ISIS can however be constrained to fewer options and fewer locations, if anti-ISIS strategies are framed to limit ISIS's geographic range and ability to shape-shift on the spectrum of conflict. Limiting ISIS's options is an important way to think about the strategy against ISIS that will prevent ISIS from out-pacing and out-maneuvering anti-ISIS forces working to retake Iraq's cities. This requires an estimate of the latent capability that ISIS possesses in Iraq, which ISIS may leverage to undermine efforts against it in 2015. Reviewing ISIS's early campaigns is necessary to achieve this estimate. In many cases ISIS's plans in 2015 may not be firmly settled. It is therefore useful to consider ISIS's range of options and design ways to constrain and shape them preemptively.

The first step is recognizing that ISIS is a strategic organization. ISIS's strategic intent and military design became increasingly transparent after ISIS declared its caliphate. Phased mission statements such as the one below appeared in ISIS's first issue of its *Dabiq* Magazine in July 2014, indicate that ISIS's military design was well-established before that time:

"These attacks will compel apostate forces to partially withdraw from rural territory and regroup in major urban regions. The jama'ah [congregation] would then take advantage of the situation by increasing chaos to the point leading to the complete collapse of the taghut [idolatrous] regime in entire areas, a situation some refer to as "Tawahhush" ["mayhem"]. The next step would be to fill the vacuum by managing the state of affairs to the point of developing into a fully-fledged state, and continuing expansion into territory still under the control of the taghut."⁴⁴

This quote revealed how ISIS framed its strategy to break the state of Iraq, a recovering but functional state. The first *Dabiq* magazine also outlined the phases of Zarqawi's original plan,⁴⁵ demonstrating that ISIS's institutionalization was sufficient to carry a strategic plan past the death of multiple leaders:

1. *hijrah* [emigration];
2. *jama'ah* [congregation];
3. *destabilize taghut* [idolatry]
4. *tamkin* [consolidation]; and
5. *Khalifah* [Caliphate]

These excerpts also show that ISIS felt it was sufficiently organized as a fighting group to pursue this mission before it resumed its terror campaign in 2012-2013 to destabilize Iraq, leading to a military campaign to consolidate control of territory before ISIS declared the Caliphate in June 2014. This is an important aspect of ISIS's interpretation of *jama'ah*, indicating that ISIS's strategy will endure even if it is whittled back to a disrupted fighting force. ISIS's functional strategy is likely durable, allowing ISIS to reset at an early stage continuously as it suffers losses until it outlasts state security forces in its plan to destabilize states.

These excerpts from *Dabiq* also demonstrate how ISIS applied controlled hybridization to its military planning. ISIS's mission in Iraq required a phased approach. The third phase was to generate disorder, where order in Iraq had previously been instated. ISIS's strategy in Syria, Libya, the Sinai, and Yemen, is likely instead to take advantage of existing disorder, allowing ISIS to move ahead with terrain consolidation, extending the domain of the caliphate. The quotes above point to other essential elements of ISIS's 2012-2014 campaigns as well, that collectively form ISIS's military design signature in Iraq: belt maneuvers, hybridization, and campaign phasing. These elements of ISIS's design signature appeared in its previous and current campaign phases, and it appears that ISIS has adapted them to the defense, a sign of enduring organizational capacity. ISIS may also use them to prepare for future phases, which is why reviewing ISIS's history is important to recall the extent of its range.

ISIS can claim to remain in a military sense if it can still mount offensives that result in battle damage or control of terrain while preserving and increasing its own combat power. ISIS can survive in deserts and in embedded urban positions to do this; it does not require control of cities and can survive in lower profile stances, even though cities represent real loss on a political plane. This gives ISIS options when it faces serious losses such as Tikrit, in that ISIS can choose to fight to the death or alternately preserve its resources. Control of cities is important to ISIS politically, and cities allow ISIS to

deny infrastructure, populations, and facilities to anti-ISIS forces. But denying cities to opponents does not require that ISIS preserve the cities in question, an important point in anticipating how ISIS will “defend” cities against anti-ISIS forces. Militarily, ISIS can survive their destruction, especially if ISIS expands its territorial control concurrently. It is therefore worthwhile to recall how ISIS survived near defeat in 2008 to reconstitute, lest ISIS be pushed from cities in 2015 in ways that fail to last.

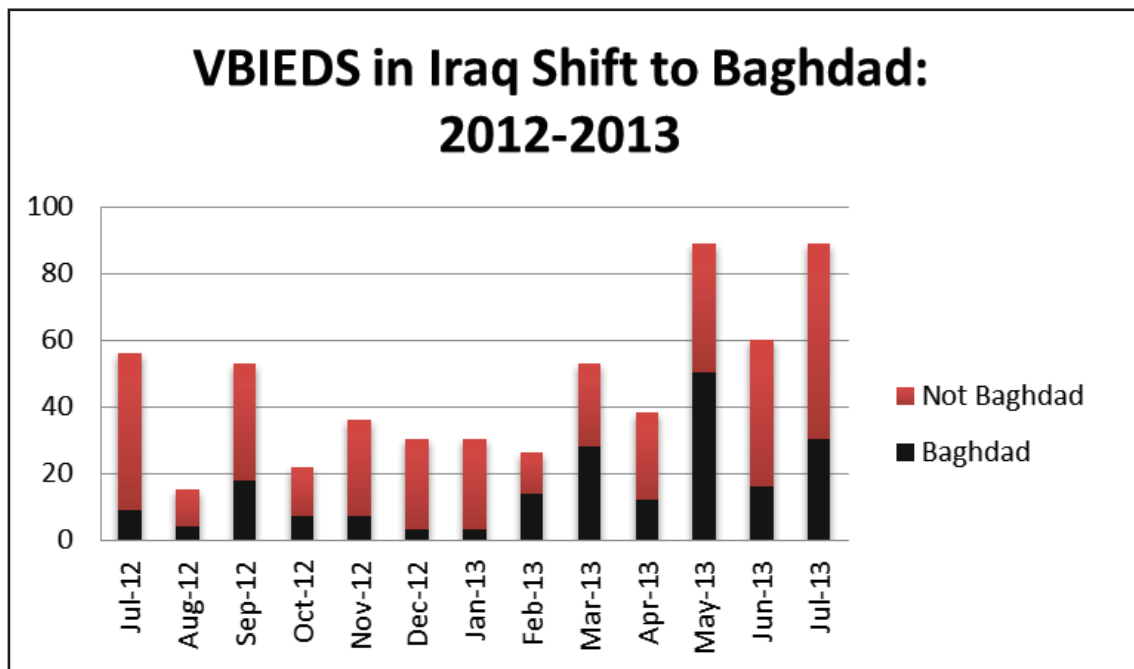
Surviving Near Defeat (November 2008– December 2013)

ISIS’s previous disposition before the announcement of its caliphate in June 2014 reveals ways that ISIS will attempt to survive anti-ISIS strategies in 2015. ISIS survived near defeat in the outer belt of Iraq and in the Jazeera between December 2008 and December 2011. Prior to that, the disrupted and degraded remnants of AQI engaged in guerilla style attacks throughout Iraq as the smaller and weaker force, using sophisticated and adapted IEDs, SVBIEDs, and SVESTs against coalition forces including Iraq’s Sahwa [Awakening] movement. ISIS also attacked the population during the interim period with spectacular attacks to demonstrate its continuing presence. ISIS was not attempting to control terrain during this period. But it used this time to reinvigorate its funding networks and build plans to attack after U.S. withdrawal. ISIS’s use of this “down” period was visible in its occasional spectacular attacks, but the extent of its congregation became clear by July 2012 with the opening of AQI’s *Breaking the Walls* campaign, in which AQI launched a

wave of 30 VBIEDs across Iraq that detonated on the same day, July 23, 2012.⁴⁶

ISIS consolidated its VBIED wave attacks by February 2013 into a tight pattern of attacks inside Baghdad. ISIS’s VBIEDs were part of its signature terror campaign to concentrate attacks against Shi’a civilians in Baghdad as a means of to invalidate the state and instigate sectarian violence. ISIS’s attack patterns demonstrated the renewal of its capacity for military-grade combat support and command and control, and in many ways ISIS’s VBIED wave campaign tipped into a conventional style by demonstrating cross-front coordination and unified pursuit of designated objectives. ISIS ended the *Breaking the Walls* campaign with a double attack upon two prisons, Abu Ghraib and Taji, both of which lay within the Baghdad Belts. ISIS released over 500 prisoners from Abu Ghraib on July 21, 2013, most of whom likely remained within the Baghdad sphere. ISIS likely began to frame multi-front campaigns at this point, keeping its forces in the Baghdad belts engaged in the capital region while preparing for attacks in the outer and middle bands. ISIS’s presence in the other band was also gaining strength in Anbar and the Zaab triangle, likely aided by developments in the Syrian war that provided access to new sources of funding and recruits.

The early years of ISIS’s revival are an important reminder of the future modes that ISIS may take if it loses control of more cities. ISIS’s terrorist and guerilla tactics may present grave challenges to the ISF as they attempt to hold ground in Tikrit and other cities in close proximity to contingents of ISIS that



ISIS’s disciplined VBIED wave pattern consolidated upon Baghdad in February 2013. ISIS continued to conduct high levels of VBIED attacks outside of Baghdad additionally, indicating an overall increase in the number of VBIEDS in 2013 before ISIS began to seize control of territory. See AQI Resurgent, Part I & II

maintain a low profile. They are also a reminder of what AQI brought to bear in Iraq while the Syrian war was raging, a reminder that AQI rebuilt its campaign in Iraq while most resources and foreign fighters were headed for the Syrian front. Access to greater resources was a likely motive for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to declare the expansion of AQI from the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which occurred at a moment of operational strength rather than weakness in April 2013, shortly before the organization launched the transformational attack on Abu Ghraib prison. Facilitation in Syria was then and is now essential to ISIS's resilience as a fighting force in Iraq, if and when its resources in Iraq are depleted.

ISIS attempted to prosecute a different campaign in Syria in 2013, seeking to establish early Shari'a courts and Da'wa [religious outreach] in Raqqa, Aleppo, Idlib, and Damascus. Concurrently, ISIS attempted to claim affiliation to Iraq's Sunni population, which was engaged in a largely non-violent anti-government protest movement in Hawija, Tikrit, Fallujah, and Ramadi in 2013. Neither of these influence campaigns worked. Rebel groups and the al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra rejected ISIS and drove its forces from Idlib and Aleppo in January 2014.⁴⁷ ISIS was only able to keep that which it could defend against Syrian rebels through force, namely Raqqa, Manbij, al-Bab, and Jarabulus, which ISIS still controls as of May 2015. This is an important phase to recall in 2015 as ISIS moves deeper into rebel-held areas in Aleppo, Hama, and Damascus. ISIS was driven from northern Syria by its perceived constituency; and afterwards ISIS quietly went underground in southern Syria. There is a vast difference between underground and gone, an important point for anti-ISIS forces generally.

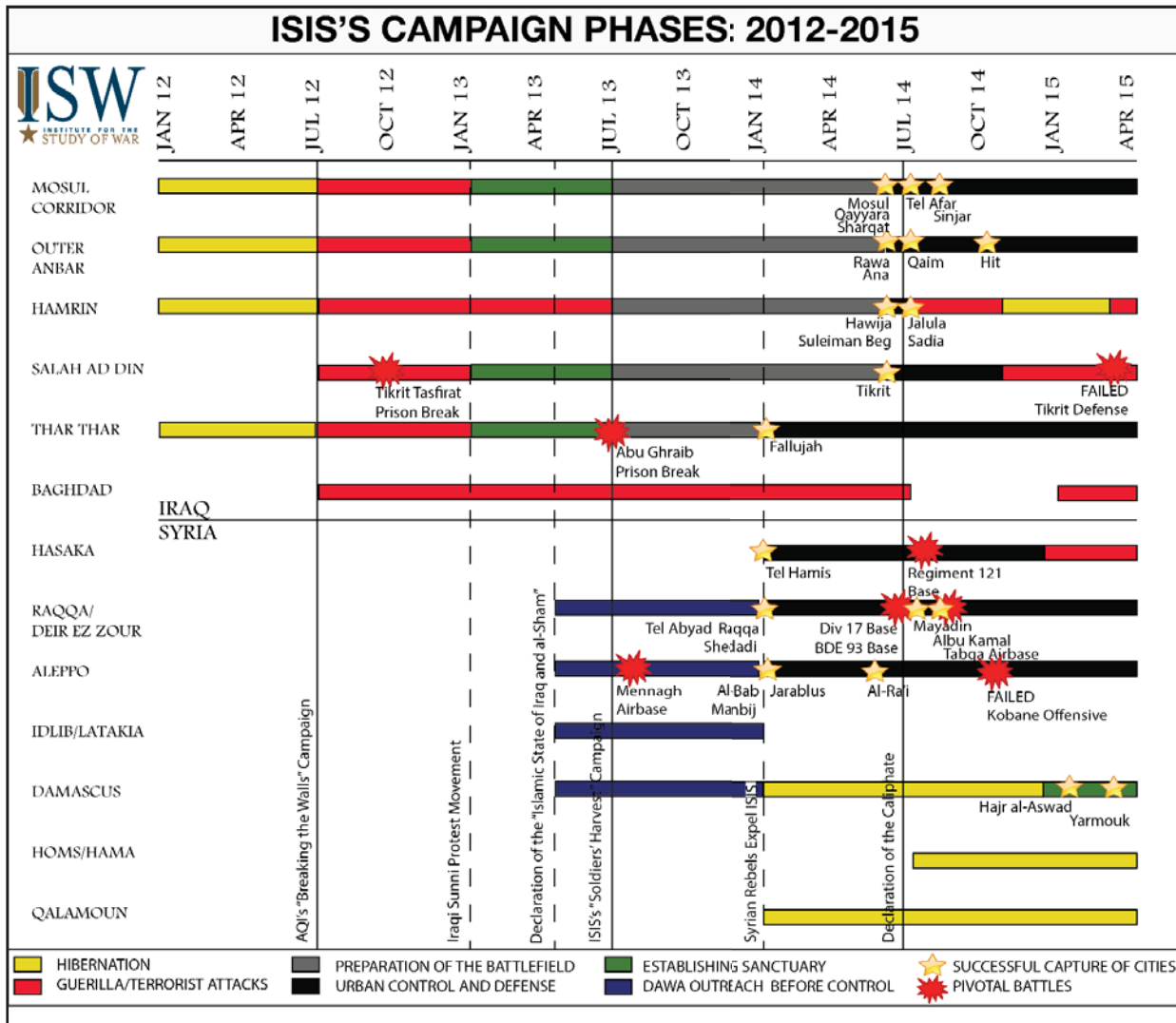
ISIS's initial attempts to influence the Sunni population in Iraq in 2013 were also visibly unsuccessful. ISIS was nevertheless able to hide behind the threat of a Sunni insurgency to gain greater strength while the ISF attempted to put down the Sunni protest movement without igniting another sectarian civil war. One visible example nearly led the national anti-government Sunni protest movement to turn violent, when the ISF under Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki attempted to raid the protest camp in Hawija in April 2013, sparking a clash which resulted in the death or injury of over 100 civilians.⁴⁸ ISIS exploited this domestic strife to attack Ramadi and Fallujah in January 2014 after the ISF attempted to clear the Ramadi protest camp in December 2013. Other cities where Sunni anti-government sentiment was strong in 2013 ultimately came under ISIS's control after the fall of Mosul, including Hawija and Tikrit. This points to how ISIS exploits social cleavages to out-manuever state security forces, irrespective of the backing of disenfranchised populations.

ISIS's influence operations in Syria in 2013 were opportunistic. ISIS's influence operations in Iraq in 2013 were calculated. They were a deliberate supporting operation in Iraq to complement ISIS's military preparations. ISIS shifted its *Soldiers' Harvest* campaign from civilian targets to military targets by late 2013, intimidating local security forces and assassinating tribal leaders in the locations where ISIS would soon move to establish urban control.⁴⁹ The *Soldiers' Harvest* campaign revealed by November 2013 that ISIS's presence in Mosul, southern Ninewa, northern Diyala, and Jurf al-Sakhar southwest of Baghdad amounted to de facto area control. ISIS's punitive house-borne IEDS (HBIEDS) to demolish the homes of security force members became the new signature attack as ISIS moved forces into these areas, along with population displacement and leaflets threatening against resistance.⁵⁰ These positions fell within all three of Iraq's belts, giving ISIS depth, another feature of ISIS's battlefield preparations in Iraq. It was clear by this point that ISIS would threaten Iraq's control in the outer belt, the middle belt, and the Baghdad belts, fixing the bulk of Iraq's security forces.

ISIS's style of warfare also changed during this period. ISIS switched from attacking civilians to attacking fixed military sites, including Federal Police headquarters and the headquarters of the Ninewa Operations Command in Mosul on October 25, 2013.⁵¹ Meanwhile the ISF was either deploying forces to try to attack ISIS in the Jazeera and Anbar deserts, or was attempting to clear Sunni neighborhoods and arrest civilian military-aged males.⁵² The ISF was therefore aware that ISIS was maneuvering through the belts, but the ISF did not have a cohesive campaign plan to protect Iraq's cities. ISIS's slow regeneration over five years, shifting among attack styles over a wide geography, had the cumulative effect of leaving Iraq exposed to ISIS's urban assault in 2014. This was not incidental, but deliberate. ISIS's phases in Iraq were carefully timed to neutralize any advantage that made the ISF a more sophisticated military than ISIS. Controlled shifting among warfare styles in discernable phases, which ISIS assigned names to in several cases, demonstrated the clear presence of a centralized military plan for ISIS's assault upon Iraq in the 2012-2014 timeframe. This is the feature that earned ISIS the moniker the "Terrorist Army," and it was discernable before ISIS seized control of cities in Iraq and Syria in January 2014.

Seize Control (January 2014 – July 2014)

ISIS demonstrated a new capability to conduct conventional warfare in 2014, and in so doing ISIS redefined the contemporary norms assigned to modern Salafi-jihadist groups. ISIS maneuvered and outmatched the Iraqi Army on numerous fronts and established contiguous control of major cities and military bases. ISIS declared its caliphate after it had established political control with capabilities to



This map does not display the ISIS-affiliated activity in Syria prior to the declaration of ISIS in April 2013. Prior to that, ISIS and the al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra, were likely joined. Jabhat al-Nusra's violent activities in Syria began in January 2012.

spare to continue its expansion. ISIS proceeded in multiple operational phases that indicated the presence of a theater-level campaign plan. The plan maximized use of Iraq's deserts and existing military infrastructure in northern Iraq and eastern Syria to establish lasting control. More than its previous operations, this phase demonstrated the presence of trained military experts within ISIS, likely Salafist members of Iraq's former Army.⁵³ This conventional warfare capability allowed ISIS to use its other warfare styles as a preparation phase to degrade the ISF over several years before ISIS's main assault.

The mechanics of ISIS's conventional maneuver plan also overtly demonstrated ISIS's prior knowledge and skilled use of Iraq's belts. ISIS offset its desert operations in Anbar from its urban offensive, drawing the Iraqi Security Forces into the desert and decimating the leadership of the 7th IA there⁵⁴ before attacking into Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014.⁵⁵

ISIS offset in time and space its Anbar urban offensive in January 2014 from its main offensive in northern Iraq in June 2014 by six months, drawing a maximum deployment of the Iraqi Security Forces into an intense fight in Anbar where they sustained heavy losses.⁵⁶ This exposed Mosul's security forces to ISIS's frontal assault in June 2014 without the potential for reinforcement from the ISF elsewhere. This operation is the largest scale diversion across Iraq's depth that ISIS delivered to date, and it demonstrates the extent of ISIS's use of geographic framing and phasing in its conventional campaign design.

ISIS's urban offensive in Fallujah and Ramadi in 2014 occurred simultaneously with ISIS's seizure of Raqqa and cities in northern Aleppo in January 2014, which by contrast was a reaction to an attack against ISIS by Syrian rebels and Jabhat al-Nusra. It nevertheless indicated the depth of ISIS's ground forces across Iraq and Syria that were engaged in

simultaneous campaigns to claim territory. ISIS was able to expel opponents from Raqqa and northern Aleppo and seize full control of the former while also engaged with the ISF in Anbar. ISIS nevertheless ceded Idlib, the remainder of Aleppo, and Hama to other rebels and JN. ISIS also went dormant in Damascus by early 2013. ISIS's holdings in Syria therefore did not speak to its military design capability so much as its tactical abilities relative to Syrian rebels and Jabhat al-Nusra east of Aleppo.

ISIS then expanded its attacks in Deir ez-Zour in early 2014, which spoke more clearly to the creation of a unified campaign plan across Iraq and Syria by ISIS. Gaining ground in Deir ez-Zour allowed ISIS to consolidate its strength in outer band of the Jazeera to unite its Syrian and Iraqi campaigns.⁵⁷ ISIS then established control of Deir ez-Zour's oil infrastructure, generating new financial streams. Jabhat al-Nusra even withdrew from Deir ez-Zour province by July 2014,⁵⁸ effectively ceding eastern Syria to ISIS after the fall of Mosul. At this time, ISIS's previously disparate military campaigns in Iraq and Syria likely began to merge at a larger theater level.

The operational design of ISIS's June 2014 urban offensive in Iraq was likely a personal signature of a lower operational commander who is now deceased. ISIS named the Mosul operation after Abdul Rahman al-Bilawi, reportedly the commander of Anbar, known as the "Lion of Anbar." ISIS honored him in the first issue of *Dabiq* with a passage naming the Mosul offensive "Assadulah al-Bilawi campaign," describing its full extent in detail.⁵⁹ Desert maneuvers by vehicle columns serving as "light cavalry" moved quickly from one front to another, seizing Mosul, Tikrit, Baiji, Hawija, and then cities in northern Diyala and eastern Salah ad-Din. This near simultaneous capture of multiple cities was a new bar for ISIS and a shock to Iraq's outer belt defenses, which largely dissolved in response to the crisis.⁶⁰ ISIS rapidly maneuvered to cities in outer Anbar, including Rawa, Ana, and Qaim by June 22, 2014.⁶¹ ISIS thereby added control of cities in Iraq's outer belt and middle belts to its previous inventory, which consisted of control of Fallujah in the Baghdad Belts and partial neighborhood control of Ramadi. Here geography and phasing united again to reveal an all-of-Iraq plan to break the state and establish ISIS's claim to a caliphate. ISIS announced its creation of a caliphate from Mosul on June 28, 2014.⁶²

Exploiting Success: The Northern Blitz (July 2014 – August 2014)

The blitz that followed was yet another hallmark of ISIS's summer 2014 offensive campaign. ISIS exploited the moment of shock it had induced, leveraging captured military equipment from Mosul and maneuvering rapidly toward Syria. ISIS seized multiple regime bases in Hasaka and Raqqa provinces, moving swiftly into northern Aleppo and pushing against rebel positions north of the city. This northern Syria



Abu Omar al-Shishani, named ISIS's "Commander of the North" in early 2014, is shown exiting an armored HMMWV likely captured during ISIS's assault upon Mosul. ISIS transported military equipment and vehicles from Iraq to Syria as ISIS engaged its blitz campaign, in which ISIS gained further momentum by seizing several Syrian regime bases in eastern Syria thereafter. Source: Activist Twitter Post

attack column was likely the work of another operational-level commander, possibly Abu Omar al-Shishani, whom ISIS named its "Commander of the North" as early as May 2014.⁶³ Abu Omar al-Shishani was famously shown climbing out of an American HMMWV on July 2, 2014,⁶⁴ displaying the movement of captured military equipment from Iraqi bases in northern Iraq after Mosul's fall. ISIS extended its blitz, augmented with heavy firepower and armor from captured Iraqi and Syrian bases, to expand closer to Aleppo's northern Kilis corridor, capturing the village of Dabiq after which ISIS's magazine is named. ISIS also reinvigorated its stalled offensive to capture the Syrian Kurdish border town of Kobane, accelerating with vigor in August 2014 until Syrian Kurds with Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga reinforcements and U.S. airstrikes halted ISIS's advance. Shishani is believed still to be alive as of May 2015, though he was also reportedly present at and unable to win the battle of Kobane, demonstrating his tactical limitations.

ISIS's urban offensives to seize cities in Iraq and Syria might have continued if this phase of ISIS's campaign had not been halted shy of Kobane in Syria. ISIS's offensives in Iraq also halted shy of several assessed objectives, including Haditha and Ramadi in Anbar, Balad and Dhuluiyah in northern Baghdad, and Samarra, Muqdadiah, and Kirkuk city. ISIS also came within 30 km of the Kurdish capital of Erbil on August 7, 2014 just before U.S. airstrikes in Iraq began. Shi'a militia mobilization with Iranian support prevented ISIS's advance in Diyala, Samarra, and Baghdad. The Kurdish Peshmerga prevented ISIS's advance into Kirkuk city and protected the strategic Mosul Dam after ISIS temporarily

seized it. Sunni tribal militias joined the ISF to protect Haditha and Ramadi from ISIS. U.S. airstrikes augmented Syrian Kurdish forces, the Peshmerga, and the ISF in outer Anbar and eastern Salah ad-Din, likely contributing directly to their success in culminating ISIS's offensive. It is not clear at this time if these forces will be able to hold terrain consistently against ISIS without supporting airstrikes if ISIS reestablishes the initiative in future phases.

Consolidate control (April 2014 – PRESENT)

ISIS's blitz was offensive in nature. But much of what followed ISIS's capture of Mosul was part of a territorial consolidation phase, a defensive operation. ISIS consolidated its urban control militarily by eliminating gaps in its control line where possible across Iraq and Syria. ISIS first began to consolidate control in northern Syria following its gains and losses in January 2014 in an attempt to improve its positions. ISIS began a tactical offensive in Aleppo in April 2014 to push against the boundaries that settled after the fighting against rebels in January 2014. ISIS's initial offensive in Kobane, which was unsuccessful, was likely part of this consolidation. ISIS also extended its control from Raqqa and Hasaka to Deir ez-Zour in April 2014, which was still heavily populated with rebel groups hostile to ISIS and JN.⁶⁵ ISIS established positions forming contiguous control from southern Hasaka to Abu Kamal before the fall of Mosul. This consolidation was an extension of ISIS's conventional maneuver campaign, but one that supported ISIS's interior defense, not just its future expansion.

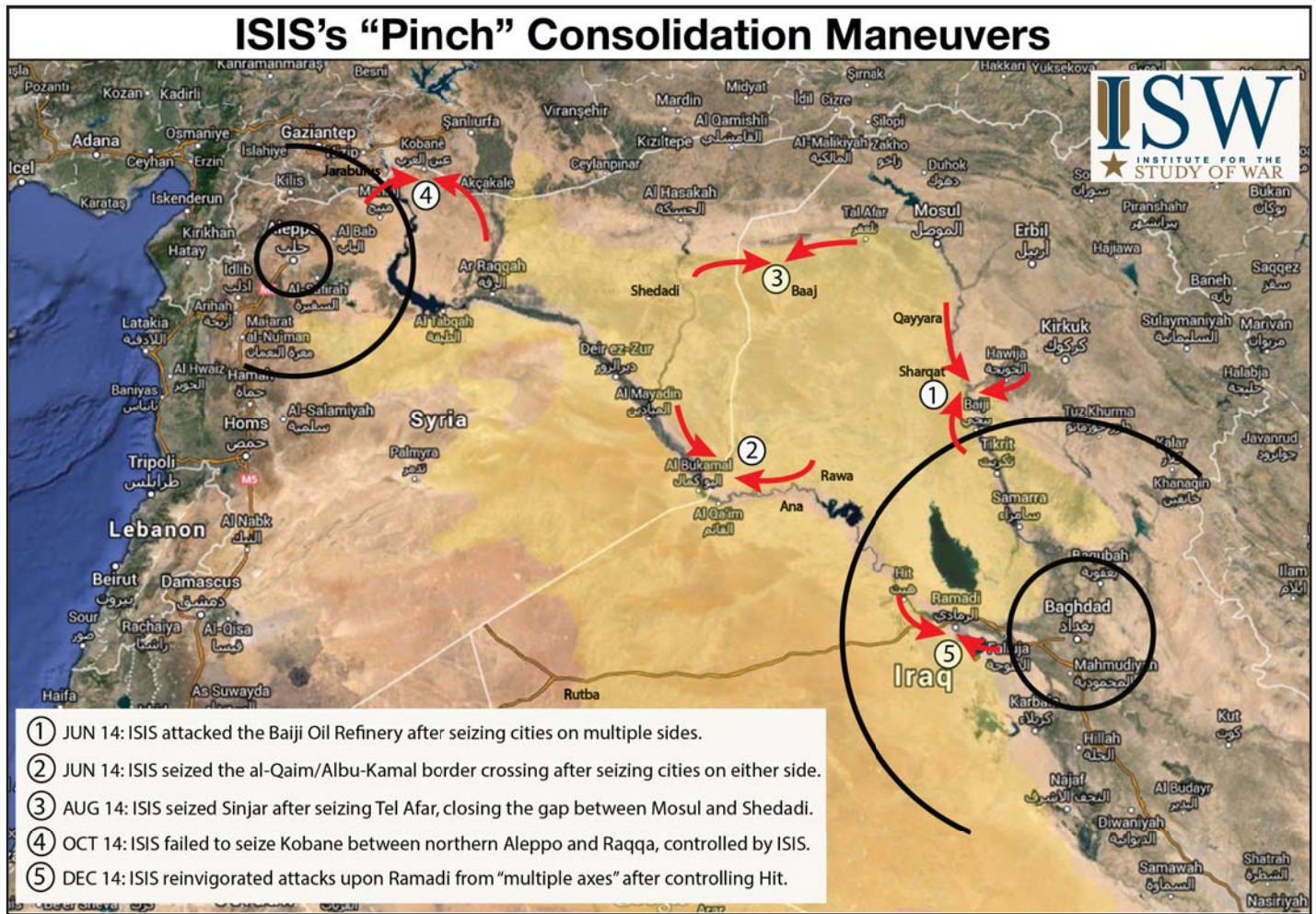
ISIS's consolidation in Syria proceeded rapidly after the fall of Mosul. ISIS renewed its ground offensive in Kobane on June 23, 2014 after a brief pause to collect on the material rewards of Mosul's fall, after which time the ISIS campaign to seize control of Kobane intensified dramatically. When ISIS moved from its northern Iraq offensive to outer Anbar in June 2014, ISIS in Deir ez-Zour consolidated from the Syrian-Iraqi border crossing at Abu Kamal to Qaim while ISIS in Anbar pushed west from Rawa and Ana, consolidating from both directions. ISIS also connected its positions in Hasaka and Ninewa provinces with cities and roads as well as the Jazeera desert, which had long been a transnational support for ISIS in northern Iraq. ISIS in effect consolidated control of the outer belts region by July 2014, creating an urban perimeter around the Jazeera that was only exposed to counter-attack along the Kurdish north, along the eastern front, and in isolated pockets of ISF control in Anbar. The Assad regime also maintained isolated positions in Hasaka and Deir ez-Zour. These positions were not positioned for counter-offensives, but rather to symbolize the extent of Assad's physical control.⁶⁶

Iraq's belts enabled a conventional tactic that became a signature of ISIS during its late 2014 consolidation phase. ISIS repeatedly attacked cities from "multiple axes," either

from deserts or from cities already under its control. This consolidation tactic isolated ISF elements deployed forward and eventually eliminated their forward presence. After the fall of Mosul on June 9, 2014, ISIS executed several such envelopments, visible through the order in which cities fell to ISIS. After Mosul, ISIS seized Qayarra, Shirqat, Tikrit, Baiji, and Hawija on June 10-11, 2014, effectively surrounding the Baiji Oil Refinery, a strategic infrastructure objective.⁶⁷ In another example, ISIS seized the outer Anbar towns of Rawa and Ana in June 2014 before it proceeded west to the Iraqi-Syrian border crossing at Qaim, "pinching" this gap in its control line from the east and west from its existing positions in Deir ez-Zour province in Syria.⁶⁸ ISIS also seized Mosul before moving west to clear Tel Afar and Sinjar, again "pinching" the gap from the east and west from existing positions in Hasaka province.⁶⁹ These moves demonstrate the geographic framing that ISIS employed in Iraq to extend and consolidate its urban control. ISIS possessed desert support zones within each belt, and ISIS projected from the deserts into cities in 2014 to establish and expand its urban foothold.

ISIS also seized Suleiman Beg in Iraq between its eastern strongholds in Hawija and northern Diyala, including the Shi'a Turkomen town of Amerli, where ISIS laid siege and created another humanitarian crisis that required the intervention of international aid. This operation reflected less of a "pinch" configuration, mainly because ISIS could not maneuver as freely in eastern Iraq. ISIS reached all the way to Khanaqin in Diyala Province on the Iraq-Iran border, which likely provoked strong Iranian response in Iraq. Ultimately, ISIS failed to consolidate on this eastern front. Iranian-backed Shi'a militias mobilized and cleared ISIS from northern Diyala between June 2014⁷⁰ and November 2014.⁷¹ ISIS's eastern forces likely consolidated into the deserts east of the Tigris in Salah ad-Din, though the risk that ISIS survives in Diyala in a low-profile form remains as of May 2015.⁷² This low profile posture, visible through isolated attacks, is an indicator of how ISIS may posture after anti-ISIS operational successes elsewhere. These areas must be watched to see if ISIS potentially resurfaces in low-profile configurations in Diyala in future phases.

ISIS's stronghold in Fallujah also enabled ISIS to "pinch" west along the Euphrates to consolidate complete control of Anbar in late 2014. ISIS seized the city of Hit in the middle of Anbar province in October 2014,⁷³ making it possible for ISIS to attack Ramadi from the east and west. This position also enabled ISIS to close the distance between Hit and Rawa, enveloping Haditha, Baghdadi, and al-Asad airbase. This envelopment allowed ISIS to attack this strategic military position in December 2014 to prevent ISF reinforcements to Ramadi, where ISIS had been fighting since January 2014. The battle for Ramadi in mid-April 2015 demonstrates the difficulty of fighting ISIS in the middle belt. ISIS retains the option to attack wherever the ISF is not concentrated. The



This map depicts the order in which ISIS seized cities across Iraq and Syria during its consolidation phase. ISIS closed the gap between cities under its control in a "pinch" maneuver that isolated enemy forces and reduced their ability to withstand ISIS's advance.

ISF launched a counter-attack against ISIS's positions near Ramadi on April 16, 2015, and subsequently ISIS attacked ISF positions in the Baiji Oil Refinery while also counter-attacking near Ramadi.⁷⁴ The April 2015 attacks upon Baiji and Ramadi illustrate an enduring characteristic of ISIS's battlefield disposition that leverages the rings for mobility: ISIS appears to have separate forces in northern Iraq and Anbar, and ISIS plays these two fronts off of one another where possible to divert and overstretch the ISF.

ISIS did not pursue its consolidation at Kobane the same way because it met with similarly strong resistance there, including reinforcements from the PKK and Peshmerga and U.S. air support by October 2014. Arguably ISIS only needed to take villages south of Kobane to complete its consolidation, which ISIS achieved when it seized the road connecting Manbij to Hasaka at the Euphrates bridgehead at Serrin in early 2014.⁷⁵ ISIS pursued the city of Kobane doggedly as if it were key terrain, however, reportedly reinforcing the battle with new recruits and Hisbah police forces from Aleppo and Raqqa.⁷⁶ At this point ISIS exceeded its consolidation goal, instead

behaving as if still had the power to elongate its northern blitz. ISIS's commander of the north, Abu Omar al-Shishani, reportedly deployed with a large contingent of reinforcements on October 26, 2014⁷⁷ possibly to reinvigorate the offensive at Kobane. ISIS reportedly launched a final attack on Kobane from three axes on December 2, 2014,⁷⁸ which Syrian Kurds repelled, sealing ISIS's tactical defeat there. Kobane thereby demonstrated a weakness in ISIS's phasing. ISIS did not cleanly transition to the defense in northern Syria, where it continues to face an expanding Kurdish threat as of May 2015.

The "pinch" tactic used by ISIS during its consolidation suggests ways in which ISIS may attempt to undo the ISF's consolidation in Iraq in 2015. ISIS will likely attempt to break out of clearing operations by attacking cities that have already been cleared by the ISF, such as Tikrit, contesting them in a way that over-stretches the ISF. ISIS likely desires to hold the fight in Iraq's middle belt rather than in the outer belt, where ISIS's core strength is concentrated. ISIS can operate flexibly in this battle zone because it also has strong positions in the

Baghdad belts, namely in the Thar Thar desert and Fallujah. The Thar Thar desert⁷⁹ likely enabled ISIS's attacks upon towns in northern Baghdad such as Balad and Dhuluiyah in late 2014, as well as Samarra, which ISIS continued to attack as recently as March 20, 2015.⁸⁰ ISIS's enduring presence in the capital region preserves its check upon the Iraqi Security Forces, which cannot deploy fully forward while ISIS represents such a proximate threat to Baghdad without ceding control of the capital and Iraq's holy cities to Iranian-backed militias.

Establish Internal Security (January 2014 – PRESENT)

ISIS began to establish practices for internal security in Syria in January 2014.⁸¹ ISIS's internal security includes religious police, known as the Hisbah religious police force, which enforces ISIS's interpretation of Sharia law and maintains social control.⁸² ISIS liberally enacts corporal punishment,⁸³ executions,⁸⁴ and other punishments that it claims to derive from religious law in the cities under its control to demonstrate its local power. ISIS also persecutes minorities, executes attempted defectors and potential organizers of resistance to ISIS, and prevents residents from leaving the cities under ISIS's control.⁸⁵ ISIS conducts mass executions as an escalated means to control a population, which ISIS notoriously did to the Sheitat tribe in Deir ez-Zour in August 2014.⁸⁶ The tribe ultimately submitted to ISIS rule, though ISIS continues to suffer from internal resistance in the province in early 2015,⁸⁷ a harbinger of future challenges to ISIS throughout its depth.

ISIS's brutality may anneal populations against ISIS, but ISIS's coercive power still dominates within its control zone as of May 2015. Brutality will not necessarily precipitate ISIS's demise from internal threats. However, it increased external threats to ISIS by igniting Western intervention. The U.S. intervened in Iraq with airstrikes when ISIS massacred Yazidis north of Sinjar in early August 2014.⁸⁸ The U.S. also intervened with airstrikes in Kobane after ISIS displaced 172,000 Kurds as it advanced to the border city in October 2014.⁸⁹ This international response likely surprised ISIS, given the tolerance displayed by the international community and the U.S. for Bashar al-Assad's crimes. ISIS conducted many such massacres without provoking this response, such that ISIS is likely to continue the behavior as a solution for internal security.

ISIS nonetheless accelerated its brutality in the face of international involvement. ISIS began beheading captured Americans among other foreigners, capitalizing upon a message of retribution. ISIS extended this treatment to imprisoned Jordanian pilot Mu'adh Safi Yusuf al-Kasasibah whom ISIS immolated in February 2015, explaining its actions as retaliation through references to early Islamic history.

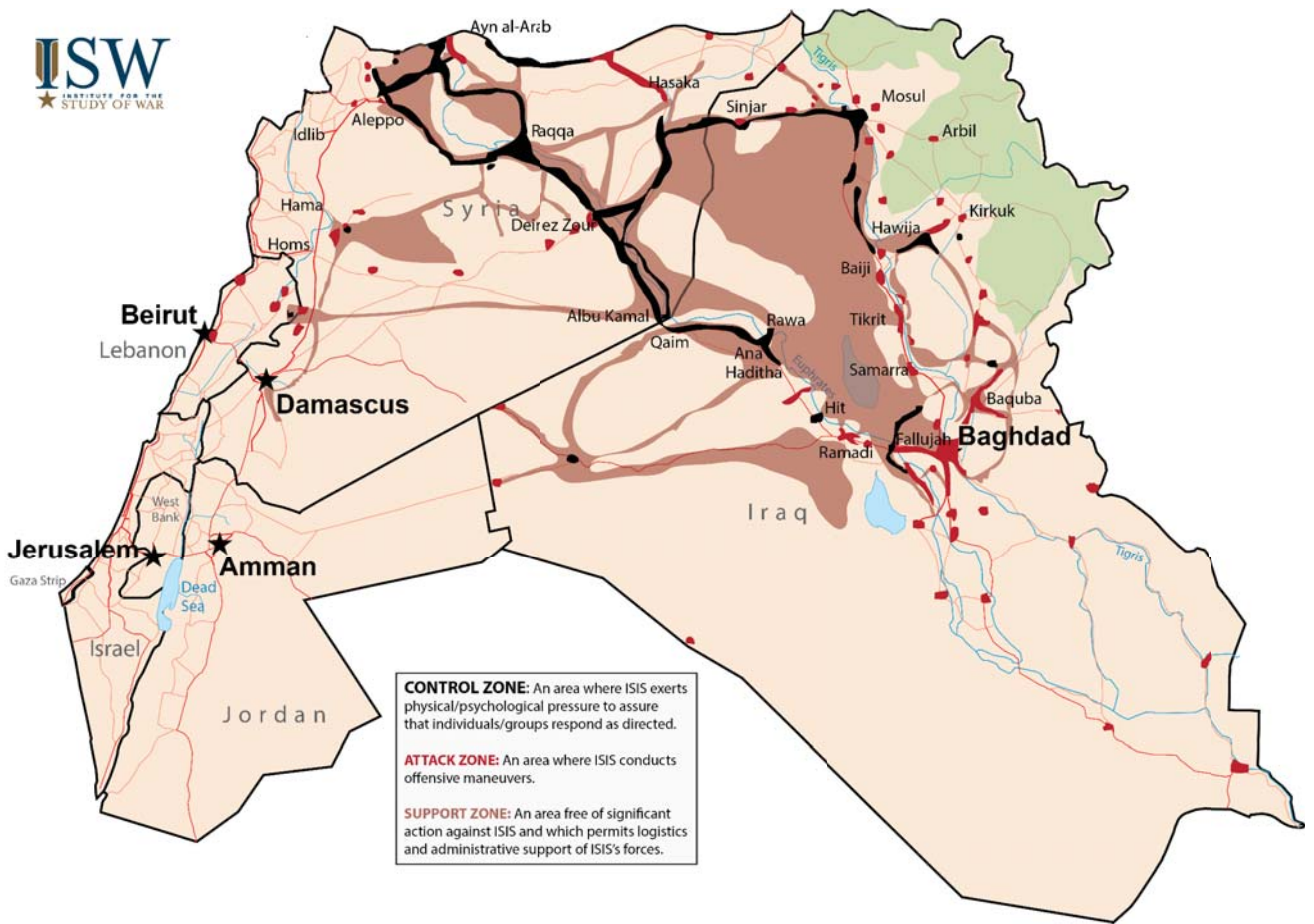
"The Islamic State not only followed the footsteps of Allah's Messenger (sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) in his harshness towards the disbelievers, but also emulated the example of his righteous Sahabah (radjyallahu 'anhum) [companions of Mohammed] by punishing with fire in retaliation, for the purpose of terrorizing the murtaddin [apostates] and making examples out of them."⁹⁰

ISIS manages internal security as well as global expansion through a psychological campaign of fear. This allows ISIS to fall back on its core competency for violence when its influence campaign otherwise falters. Fear is a powerful motivator. The effect upon populations behind ISIS's control line means that they will likely not be able to rise up against ISIS unless ISIS is attacked from the outside. Such an uprising is therefore unlikely unless the central governments of Iraq and Syria present a compelling alternative.

MEASURING SUCCESS AGAINST ISIS IN 2015

ISIS accomplished many of its military objectives at a rapid pace between June 2014 and September 2014. ISIS established control of 11 cities in the outer and middle belts of Iraq, including four major urban centers: Mosul, Baiji, Tikrit, and Hawija. ISIS seized several Iraqi military bases in the process, acquiring military equipment that ISIS utilized to attack several military bases in Syria. Acquiring hardened military defensive positions, ISIS pressed forward from those positions to clear areas that constituted gaps in its defensive line, at Deir ez-Zour, the Baiji oil refinery, middle Anbar, and Kobane. Several of these area objectives also held intrinsic value, especially the Baiji oil refinery, an important potential source of revenue. ISIS thereby established dominion in the Sunni heartland of Iraq and Syria, forming its physical caliphate. ISIS was able to control some critical infrastructure, particularly dams along the Euphrates, bridges, and oil fields. ISIS formed active frontiers near Iran in Diyala province and in the "Northern Front" against Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria. ISIS destroyed significant military capability and attempted to expand into deeper stretches of Iraq and Syria.

ISIS did not destroy the seat of the Iraqi government in the capital. ISIS did not destroy rival military forces. Its military frontiers in eastern Iraq, northern Syria, and northern Iraq became active zones for effective counter-attacks by armed anti-ISIS forces, and ISIS lost control of much of the eastern front outright.⁹¹ ISIS did not succeed in closing the gaps in its defensive lines; in fact, anti-ISIS forces were able to expand and brace the gaps at Baiji, Tikrit, al-Asad airbase, Sinjar, Hasaka, and Kobane. The Syrian regime withstood ISIS assaults upon its positions in Deir ez-Zour city, and as of May 15, 2015 the regime's positions in the province are still standing. Furthermore, ISIS lost control of additional forward positions within the Baghdad belts. ISIS lost Jurf-al Sakhar,⁹² southwest of Baghdad, and its positions in northern



ISIS suffered tactical losses in eastern Iraq, near Baghdad, and at Kobane in northern Syria. ISIS also lost its first major city at Tikrit. ISIS nevertheless maintains extensive control of cities across Iraq and Syria as of May 2015.

Baghdad, though ISIS still possesses a desert support zone in the Thar Thar region and VBIED cells still remains active near Baghdad in May 2015. The ISF and Shi'a militias successfully cleared ISIS from its eastern frontier in northern Diyala and eastern Salah ad-Din, retaking several towns that had fallen under ISIS's control, but ISIS has begun to attack behind the ISF control line in Diyala in April 2015.⁹³ Strategically, ISIS succeeded in drawing Iran into the war in Iraq in a way that complicates U.S. involvement.⁹⁴

The loss of Jurf al-Sakhar likely limited the degree to which ISIS could project force upon the Shi'a holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. ISIS may still possess strength south of Baghdad from which to project guerilla and terrorist attacks. ISIS has likely also infiltrated the southern Baghdad neighborhood of Dora, from which attacks were launched in December 20, 2014 upon the Green Zone.⁹⁵ The displacement of Sunni civilians from Jurf al-Sakhar and Anbar likely provided ISIS with an avenue for infiltration into areas of less intense security from which it may renew attacks either to reestablish its strongholds south of Baghdad or to launch greater attacks

within Baghdad city.⁹⁶ ISIS's latent presence south of Baghdad may present threats to ISF bases south of Baghdad or the holy cities if ISIS's control in Anbar falters.⁹⁷

The loss of its positions north of Baghdad in the vicinity of Balad and Dhuluiyah likely degraded ISIS's disposition in the Baghdad Belts more significantly,⁹⁸ limiting the degree to which ISIS could isolate the ISF in Samarra by cutting off their ground access to Baghdad. ISIS nevertheless retains access to the Thar Thar desert support zone, from which it attacked and overran an Iraqi Army post at Thar Thar regulatory dam on April 24, 2015.⁹⁹ But even this position constituted a forward position rather than a direct loss to ISIS's physical caliphate. ISIS also likely desired to connect its desert systems east and west of the Tigris as it adapted to the loss of the Hamrin ridge line. When the ISF cleared ISIS from this zone in December 2014, the ISF gained a significant upper hand in the defense of the Iraqi state against the ISIS main battle plan. ISIS likely still maintains freedom of maneuver in Iraq's interior deserts as of May 2015, however, from which ISIS will likely continue to attack both Baghdad and Samarra.

ISIS did not, therefore, lose much of its core terrain in late 2014. It did lose the initiative, however. These losses therefore represent significant opportunities for anti-ISIS forces to exploit gaps in ISIS's control line and to use ISIS's battlefield framing to its disadvantage. It is important to the success of anti-ISIS operations that ISIS's response to its losses be evaluated for whether the elements of ISIS's original design, namely geographic framing, phasing, and hybridization, will re-emerge. It is not yet clear as of May 2015 whether ISIS's command and control or mobility have been degraded to the degree that ISIS can no longer design sophisticated campaigns, limiting its ability to engage ISF and Kurdish counter-offensives cogently. ISIS may in fact decentralize on purpose. What may constitute a deliberate choice to cede command authority to local ISIS elements and to encourage low-profile hybridization may masquerade as permanent loss of ISIS's design capability, which ISIS may apply selectively if it still exists. While ISIS continues to mount simultaneous attacks in Baiji and Ramadi, to increase its presence in Damascus, and to launch attacks behind ISF lines in April 2015, it is safest to plan against both possibilities, which are dangerous in their own right and support both ISIS's longevity and its resilience.

There is a difference between hybridization and real constraint, and it is also possible to apply constraints that limit ISIS's flexibility. It is important to prevent ISIS from having the opportunity to scale back up to high-profile and sophisticated attacks like those ISIS prosecuted in 2014. This is a worthy goal for the anti-ISIS campaign in support of other phased objectives and a way to frame the current status of the fight against ISIS as of early 2015. Within this frame, ISIS's conventional warfare has not yet been fully impeded as of May 2015. ISIS does not, however, implement simultaneous attacks as often as it did in 2014. ISIS launched a significant set of attacks on January 30, 2015 in Anbar, Samarra, and Kirkuk on the same day. ISIS also launched attacks in Ramadi and on the Baiji Oil Refinery on the same day on April 16, 2015, likely a synchronized and signature plan.¹⁰⁰ Both appeared to be timed in response to contemporary activities by anti-ISIS forces, but ISIS likely cannot sustain a high rate of such attacks. It is therefore possible to out-pace ISIS. It is also important not to underestimate what enduring military logic still applies to ISIS's next moves in 2015 despite heavy personnel losses that are also expected to have degraded its leadership ranks.

ADAPTING TO THE DEFENSE

ISIS has been adapting to the defense since its gained control of cities in January 2014. But as discussed in this report, ISIS can mediate its defensive actions and political objectives to preserve its combat power. Some approaches used by ISIS in 2015 may leverage its conventional warfare approaches, including fortified defenses, area defenses, and zone defenses. ISIS tested some of these defenses in Tikrit, and

some of them apparently succeeded, given that the operation to clear Tikrit took several weeks. ISIS's defenses at Tikrit may not fully encapsulate how ISIS approaches defenses elsewhere, as ISIS likely learned from the experience also. ISIS may deliberately vary its tactics, hybridizing in different ways across fronts, especially now that it has suffered losses. Degradation encourages rather than impedes this tailored behavior. It is nevertheless useful to review ISIS's means to conduct conventional defense in order to counteract this range of action and shape ISIS's future behavior.

Fortified Defense

ISIS has developed fortified defenses in numerous cities. ISIS reportedly erected giant cement walls and dug trenches around Mosul in January 2015.¹⁰¹ ISIS also destroyed bridges near Tikrit in March 2015¹⁰² and near Mosul in April 2015.¹⁰³ ISIS is also expected to thwart urban clearing operations by using civilians as human shields, according to local reporting.¹⁰⁴ Engineering obstacles and rings of IEDs have also been widely reported, with clearing operations in Tikrit in March 2015 illustrating the veracity of this claim.¹⁰⁵ ISIS's fortified defenses represent an advantage over the Iraqi Security Forces, which were never solely responsible for clearing cities against high-end opponents. Shi'a militias may possess an experiential advantage, having been perpetrators of urban warfare against U.S. forces and builders of IEDs previously, having learned hard lessons in 2008 from the battles of Sadr City and Basra, and having further improved their urban combat skills in Syria. But the stalled operation in Tikrit by March 25, 2015 indicates that their abilities to clear ISIS from Tikrit without air support were insufficient to the task. They were able to leverage this capability to clear ISIS from numerous small villages in 2014, including northern Diyala and Jurf al-Sakhar. But ISIS's fortifications still hold the advantage in large cities, where the ISF must allow significant damage to municipal and cultural structures occupied by ISIS in order to clear them.

Preserving the physical extent of its caliphate does not necessarily require ISIS to preserve life and property within the cities it claims. ISIS will likely destroy cities under its control in order to deny them to its adversaries. ISIS reportedly destroyed buildings in cities such as Mosul,¹⁰⁶ Hamdaniyah¹⁰⁷ and Qaim¹⁰⁸ in February 2015 in order to destroy what they represent. Fortified defenses do not preclude this behavior. ISIS preserves its caliphate by keeping former states' security forces from establishing competitive claims to legitimacy. Anti-ISIS strategies must, therefore, encompass lasting security solutions for the states competing with ISIS, namely Iraq and Syria. ISIS will not likely abandon its strategic cities, especially Fallujah, Mosul, and Raqqa, without destroying them in the process to deny them to opposing political forces. In the event that anti-ISIS forces reclaim them all, ISIS will not be truly defeated if these cities are never rebuilt. For this reason, ISIS likely anticipates that it will not face existential



ISIS's Defensive Strategies

Fortified Defense	ISIS prepares hardened defenses within cities to maximize enemy and civilian casualties, destroy critical infrastructure, and deny access to cities under its control.
Area Defense	ISIS defends terrain in prepared positions with counter-mobility and anti-personnel obstacles to slow the advance of enemy forces approaching cities under ISIS's control.
Zone Defense	ISIS conducts offensive operations in distant zones with forces permanently assigned to that zone while under attack in the primary zone in order to divert enemy forces.
Hibernation	ISIS retrogrades or remains in place within cities that are overrun by anti-ISIS forces without conducting attacks in order to outlast enemy forces and prepare for future counter-attacks.
Expansion	ISIS expands to new fronts while under attack on a primary front in order to evade destruction and regain the initiative.

Source Consulted: FM 3-90-1- Offense and Defense

threats in 2015 because there is no end in sight to the Syrian war and no discussion as of May 2015 to rebuild Iraq's cities.

Area defense

ISIS also appears to have a concept for area defense in select locations, in which ISIS buffers its fortified defenses by defending the surrounding areas.¹⁰⁹ ISIS declared two new governing areas, or *wilayats*, in the Jazeera west of Mosul and the Dijla [Tigris] south of Mosul on February 19, 2015,¹¹⁰ potentially converting these two historic support zones into a belt defense around Mosul. The Mosul belt defense became an active front in January 2014, as ISIS conducted attacks and sustained counter-attacks by the Kurdish Peshmerga on both fronts.¹¹¹ ISIS also appeared to conduct peripheral attacks outside of Fallujah city in January 2015,¹¹² which comprised a form of area defense. ISIS deployed defensive SVESTs against attacking forces approaching Tikrit on March 13, 2015 which may have been an attempt at a mobile defense, in which ISIS attacks its approaching attackers, rather than an area defense.¹¹³ ISIS may also have deployed a VBIED wave against attackers approaching ISIS's defenses near Ramadi on March 17, 2015 as a way to buffer ISIS's cities and prolong the ISF's advance.¹¹⁴ Tikrit nevertheless demonstrated that ISIS's urban defenses can be overcome, though ISIS likely retains the potential to attack Tikrit again from multiple desert axes the way it has continuously attacked Baiji.

The designation of "*wilayats*" inside Iraq and Syria generally suggest that ISIS has an area defense strategy for its domain in Iraq and Syria, but ISIS's concept for defense may involve leaving the cities and retaining future opportunities to attack them from outlying areas. This is particularly true in Iraq, where many of ISIS's controlled cities are surrounded on multiple sides by deserts. ISIS's positions in Northern Aleppo are comparatively exposed, in that ISIS can only fall back to Raqqa and desert areas east of Hama if it loses control of Manbij, Jarabulus, and al-Bab. The stretch of the Euphrates between Raqqa and northern Aleppo is ISIS's most vulnerable defensive configuration, a potential opportunity for anti-ISIS forces to exploit. These districts are also uniquely critical to ISIS as the pathway for new recruits to flow into Syria and receive basic training. These cities are also the least likely to be challenged by anti-ISIS actors in 2015; therefore, ISIS is likely to hold them in 2015 despite this opportunity.

Fallujah is also a forward position that is exposed to the core defenses of the Iraqi state, but ISIS nonetheless has attacked the ISF outside of the city as recently as April 24, 2015.¹¹⁵ This particular offensive may be an area or mobile defensive strategy to protect Fallujah itself, but it is more likely a supporting operation to compromise the ISF's presence west of Fallujah and strike the ISF close to Baghdad. This operation also suggests that ISIS may also be experimenting with a third defensive option, whereby it attacks in one area

with locally emplaced forces in order to support its defenses elsewhere. For the purposes of this report, we will refer to this tactic as “zone defense.”¹¹⁶

Zone defense

Other examples of zone defense have occurred elsewhere in Iraq in 2015. ISIS has continued to launch attacks in 2015 in apparent attempts to divert attention away from anti-ISIS counter-offensives targeting individual cities under ISIS’s control. ISIS executed major attacks on January 30, 2015 in Ramadi,¹¹⁷ Kirkuk,¹¹⁸ Samarra,¹¹⁹ and areas west of Mosul in what appeared to be a large-scale demonstration of synchronized attacks on multiple fronts.¹²⁰ Iraqi news sources called the attack upon Kirkuk the largest since Mosul, indicating that ISIS still maintained a capacity for strategic offensives in Iraq and a manpower reserve in the Zaab. This diversion was likely an attempt to offset Peshmerga offensives northwest of Mosul near Iski, which were ongoing at the time.¹²¹ ISIS also launched an attack upon the Kirkuk police directorate in central Kirkuk that day,¹²² and the following day ISIS also took control of the Khabaz oil field west of Kirkuk city.¹²³ These additional attacks suggest that this operation was more than a diversion, perhaps a reaction to loss of other funding streams, or perhaps a defensive strategy based upon ISIS’s existing offensive plays that maximize multi-front coordination and maneuver.

ISIS conducted simultaneous attacks upon al-Asad airbase in Anbar and Gwer/Makhmour on February 18, 2015, indicating that ISIS still had offensive capability to devote to Mosul area defense as well as zone defense in Anbar. ISIS also launched attacks on Baghdadi and al-Asad earlier in the year in order to divert ISF in Anbar from their primary objective to clear ISIS in Ramadi. ISIS renewed attacks in the vicinity of Taji base in January 2015, indicating that ISIS still had latent capacity in the northern Baghdad belts.¹²⁴ ISIS continues to attack Taji as recently as April 27, 2015,¹²⁵ allowing ISIS to project attacks in priority rear defense areas of the ISF. The presence of concurrent operations that may be planned and executed at a local level suggests that ISIS is coordinating operations across fronts selectively, choosing not to impose guidance upon local commanders or incur the risk of coordination by exposing higher level leaders or allowing multiple leaders to be killed on one objective.

Selective use of higher-level designs suggests that ISIS retains the ability to control its military sub-components, but may not always leverage it. ISIS appears to select simultaneous offensives when the need arises to defend a particular front, showing that it can launch operations in more than one place, an asymmetric capability compared to the ISF that reduces the ISF’s ability to mass. This selective use is a measure of organizational agility rather than weakness, allowing ISIS to survive counter-offensives in 2015 despite losing ground and retaining the ability to mount coordinated offensives again



Fallujah was the first city in Iraq to fall under ISIS’s control, but it was among the last to be declared a wilayat. ISIS Wilayat Fallujah Media Office posted a photo of the public park that ISIS erected in Fallujah to illustrate its freedom of movement and social mobility in the city, which is 60 km west of Baghdad.

in the future. ISIS’s simultaneous attacks on Ramadi and the Baiji Oil Refinery in April 2015 are a further demonstration that ISIS retains the ability to launch synchronized attacks across fronts.¹²⁶

ISIS may also conduct diversions outside of Iraq and Syria to alleviate the demand for operational defense on its interior. ISIS’s diversions include declaring *wilayats* in other countries, conducting spectacular attacks in other countries, and mounting new global messaging campaigns to polarize and radicalize populations.¹²⁷ Within Iraq and Syria, ISIS may also adopt a low military signature in order to prepare for future attack waves, particularly waiting for Western powers to withdraw or for sectarian war to erupt in Iraq once more. Playing to its roots as a desert insurgency is not necessarily a matter of diminished capacity for ISIS, but possibly a reflection of strategic patience. This attitude is particularly dangerous to current anti-ISIS operations that seek to remove ISIS from major cities as a counter-strategy.

Hibernation

If all of ISIS’s urban defenses fail and ISIS’s caliphate is destroyed, ISIS’s lethal power and organization are likely to endure beyond the loss of cities, just as AQI managed to reconstitute after near-destruction in Iraq in 2008. Identifying this capability is difficult when ISIS goes quiet. Quiet, like that which followed ISIS’s removal from Jurf al-Sakhar, can mean a tactical victory against ISIS. It can also reflect strategic patience and deliberate low-profile hybridization, a measure of design and control rather than weakness. In an environment in which estimates for ISIS’s strength and battle damage vastly vary, it is critical to frame a way to see ISIS’s campaign clearly. Battles like Kobane and

Tikrit may yield different conclusions. Variance in how ISIS fights on different fronts is potentially a reflection of less control, or instead a reflection of more adaptation. Relying upon the initiative of local commanders may be ISIS's strategy to absorb counter-offensives. It is therefore necessary to consider ISIS's favorite operational plays, given that ISIS will likely repeat them based upon the circumstances of the time. ISIS may wait for ideal opportunities to re-emerge after 2015.

ISIS will remain dangerous to recovering states even if its military organization has dissipated. ISIS will keep fighting an initiative-based campaign through a network of insurgencies in this case. ISIS can threaten Iraq's security even after cities are reclaimed. If the ISF cannot grow capacity at a scalable rate, ISIS will represent a formidable enemy long-term, edging Iraq closer to Syria's present security condition. Syria's disorder already preserves ISIS by default, with no state possessing enough legitimacy and force to drive ISIS from cities, rebuild, and keep ISIS at bay. Taking advantage of disorder is an easy play for ISIS. Prospering in disorder does not depend upon exceptional warfare to the same degree as breaking functional states, which is what ISIS accomplished in Iraq. The latter strategy required that ISIS challenge state security directly and overcome it. The ability to do so successfully still distinguishes ISIS from global jihadist groups. Lack of action for a time does not mean that ISIS has necessarily lost it, especially with Syria as a rear area for organizational recovery.

ISIS's urban control in Syria is not likely to face the same threats as its control of cities in Iraq, and therefore ISIS is not likely to face an existential challenge to its credibility. Strategies to defeat ISIS therefore cannot ignore Syria. ISIS will survive with its caliphate intact if ISIS is removed from cities in Iraq without a strategy to remove ISIS from major cities like Raqqa, Manbij, al-Bab, and Jarabulus. Moreover, ISIS can resurge easily into Iraq from this stronghold in Syria. ISIS will also expand deeper into Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey front this front, allowing ISIS's full global program to continue even if Iraq reconstitutes a security barrier to ISIS. The Syrian civil war therefore allows ISIS to prosper while no party, especially the Syrian regime, has the capability to remove ISIS, reclaim cities, and rebuild. ISIS defeat strategies for Iraq must therefore extend to Syria, where ISIS's ground campaigns are directly linked. Moreover, both support ISIS's claim to an extant physical caliphate with access through Syria to the outside world.

Further Expansion

Meanwhile ISIS is seizing on new fronts in Syria. ISIS is likely expanding in Aleppo, Damascus, Qalamoun, Homs, and Hasaka as of May 2015.¹²⁸ ISIS is also seizing the initiative elsewhere in the region. ISIS's remote *wilayats* in Sinai, Libya, Yemen, Mecca and Medina, Algeria, and Khorasan¹²⁹ are

likely part of ISIS's defensive strategy to avert strategic failure if its caliphate is destroyed. ISIS's global operations divert attention from its interior defenses and create redundancy for its military campaign. These *wilayats* can also be part of an offensive strategy to gain terrain for the caliphate if it survives the current onslaught of anti-ISIS operations. ISIS may also be expanding its operations regionally to accelerate an environment of regional disorder, a long-game to preserve the caliphate against the international system. The synergy between ISIS's solutions for immediate defense and preparation for future offensives points to how ISIS has adapted its design to maximize flexibility as its geography changes over time. ISIS is prepared for a wide range of tactical eventualities. Strategies in opposition need to constrain ISIS to a limited and predictable set of options in order to defeat ISIS decisively.

ISIS has also begun to message to other states in the region that they can also be "touched." ISIS launched an attack against the Iraqi Border Guards near the Saudi and Jordanian borders at a location known as Inaza or Ruwayshid air base on January 4, 2015.¹³⁰ ISIS's Media Office of Anbar published a photoset allegedly showing their military activities in the area of al-Salul, implying close proximity to the Saudi border.¹³¹ ISIS attacked the Jordanian Trebil border crossing again on April 25, 2015¹³² and reportedly also a Saudi border crossing on April 26, 2015.¹³³ ISIS's immolation of Jordanian pilot Mu'adh Safi Yusuf al-Kasasibah is another message to strong states, in addition to ISIS's strategic messages concerning the caliphate's expansion to Mecca, Medina, Jerusalem, and Rome.¹³⁴ ISIS's regional expansion through *wilayats* at greater distances allows ISIS to create multi-front threats upon neighboring states like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. This could even include Turkey, if ISIS's position among groups in the Caucasus improves in 2015. The pressure that ISIS places upon these states outside of Iraq and Syria diverts their attention from ISIS's Jazeera-based physical caliphate. It thereby supports ISIS's defense while allowing ISIS to stage for future expansion.

ISIS is already active through loosely connected networks on many other fronts across the globe. ISIS's terrorism and geographic expansion programs are highly dangerous by themselves even if ISIS's physical caliphate is destroyed, making anti-ISIS efforts inside Iraq and Syria necessary but insufficient to destroy ISIS. ISIS is likely attempting to achieve critical mass in its radicalization campaign to avoid strategic defeat should its physical caliphate fail. ISIS may also try to conquer cities in other countries to preserve its caliphate. ISIS likely cannot easily replicate its battlefield advantage in Iraq, where its organization was originally forged, and where its most prominent military personages were likely trained. It is therefore possible to remove ISIS's claim to a caliphate by removing its control of cities in Iraq and Syria, if current conditions remain static on other fronts.

Containing its expansion and effectively countering terrorism and radicalization are necessary anti-ISIS strategies that must run in parallel. If ISIS is allowed to remain in control of its original caliphate lands, anti-ISIS efforts to contain ISIS abroad will fail.

ONGOING OPERATIONS TO CONSTRAIN ISIS'S OPTIONS IN 2015

Countering ISIS's strategy "to remain and expand" in 2015 requires out-performing its ground forces inside Iraq and Syria and re-establishing permanent security there. Degrading ISIS in support of this goal does not mean killing a certain number of fighters. It means limiting ISIS's ability to flex and bounce back to resume offensive operations. Several operational conclusions from this report suggest ways to out-maneuver, out-pace, and out-flex ISIS. The recommendations below provide ways to maximize tactical opportunities to degrade ISIS in ways that constrain its options and provide important opportunities to build momentum for anti-ISIS forces through successive and cumulative tactical victories. They are insufficient to defeat ISIS overall, but they are ways to maximize the ground war that is already underway to achieve strategic effects.

1. *ISIS's pinch maneuver may also work in reverse.* The Iraqi Security Forces are in a better position in Anbar in 2015 than they are in northern Iraq because the ISF possesses a forward military position at al-Asad airbase. Forward military positions perforate ISIS's contiguous control and allow the ISF to envelop and isolate intermediate ISIS positions such as Hit. Re-establishing control of the airbases at Tel Afar and Qayyara in northern Iraq could similarly compromise ISIS's area defenses and force ISIS to decide between offensive actions to re-consolidate contiguous control around Mosul and other defensive objectives. ISIS will attack ISF forward positions heavily; and therefore their logistics and defenses must hold. Establishing forward positions for the ISF possibly requires ISIS to designate northern Iraq as its main effort. Forward positions may also isolate and de-couple ISIS's operations on other fronts, which the ISF must nonetheless cover simultaneously with the assumption that ISIS will respond by attacking elsewhere. ISIS pursues northern Iraq, Anbar, and northern Syria simultaneously, and anti-ISIS forces must do so also.
2. *Iraq needs a better way to patrol deserts.* The Iraqi Security Forces attempted to launch anti-ISIS offensives in 2013 in the Jazeera and Anbar deserts, and these operations failed. The Jazeera and Badia Operations Command (JBOC) tasked with this mission is currently stationed at al-Asad Airbase in Anbar as of May 2015, conducting operations between Hit and Haditha. Once the Anbar Operations Command is strong enough to resume this mission, the JBOC or other Iraqi forces should instead focus upon patrolling the desert areas near Iraq's cities where the desert begins, blocking ISIS's access to urban areas and reduce its ability to attack cities from multiple axes. The JBOC can also use Iraq's belts to limit ISIS's lateral movement, especially by interdicting desert routes that run parallel to the former Route Phoenix, the highway that connects Baiji to Haditha and the Muthanna Complex road. This effort can be augmented with coalition air support, but desert security requires a ground interdiction strategy augmented by U.S. aerial reconnaissance to limit ISIS's access to cities. The JBOC will need to defend Iraq's borders ultimately, but it will fail to achieve operational effects in the near term if it orients far away from Iraq's cities.
3. *Someone has to clear Syrian cities along the Euphrates.* No ground forces in Iraq or Syria are prepared for this mission, not the JBOC, not the Syrian opposition, and not the Assad regime. If the Iraqi Security Forces or trained Syrian rebels undertake it, ISIS will likely attack forward at Baghdad, Aleppo, and other places with terrorist attacks. Not only will these anti-ISIS forces fail to clear and hold the cities farthest from established security zones, but they will also incur operational losses on their own defensive fronts as ISIS projects attacks as a means to divert attention from its core defenses. Clearing the cities along the Syrian stretch of the Euphrates will likely require additional ground forces.¹³⁵ Otherwise ISIS's physical caliphate will remain intact, states will fail to reestablish sovereignty within their borders, and ISIS's strategic defeat will become much harder to attain.
4. *ISIS's operations in Iraq and Syria can be de-linked at Raqqa.* ISIS can be divided by ground forces that enter at Kobane and exploit ISIS's weakest physical links between Raqqa and northern Aleppo. Raqqa lies between the Jazeera and the northern Euphrates system at the Syrian-Turkish border. Northern Aleppo varies drastically from ISIS's positions east of Raqqa, and ISIS's warfare west of Raqqa varies accordingly. Anti-ISIS forces that break ISIS's ground war into its eastern and western fronts will reduce ISIS's ability to synchronize its effects on both fronts in the future. ISIS in Syria can further be de-linked between Raqqa and northern Aleppo along the upper Euphrates. ISIS will still be able to operate on both fronts in parallel, but their synergy is an important capability to constrain. It is also valuable to rupture ISIS's projected image of a contiguous caliphate by slicing its domain in two. A divided ISIS will be easier to defeat operationally.
5. *The "Hold" forces have to hold.* Clearing ISIS from cities is necessary but insufficient to prevent ISIS's return. The cities have to be rebuilt, re-populated, and re-secured. The Hold phase following anti-ISIS clearing operations is vital to the strategic defeat of ISIS. Destroyed cities

with displaced populations that cannot return and prosper would translate to victory for ISIS. Intermediate investments in military counter-offensives will be wasted in this case. ISIS will likely outlast the storm, expending fewer resources, and return when there is less anti-ISIS capability and will to resist. The rebuilding of Iraq and Syria are part of the anti-ISIS mission, not only to hold the terrain from ISIS, but also to prevent a lateral escalation between Arab States and Iran elsewhere in the region.

6. *Displaced Persons are a lasting vulnerability.* ISIS and other threats, including Jabhat al-Nusra, benefit from the malaise of internally displaced persons and refugees that lose faith in the modern states that have failed to secure their well-being. Particularly when displaced persons receive shelter from neighboring states or within urban capitals such as Baghdad, their presence also creates vulnerabilities to infiltration by ISIS and other violent groups seeking to radicalize or terrorize. Anti-ISIS forces must consider how to reestablish conditions for displaced populations as means to mitigate this vulnerability. It is also necessary to reinforce the integrity of states for the generation that is being raised without a home or a national identity.
7. *Mosul is a valid operational priority for the immediate battle plan in 2015.* Iraq must reclaim it before ISIS destroys it. Recapturing Mosul will not be the end of the war against ISIS, however. How ISIS fights for Mosul will indicate whether ISIS in 2015 will behave more like a state, such that ISIS will fight hard to prevent its capture; or rather, in keeping with the argument of this report, ISIS will revert to the behavior of an insurgency that intends to win by drawing the ISF into a long urban battle and continuously evading defeat elsewhere. Avoiding this trap is also a reason to delay the Mosul operation to ensure that the ISF is set up for success before launching on a one-way mission. The significance of Mosul to ISIS is tempered by its other claims, and this is a risk to the current anti-ISIS strategy if it proceeds linearly to reclaim individual cities, even Mosul, before ways to get ahead of ISIS's next moves. Mosul is instead an opportunity to constrain ISIS's operations on other fronts and open more opportunities to challenge ISIS elsewhere, cornering and overcoming its deliberately flexible campaign.

Achieving successes against ISIS will require awareness of what flexible options ISIS retains at each phase. It is vital to the success of the anti-ISIS campaign not to suffer surprise in later phases by mischaracterizing ISIS's use of hybridized forms of warfare as degradation. ISIS has suffered battle damage, and ISIS's military capabilities have likely been degraded, but shifting to the defense and to less sophisticated styles of war is not a clear sign that ISIS is on a path to defeat. ISIS may use its lower profile forms deliberately to outlast its enemies, especially the U.S., to reestablish control in later

phases. It is nevertheless critical to remove ISIS from the cities under its control as a main objective now, given that ISIS is destroying them over time. This is not an easy or short task, and time unfortunately favors ISIS's expanding control and adaptation.

As a terrorist group, ISIS will likely remain in the way that its predecessor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) did, by retreating into desert safe havens and across state borders should all else fail. The minimum threshold for ISIS to remain an organized violent group that can reconstitute is imperceptibly low, especially given the widespread nature of global jihadists seeking affiliation and networks today. The U.S. mission to destroy ISIS may tolerate this resilience if indigenous security solutions are established that prevent ISIS from overrunning state military infrastructure, seizing cities, or terrorizing populations in ways that spark sectarian civil wars. AQI developed the capacity to do all of these things in Iraq in 2012-2013. There were exogenous factors, such as Nouri al-Maliki's authoritarianism and the civil war in Syria that contributed to ISIS's rapid growth and the reduction of barriers to its entry, a pale reflection of the challenges facing the Iraqi state in 2015. Limited remnants of ISIS can regrow the organization to full strength in the future. The anti-ISIS campaign therefore requires either eradicating ISIS more fully or establishing better conditions for state security than Iraq and Syria combined could muster in 2013.

A final strategic assumption threatens to undermine all anti-ISIS activities. ISIS will prevail if competing states are destroyed. Syria is now largely destroyed in 2015. There is no legitimate government to back that will end the war and also secure the whole of Syria. The armed opposition seems to prefer Jabhat al-Nusra at the helm, despite its al-Qaeda affiliation, over Bashar al-Assad. The minority populations in Syria still largely support Assad because they fear annihilation under a Salafi-jihadi society. Syria cannot be surgically supported through airstrikes and train and assist missions alone when Syrian society has lapsed into such chronic disorder. Syria before 2011 is gone. The loss of Syria as a state will allow ISIS, al-Qaeda, and Iran to claim the land and the people that had once belonged to Syria for their own claims. Even a long string of military victories over ISIS will be insufficient to defeat the organization if Syria is left to this fate. Iraq can be the operational beachhead to challenge ISIS, and the model for state recovery, but it will not solve or contain Syria's disorder. Indeed, the ground war against ISIS will only succeed if it is part of a strategy to rebuild both Iraq and Syria.

CONCLUSION

The U.S. and other anti-ISIS actors are facing a new environment in 2015 in which the underlying assumptions that allowed the U.S. to promote limited wars and surgical

counter-terrorism strategies are no longer valid. Policymakers must now make strategic planning decisions assuming that disorder in Syria and the fragility of Iraq's security will continue into the future. This strategic inflection requires that the U.S. reconcile its policy of defeating ISIS with the absence of a regional policy to stabilize the Middle East region. The overall threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East, abroad, and at home is rapidly accelerating. ISIS has done much to undermine the paradigm that statehood yields security, a condition once reinforced by the international system. The further growth of ISIS is one among many threats that will emerge in this environment. States will be challenged more often in the coming years in part because of this precedent by local and transnational groups that emulate ISIS. Threats are rising in more places globally because states have been proven vulnerable. Such groups will not automatically align with ISIS, given that al-Qaeda is competing with ISIS now, but the net result is not a diminished threat, but a growing one. Instead, competition has energized the overlapping global jihadist support network.

The only way to defeat ISIS, which is necessary for U.S. national security, is to guarantee a ground force that will occupy, secure, and rebuild Syria, and Iraq to a lesser extent. More limited solutions are insufficient to shape ground conditions that promote stability and reduce the opportunity for groups like ISIS to remain. The U.S. is not a suitable unilateral occupying force in 2015 because anti-U.S. sentiment in these countries has risen to staggering levels. Iran is also not suitable or capable, as demonstrated by its inability to help the Assad regime win its war in Syria, its tactical inability to clear ISIS from Tikrit in Iraq, its state sponsorship of terrorism, and its strategic objectives to destroy other states in the region. The Arab coalition currently fighting the Houthis in Yemen is likewise unsuitable, given the likelihood that it would also condone persecution of minority Shi'a populations; it is also incapable, given what little its current air campaign in Yemen has accomplished as of May 2015. The Arab coalition is also risky because it treats Iraq and Syria as battle grounds for a sectarian war against Iran instead of unified state-building missions that are necessary to defeat ISIS and al-Qaeda. U.S. leadership is therefore essential. Partnership is also essential, because the U.S. is no longer a legitimate ally in the eyes of many populations in the region.

Adapting to the new environment and solving Iraq and Syria will empower the U.S. and its allies to limit the spread of this condition. Failure to do so will not only result in a durable threat from ISIS, but also cascading threats that rise because of continuing challenges to state structures in the Middle East. Dealing major blows to ISIS while leaving Iraq and Syria unattended will spawn dangerous contingencies in the mid-term. These contingencies include increased Iranian expansion, elevated lateral escalation, and the durable rise of al-Qaeda. Even without a caliphate and without a caliph,

ISIS will not fade, but likely merge once more with al-Qaeda. Their differences are not so great that their competition will endure after this generation of leaders passes. Particularly if Jabhat al-Nusra succeeds at its aim to capture the Syria revolution, and particularly if Iraq and Syria do not recover as states, al-Qaeda will position itself to gain from ISIS's losses. The U.S. could inadvertently degrade ISIS and incidentally empower al-Qaeda at the same time with the surgical anti-ISIS approach it has been pursuing since August 2014.

Failure to re-establish Iraq and Syria as sovereign states will also accelerate the regional sectarian polarity of the Middle East, already charged by the proxy war between Arab states and Iran that conditions in Syria have accelerated. The social mobilization of the Arab world against Assad and Iran will give ISIS and al-Qaeda greater freedom of action. ISIS will remain and expand strategically regardless of military outcomes in Iraq if the Sunni Arab world is brought closer together by unified concern over Iran, which has already displaced ISIS or al-Qaeda as the member states' top priority. Regional sectarianism, like disorder, cements ISIS's survival.

The U.S.-led anti-ISIS campaign may succeed strategically if the opposite proves true and states cross ethnic and sectarian boundaries in order to form durable coalitions and alliances to counter ISIS that instead inure the region against the sectarian effect that ISIS desires to provoke. This outcome is not likely to occur naturally in Syria, as long as Assad remains and his brutal style of warfare continues. Iraq, on the other hand, is more stable, cosmopolitan, and has a national identity that can transcend the sectarian influences of ISIS, Ba'athist insurgents, and Iranian proxy militias, making Iraq the key to demonstrating regional alternatives to sectarian division. Iraq's success against ISIS, if Iraq can function independently of Iran, will likely have a stabilizing effect upon the regional sectarian dynamic, which can begin to reverse the trends currently lingering on the horizon. The preservation of regional stability is the source of strength that is needed for a U.S.-led coalition to defeat ISIS. It may be the most elusive component, but it is possible to set a constructive precedent in Iraq that will reverberate elsewhere, address several disparate U.S. policies in the region, and set the terms for a much needed U.S. regional strategy.

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