

JULY 2015

HARLEEN GAMBHIR

## MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 28

# ISIS'S GLOBAL STRATEGY: A WARGAME





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*Cover: French soldier patrols near the Eiffel Tower in Paris as part of the highest level of “Vigipirate” security plan after a shooting at the Paris offices of Charlie Hebdo January 7, 2015. Gunmen stormed the Paris offices of the weekly satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, renowned for lampooning radical Islam, killing at least 12 people, including two police officers in the worst militant attack on French soil in recent decades. The French President headed to the scene of the attack and the government said it was raising France’s security level to the highest notch. REUTERS/Gonzalo Fuentes*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization. ISW advances an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. ISW is committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

## ABOUT OUR TECHNOLOGY PARTNER



ISW believes superior strategic insight derives from a fusion of traditional social science research and innovative technological methods. ISW recognizes that the analyst of the future must be able to process a wide variety of information, ranging from personal interviews and historical artifacts to high volume structured data. ISW thanks its technology partner Præscient Analytics for their support in this innovative endeavor. In particular, their technology and implementation assistance has supported creating many ISW maps and graphics.

Præscient Analytics is a Veteran Owned Small Business based in Alexandria, Virginia. Our aim is to revolutionize how the world understands information by empowering our customers with the latest analytic tools and methodologies. Currently, Præscient provides several critical services to our government and commercial clients: training, embedded analysis, platform integration, and product customization.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The United States currently faces multiple national security threats in an environment of growing disorder. ISIS is executing a sophisticated global strategy that involves simultaneous efforts in Iraq and Syria, the Middle East and North Africa, and the wider world. Homegrown terrorism is increasing in the U.S. and Europe. Civil wars are intensifying in Ukraine, Yemen, and Libya, while the U.S. attempts to pivot to the Asia-Pacific. In this complex environment, it is difficult for policymakers to discern the consequences of action or inaction even in the near future. The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) conducted simulation exercises on February 27 and March 16, 2015 to discover the diplomatic and military opportunities and pitfalls likely to arise in the coming months of the counter-ISIS fight. Several developments that ISW predicted during the simulation have already occurred. Identifying these scenarios and opportunities in advance can enable the U.S. and its allies to make better-informed decisions in the long-term.

ISW's simulation focused on possible outcomes of ISIS's regional activity. The anti-ISIS coalition is currently focused on ISIS only within Iraq and Syria. Therefore the U.S. is vulnerable to strategic surprise resulting from ISIS's external activity. ISIS has the potential to pressure and divert allies that are critical to the U.S.-led coalition's efforts, while continuing its own expansion program. Simulating the effects of ISIS's endeavor in advance revealed insights that will assist in the creation of a coherent counter-ISIS strategy, rather than a piecemeal strategy formulated as crises occur.

## TAKEAWAYS

- ISIS likely will expand regionally and project force globally in the medium term.
- Few countries are willing or able to counter ISIS as a global phenomenon. No simulation participants took multi-front action to limit ISIS's regional expansion, even though most participants opposed ISIS. This was true even of al Qaeda.
- Avoiding or delaying action against ISIS will not necessarily preserve strategic options in the future. Instead, U.S. strategic options may narrow as adversaries grow in strength and potential allies suffer losses and turn to other partners. Participants did not consider that smaller, early action might prevent the need for more drastic steps later on. Simulation participants expressed concern about overreach and unwittingly playing into sectarian conflicts. However, participants did not recognize that their inaction might also play into those conflicts.
- The military planners in the simulation perceived that the United States does not have enough armed forces to undertake a multi-theater campaign to degrade and defeat ISIS on its own. The U.S. therefore must choose between increasing its armed forces, relying on coalition partners to achieve the defined mission, or changing the defined mission against ISIS.
- The U.S. must define the global counter-ISIS mission, and then determine the nested objectives for ISIS and each of its affiliates in support of that mission.
- In the absence of an explicit strategy to counter ISIS's regional expansion, the U.S. and its allies likely will rely on stable and semi-stable states, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. In both simulations the U.S. team's implicit long-term strategy was to contain regional chaos as best possible through these partners, rather than adopt a campaign against extremist groups directly.
- ISIS has an asymmetric advantage because it can project force from disparate regions, potentially exploiting fissures between multiple international organizations and U.S. combatant commands.
- ISIS's Near Abroad and Far Abroad campaigns likely will exacerbate cleavages amongst European actors, leading to interstate and intrastate divergences on security approaches and prioritization of threats.
- Turkey, Russia, and Egypt each have a disproportionate ability to spoil or facilitate counter-ISIS strategies devised by the U.S.
- The U.S. risks strategic failure even if ISIS does not attempt coherent action across global fronts. The campaigns of ISIS's affiliates and supporters across multiple regions may distract and divide the U.S.'s allies and resources, as may other conflicts such as the one in Ukraine.
- ISIS's global campaign likely will increase policymakers' tolerance of frequent, high-level, and widespread violent events, creating opportunities for the United States' adversaries.
- The U.S. and its allies cannot conduct counter-ISIS operations without considering the context of other extremist forces in the region. A strategy focused on ISIS alone likely will allow other radical actors to thrive.





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# MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 28

## ISIS'S GLOBAL STRATEGY: A WARGAME

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By Harleen Gambhir

ISIS is a brutal, capable enemy that seeks to break modern states and establish a worldwide caliphate. Countering ISIS's global strategy is extremely difficult. The organization's primary fighting force is within Iraq and Syria, but the group is also establishing affiliates in the region and encouraging terror attacks in the wider world. ISIS gains influence in areas of disorder and conflict by exacerbating existing fissures in states and communities. ISIS's opponents thus are forced to counter the organization's ground presence in Iraq and Syria as well as its ability to expand and recruit across the globe.<sup>1</sup> This is a substantial task that involves coherent, yet geographically dispersed efforts, likely coordinated among multiple allies.

The United States and its partners primarily are battling ISIS in Iraq by partnering with indigenous ground forces, while also launching airstrikes on ISIS's positions within Syria. Yet ISIS retains sanctuary in both countries, and continues to launch sophisticated operations to seize new cities.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore ISIS's regional affiliates are seizing terrain, establishing training camps, and launching increasingly effective attacks.<sup>3</sup> The states in the anti-ISIS coalition thus have focused energies on a single element of ISIS's multi-pronged global strategy.

Even as the U.S. funnels significant resources and political capital into managing the anti-ISIS coalition, many other foreign policy problems also demand attention. The Ukrainian Civil War, the disintegration of Yemen, and nuclear negotiations with Iran are each shaping and complicating alliances. In this complex environment, it is difficult for policymakers to discern the consequences of action or inaction against ISIS beyond Iraq and Syria even in the near future. The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) conducted a wargame to discover the diplomatic and military opportunities, pitfalls, and stress points likely to arise in the coming months of the counter-ISIS fight. Several developments that ISW predicted during the simulation have already occurred. Identifying these scenarios and opportunities in advance can enable the U.S. and its allies to make better-informed decisions in the long term.

ISW chose this topic because of the policy community's current failure to recognize address ISIS's complex, holistic global strategy. The United States cannot design flexible or effective counter-ISIS campaigns without recognizing the scale of ISIS's strategy. ISIS's global strategy is organized in three concentric rings. ISIS seeks to defend and expand its territory in Iraq and Syria, while simultaneously establishing

relationships with jihadist groups in the Middle East and North Africa, and executing a terror campaign in the wider world. Simulating the effects of ISIS's endeavor in advance revealed insights that can assist in the creation of a coherent counter-ISIS strategy, rather than a piecemeal strategy formulated as crises occur.

### U.S. STRATEGY AND ISIS'S GLOBAL STRATEGY

ISIS's stated objective as of November 2014 is "to remain and expand."<sup>4</sup> The U.S. intends to overcome ISIS by degrading and defeating its military capabilities inside Iraq and Syria, the organization's original heartland, while taking other non-military steps to diminish ISIS's capabilities to recruit, finance, and promote its efforts through strategic messaging.<sup>5</sup> This military focus on Iraq and Syria may succeed in putting ISIS on the defensive in important terrain in those countries in ways that pressure the organization. But ISIS is also expanding and is no longer contained within Iraq and Syria. ISIS announced operations to expand to Libya, Sinai, and other corners of the Arab world in late 2014 while sustaining itself in Iraq and Syria. ISIS is attempting to preserve itself by extending operations outside of Iraq and Syria despite the military actions of the U.S. led anti-ISIS coalition. This expansion supports ISIS's defense of its heartlands and also advances the organization's regional and global campaigns.

ISIS intends to expand its Caliphate and eventually incite a global apocalyptic war. In order to do so, ISIS is framing a strategy to remain and expand across three geographic rings: the Interior Ring, the Near Abroad, and the Far Abroad. The "Interior Ring" of Iraq and Syria is the center of ISIS's campaign. The organization, after all, had originally named itself the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, designating Iraq, Syria, and their neighbors as its heartland. The other states

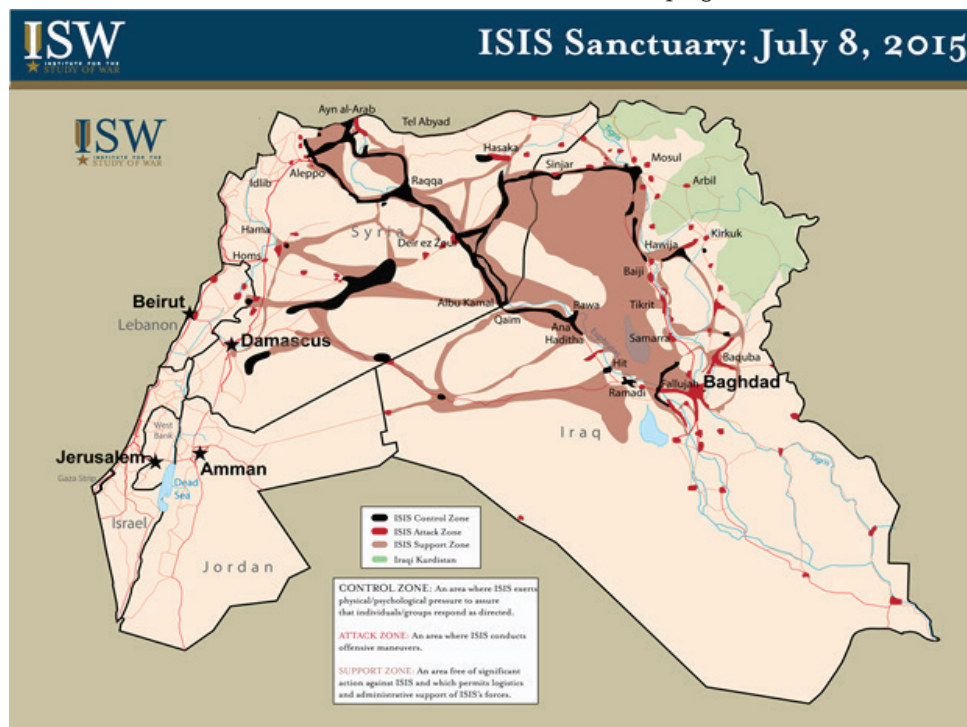
in al-Sham, including Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel-Palestine, are also part of this ring. The “Near Abroad Ring” includes the rest of the Middle East and North Africa, extending east to Afghanistan and Pakistan, comprising the lands of former caliphates. These are areas in which ISIS has begun to expand by declaring satellite operations, especially by setting up a wilayat, or governorate, in permissive terrain. The “Far Abroad Ring” includes the rest of the world, specifically Europe, the U.S., and Asia. Of these ISIS is most focused on Europe, which contains a sizeable Muslim population and is physically more proximate to ISIS’s main effort than Asia or the Americas. ISIS intends to polarize Muslim communities and isolate supporters in the Far Abroad while drawing adversaries into a global war. ISIS’s defense and expansion are focused upon the Interior and Near Abroad rings. ISIS’s terrorism is focused upon the Far Abroad Ring. ISIS engages parallel and interlocking strategies in each ring.

ISW conducted its simulation exercise in order to identify strategic vulnerabilities and opportunities that the U.S. likely will encounter as it confronts ISIS’s global expansion. Designing the simulation required evaluating ISIS’s current global strategy. ISW assessed ISIS’s global capabilities, limitations, disposition, and intent in each of its geographic rings. That assessment, summarized below, suggests that ISIS is mostly likely to strategically surprise the anti-ISIS coalition in the Near Abroad, where ISIS is already projecting military power and beginning to design ground campaigns.

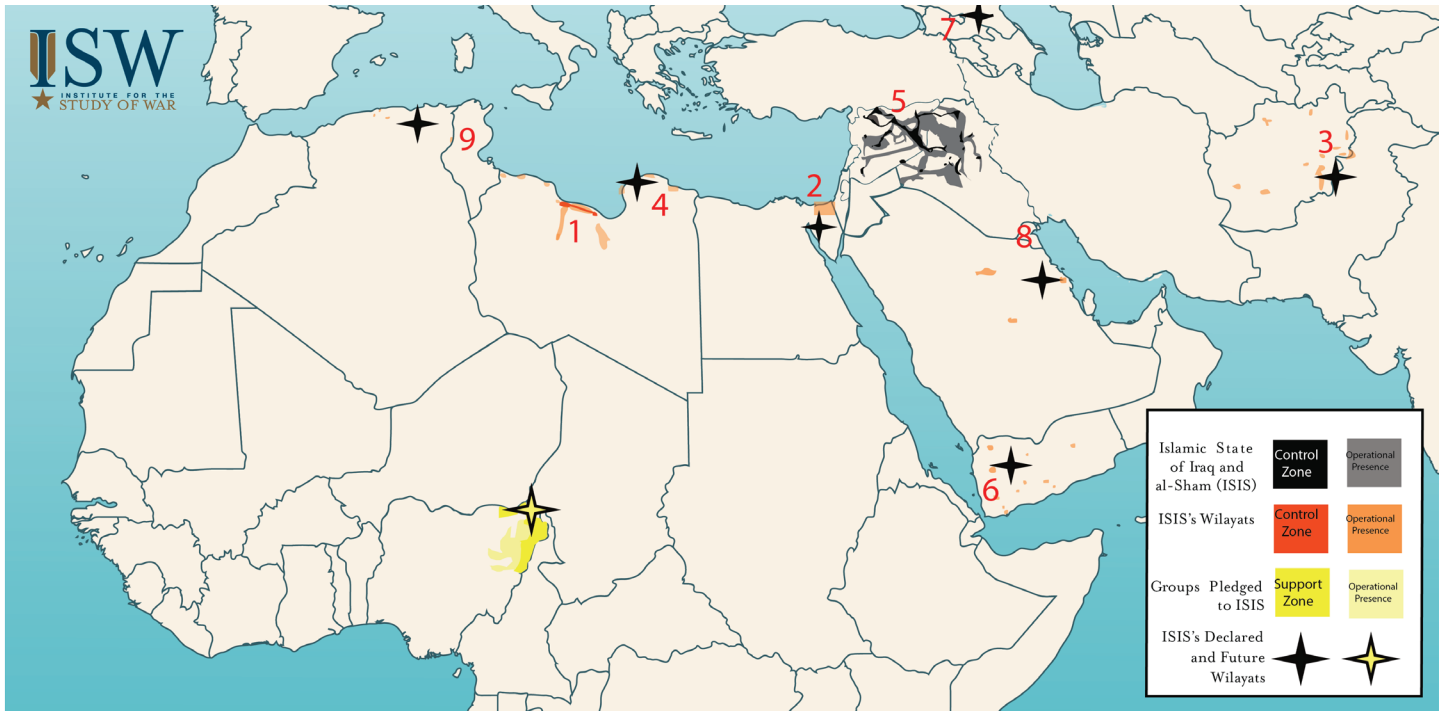
### *The Interior Ring*

The primary mission of ISIS on the Interior is aggressive defense. ISIS controls terrain in Iraq and Syria, and defends its zones of control against counter-attack. ISIS’s principal method of strategic defense is to degrade and eventually destroy state militaries, paramilitaries, and other jihadist groups that might challenge its control in Iraq and Syria. ISIS’s current priorities in the Interior ring are its efforts to break the Iraqi state, while also preparing for a campaign to challenge the Assad regime in central Syria.<sup>6</sup> In particular the organization exploits sectarian tension in both states in order to increase violence, divide adversaries, and fuel an extremist narrative. ISIS is also releasing propaganda to appeal to marginalized Sunni populations and to provoke security forces in neighboring states such as Jordan, Israel, Palestine, Turkey, and Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> ISIS’s clashes with Hezbollah along the Lebanese border and terrorist attacks targeting Jordan likely support this effort.

Eventually ISIS may attempt to expand into the wider Levant by exporting its expertise in conventional, guerilla, and terrorist warfare as currency to influence indigenous insurgencies and organized fighting groups. It is unlikely that ISIS will jeopardize its operations within Iraq and Syria for this effort, however. Instead ISIS likely will retain Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon as rear support zones in the near term, with plans to target those states eventually once it has advanced its Near Abroad campaign, described below.



*ISIS controls territory within Iraq and Syria that it is defending and expanding while it executes regional and global operations.*



- 1) June 06-09: ISIS's Wilayat Tarabulus (Tripoli) consolidated control over the Libyan city of Sirte, expanding east and west along the central coast.
- 2) June 09-10: ISIS's Wilayat Sinai (Egypt) fired rockets at an airbase used by the Multinational Force and Observers in North Sinai.
- 3) June 12: ISIS's Wilayat Khorasan (Afghanistan-Pakistan) conducted the first of 5 publicized beheadings.
- 4) June 14: Local militias expelled ISIS from its stronghold in Derna, eastern Libya.
- 5) June 15: Syrian Kuridsh and rebel forces seized the ISIS-held Tel Abyad border crossing in northern Syria.
- 6) June 17- 29: ISIS's Wilayat Sana'a (Yemen) detonated seven VBIEDs in Sana'a, targeting Shi'a religious sites and al Houthi political and military locations.
- 7) June 22: ISIS announced the creation of a new affiliate in the Caucasus, Wilayat Qawqaz.
- 8) June 26: ISIS's Wilayat Najd (Saudi Arabia) conducted an SVEST attack at a Shi'a mosque in Kuwait City.
- 9) June 26: ISIS claimed an attack by two militants that opened fire on tourists at the Imperial Marhaba Hotel and the Sofil Hostel in Sousse, Tunisia.

## ISIS-Linked Regional Activity in June 2015

*ISIS's affiliates gained new terrain in Libya and Afghanistan, while launching significant attacks in Yemen, Egypt, and Kuwait. ISIS also declared a new governorate in Russia's North Caucasus. These gains allow the organization to offset territorial losses in Libya and northern Syria and maintain its claim that it is "Remaining and Expanding" a year after the declaration of the Caliphate.*

by Harleen Gambhir and Laura Hoffman

*ISIS's affiliates and supporters are conducting military operations across the Middle East and North Africa in support of ISIS's expansion.*

### The Near Abroad Ring

The primary mission of ISIS in the Near Abroad is expansion through the creation of regional affiliates. Practically, the Near Abroad ring reflects the "Islamic lands" that ISIS intends to organize into its territorially contiguous caliphate. ISIS encourages local groups to pledge allegiance to ISIS, unite under a single banner, and designate a leader to whom ISIS can direct resources and sustained engagement. ISIS announced the creation of governorates, or wilayats in Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula in November 2014. ISIS also declared a wilayat in the "Khorasan," or Afghanistan-Pakistan region in January 2015, added the Caucasus on July 23, and may add West Africa as well.<sup>8</sup> The operations of ISIS's affiliates in Sinai and Libya bear witness to the progress of this approach.<sup>9</sup>

ISIS's enemies in the Near Abroad are its ideological competitors, al-Qaeda and Iran, as well as sovereign states in the region. ISIS rhetorically compares its current expansion to prophetic and historic battles waged by Muslim rulers in the Arabian Peninsula, Andalusia, and the Levant.<sup>10</sup> In doing so ISIS hopes to revive popular Islamic regard for the religious-political orders that once encompassed the Arab world.

ISIS's Near Abroad operations serve defensive and offensive purposes. Wilayats give the organization resiliency in case it suffers losses in the Interior Ring.<sup>11</sup> They also shape conditions for ISIS's medium and long term expansion efforts. ISIS's wilayats are geographically dispersed across the region, and thus have the potential to pressure strong states from multiple directions, while maintaining sanctuary within existing conflict zones. ISIS may seek to synchronize



efforts across its Near Abroad wilayats, and possibly between its geographic rings, in order to maximize regional disorder to its advantage. For example, ISIS's wilayats in Saudi Arabia and Yemen are likely to attack Shi'a populations and holy sites in order to incite regional sectarian war and create conditions conducive to its expansion. ISIS likely will seek to grow the power and extent of its Interior caliphate and its Near Abroad wilayats in order to eventually close the gap between the two, forming a cohesive caliphate across the Middle East and North Africa. This is a long-term goal, as ISIS would have to overcome strong states such as Jordan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in order to establish complete regional control.

*The Far Abroad Ring*

The primary mission of ISIS in the Far Abroad is disruption and preparation of the battlefield. ISIS is competing with al-Qaeda in the Far Abroad ring for leadership of the global jihadist movement. ISIS's presence in Europe, the Americas, and Asia is less concentrated than in the Near Abroad, but ISIS nevertheless aspires to global subjugation of non-Islamic lands. ISIS's Far Abroad campaign involves encouraging and resourcing terrorist attacks in the Western world. ISIS hopes that Western states and societies will target and alienate Muslim communities due to these attacks, in a way that pushes those populations away from the global community and toward the Caliphate. For example, ISIS pointed to the protests and counter-protests in response to the attack on Paris' Charlie Hebdo magazine in January 2015 as a phenomenon that successfully exacerbated demographic divisions in the West.

Terrorist attacks fuel this phenomenon in the Far Abroad much as ISIS's VBIEDS once did in Baghdad.

ISIS cooperates with terrorist cells connected to its military network and proclaims ideological affinity with lone attackers in order to generate global disruption. ISIS's sleeper cells in the Far Abroad both recruit fighters to join the Interior war and plan terrorist attacks targeting the West. ISIS uses attacks as a means to incite fear, reaction, and alienation of the Muslim diaspora in order to sustain recruitment. ISIS also means to create global resonance for the movement and further polarize European society.

*Simultaneity and Resiliency*

ISIS's campaigns in the Interior, Near Abroad, and Far Abroad are distinct, simultaneous, and mutually supporting. Global operations give ISIS strategic resiliency in case it loses terrain in Iraq and Syria. For example, ISIS's affiliates and supporters in the Near Abroad accelerated their activity after ISIS lost Tikrit in April 2015 in a way that allowed the organization to claim continued expansion and success. This surge does not necessarily indicate that ISIS has limited capacity to conduct simultaneous operations across rings. Rather, it suggests that ISIS's leadership can encourage or direct Near and Far Abroad activities in order to achieve asymmetric effects.

ISIS's global operations allow it to place stress on multiple states and international alliances at once. For example, ISIS



ISIS's campaigns in the Interior, Near Abroad and Far Abroad rings support a coherent strategy to establish a regional caliphate and incite a global war.

engaged in direct combat in Iraq and Syria, coordinated with jihadist groups planning explosive attacks in Libya, and resourced a cell planning spectacular attacks in Belgium simultaneously in January 2015.<sup>12</sup> ISIS thus pressured United States combatant commands in the Middle East, Africa and Europe in support of distinct and linked objectives for each ring. This capacity for nearly simultaneous and geographically dispersed action, whether coordinated or coincidental, gives ISIS an asymmetric advantage over traditional states that are constrained by boundaries, internal bureaucracy, and international alliances. A simulation to consider the effects of ISIS's global strategy would therefore need to account for this resiliency and simultaneity.

ISW designed its simulation to test the particular vulnerability posed by ISIS's growing operations in the Middle East and North Africa as a potential vector to stress the U.S.'s allies in the region. The U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition is focused upon Iraq and Syria, but ISIS's affiliates are gaining capability within or proximate to several coalition members, including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt. ISIS may use its geographic dispersion to shift the attention of the international community away from Iraq and Syria in order both to take pressure off of its Interior operations and to split the prioritization of the anti-ISIS coalition. ISW's simulation forced participants to consider how the U.S. might cohere its partnerships in the face of ISIS's efforts to increase disorder, a challenge that policymakers face in reality.

## WARGAME

ISW conducted one-day crisis simulations on February 27 and March 16, 2015 in order to test American, European, and regional responses to ISIS's global expansion. Prior to the simulations, ISW considered multiple scenarios that might lead to a fruitful exercise on ISIS's global strategy. Certain



Militants from ISIS's Wilayat Sinai display captured weapons in January 2015.<sup>13</sup>

scenarios dealt with ISIS's capacity to attack and influence populations in Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Another involved a spectacular attack planned by ISIS occurring on European soil. These contingencies are relevant and plausible, but they do not reflect the growing threats emerging from ISIS's affiliates in Libya and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. Militants in both locations pledged allegiance to ISIS's leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in late 2014, and claimed to be part of ISIS's newly created wilayats or governorates. During January 2015, affiliates in both locations conducted coordinated, complex attacks that demonstrated their growing lethality.<sup>14</sup>

ISW assessed in February 2015 that this type of outreach to jihadist groups would form the basis of ISIS's regional expansion.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the group has reportedly fostered relationships with militant networks in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Nigeria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. As ISIS nurtures these relationships with jihadist groups, it increases its potential range for coordinated, asymmetric attacks against enemy states. ISW assessed that ISIS's wilayats in Egypt and Libya were well-placed for this type of cross-wilayat, interstate manipulation. ISW made Egypt the focus of the simulation because of its ongoing interest in the Libyan conflict, which also affects Turkey and several European states. ISW wanted to test the outcome of a regional mobilization led by a country in the Middle East and North Africa region, in order to observe the challenges the U.S. might face in a partner-driven scenario. This development ultimately came to pass, slightly differently, in reality by late spring 2015, as Saudi Arabia created an Arab coalition to counter Iranian influence in Yemen.<sup>16</sup> Many of the decision points and tensions that arose in ISW's simulations mirrored the strategic considerations that the U.S. faces currently, in early July 2015.

Developing a wargame focused on Libya was also useful to understand the trajectory of the civil war itself. Beset by instability since the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya's crisis accelerated in early 2014. Libya's Islamist-controlled General National Congress refused to disband at the end of its electoral mandate in January 2014.<sup>17</sup> In response, elements of the nationalist Libyan National Army launched an offensive against Islamist armed groups in May 2014. A coalition of Islamist forces allied under the moniker "Operation Libya Dawn" counterattacked and seized control of Tripoli in August 2014. The internationally recognized Libyan House of Representatives currently resides in the eastern city of Tobruk, while the rival General National Congress operates from Tripoli. Both entities rely on loose alliances with militia groups, whose size and ideology vary. Al-Qaeda retains training camps in the country's southwest desert.<sup>18</sup> ISIS's operatives began social outreach and military operations along Libya's coast in late 2014.<sup>19</sup> As ISW developed the simulation scenario in early 2015, ISIS's affiliates in Libya also conducted a major attack on Tripoli's Corinthia Hotel on



January 27 and subsequently seized the coastal city of Sirte on February 16.<sup>20</sup>

The continued violence, proliferation of radical groups, and lack of political reconciliation in Libya make resolution of the conflict unlikely in the short term. Instead, Libya likely will increasingly fuel and foster extremist groups in North Africa, much as Syria does in the Middle East. ISIS's operations in Libya are only one facet of a larger, troubling conflict for which there is no coordinated international response. ISW's simulation highlighted the challenges that policymakers will face in attempting counter-ISIS strategies divorced from the overall context of national or regional conflicts. This difficulty is emblematic, because ISIS seeks to embed itself in areas of disorder in order to exacerbate conflicts. As such, ISIS will focus its energies on violent "hotspots." ISIS's propensity to exploit ongoing conflicts will present the United States with a persistent tension between reacting to individual wars while also framing ISIS as a coherent global actor.



ISIS's forces in Libya attend a training camp in April 2015.<sup>21</sup>

### The Simulations

ISW designed its simulation to test the effects of ISIS's regional expansion through outreach to jihadist groups as it ran in parallel to ISIS's territorial expansion efforts in Iraq and Syria. The game played ISIS's global strategy forward to late July 2015, in order to discover the diplomatic and military opportunities, pitfalls, and stress points that would likely arise in 2015. The simulation's scenario was based on the hypothesis that the United States and its allies would over-compartmentalize the threat of ISIS and consequently struggle with addressing campaigns from multiple directions. Participants in both iterations of the game validated this hypothesis. Interestingly, participants' failure to address ISIS's global activity did not result solely from geopolitical complications caused by injected crises, as was expected. Instead, ISIS's actions also increased many players' tolerance for regional disorder and global insecurity. The U.S. and

Europe teams largely responded to ISIS's global campaign by adopting a higher baseline for what crisis situations necessitated action. This instinct was fed by a general inability to imagine an asymmetric, global campaign to counter the scale of ISIS's campaign.

ISW conducted two separate simulations. Both sessions began with a fictional update ("Move 1") explaining new operations by ISIS in Libya. Participants discussed and subsequently briefed their recommended responses to these events. ISW's staff, acting as the control group, integrated select participant responses into a second fictional update ("Move 2"). This update reported on an armed resistance in Egypt, and placed ISIS's regional campaign in context with its efforts in Iraq and Syria. Participants once again discussed and briefed their recommended policy choices. ISW distributed up to three fictional news stories ("injects") during each round in order to encourage consideration of specific strategic challenges. ISW designed the simulation material to produce the most interesting challenges for U.S. policymakers and military planners.

### Participants and Teams

Considering the regional implications of this scenario in its full complexity required dynamic involvement of the U.S. as well as its European and regional allies. Thus ISW designated four teams for its February 27, 2015 session: a United States team consisting of Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), Administration, and State Department representatives; a Europe team consisting of Italy, France, Spain, United Kingdom, and Germany representatives; a Regional team consisting of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatari representatives; and an al-Qaeda (AQ) team representing the organization's senior leadership. ISW added representatives for Turkey and Russia in the March 16, 2015 session in order to illuminate the calculus of two potential spoilers in the region. ISW wrote ISIS's projected actions into the documents distributed in Move 1 and 2. ISW also retained decision-making control for nations not represented in the enumerated teams.

Experts from ISW and the American Enterprise Institute's Critical Threats Project (CTP) filled the majority of roles on the Middle East and al-Qaeda teams, as well as certain roles on the Europe team, according to professional expertise. U.S. Army Fellows serving in Washington, D.C. filled roles on the U.S. and Europe teams during the first session, while students of the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania filled roles on the U.S. and Europe teams during the second session. ISW chose to conduct two sessions with different U.S. participants in order to compare results and improve the simulation.

ISW instructed participants to base decisions on their best understanding of the actual strategic priorities of the countries and groups that they represented. The teams' stated primary objectives stayed relatively consistent across the February 27 and March 16 sessions. The United States teams in both instances looked to contain regional disorder in order to defend the homeland and ensure the security of its allies. In practice both U.S. teams prioritized countering ISIS within Iraq as the primary means for defeating, or at least containing the organization. The teams were eager to support regional partners in their counterterrorism efforts, as an alternative to mounting direct or Western-led action.

The Europe teams expressed support for counterterrorism operations in order to limit ISIS's regional expansion, but were reluctant to act without U.S. leadership. The threat of Russian aggression in Ukraine strengthened this reluctance and colored every discussion the Europe teams had with the U.S. teams. The teams professed to have limited resources and so concentrated their energies on dealing with domestic law enforcement and refugee issues arising from conflict in the Middle East and North Africa. These discussions on internal security rarely gave way to consideration of the dangers of alienating minority populations, which, as discussed above, is one of ISIS's objectives in the Far Abroad.

The Middle East teams included individual member nations that sometimes worked toward opposing goals. The Egypt representatives, backed by the Saudi Arabia representatives, looked to exterminate all forms of political Islam and extremism domestically and in the wider region. This effort supported the Egypt team's stated desire to eliminate political opposition, while strengthening the nation's role as a regional leader and key U.S. ally. ISW analysts filling the Egypt roles noted that the nation's leaders were likely to pursue highly visible actions in support of the anti-ISIS coalition, rather than the most effective actions.

The Qatar representatives, working with the Turkey representatives in the second session, sought to defend political Islam in the region, specifically through support to the Libyan General National Congress. Representatives from both Qatar and Turkey focused on diplomatic efforts, though the Turkey representatives continued to support U.S. efforts to train moderate Syrian rebels in order to achieve the nation's primary objective of eliminating the Assad regime. The al-Qaeda team based its assessment of the organization's objectives on extensive study of current and historic statements and operations. The team reiterated its appraisal of ISIS as a deviant organization that caused division within jihadist ranks, but assessed that it would eventually burn out. In both sessions, the al-Qaeda team chose to continue its existing efforts to work through affiliates to plan attacks against the

West, and to sponsor local insurgencies in Syria, Yemen, and the Sahel. The team explicitly affirmed its resolve to focus on shaping a jihadist revolution in the long term, rather than on responding to spectacular claims or activity by ISIS.

The simulation demonstrated the various counter-ISIS policy outputs that could result from the overlay of these divergent strategic objectives. The U.S. team's efforts to coordinate coalition action in Iraq and Syria were complicated by differing capabilities and prioritization across teams. Meanwhile, few nations besides Egypt chose to take action against ISIS in the wider region, and that activity, as we shall see, did not remain focused on ISIS for long. Participant action in each session illustrated the opportunities for and limitations of coordinated action against ISIS in the Near Abroad.

*Game 1 - February 27, 2015*

The first simulation began with the distribution of a fictional update written by ISW. The update, dated April 15, 2015, explained that ISIS's forces were gaining traction amongst Islamist rebel groups in Libya. In light of this threat the

*February 27, 2015 Participants*

UNITED STATES	EUROPE	MIDDLE EAST	AL QAEDA
Joint Chiefs of Staff	Italy	Egypt	Al Qaeda senior leadership
AFRICOM	France	Saudi Arabia	
Administration	Spain	Qatar	
State Department	United Kingdom		
	Germany		

*March 16, 2015 Participants*

UNITED STATES	EUROPE	MIDDLE EAST	AL QAEDA
Joint Chiefs of Staff	Italy	Egypt	Al Qaeda senior leadership
AFRICOM	France	Saudi Arabia	
CENTCOM	Spain	Qatar	
SOCOM	United Kingdom		
Department of Defense	Germany		
Administration	Russia		
State Department			

Egyptian government had initiated a train and equip program in support of forces allied with the Tobruk-based Libyan government. ISIS subsequently kidnapped 20 Egyptian military trainers from the Libyan-Egyptian border, and threatened to execute one soldier each week. Meanwhile the U.S. was focused on preparing Iraqi forces for an imminent operation to retake Mosul.

Given this information, each participant then had to determine his or her strategic objectives, desired interim end states, and requisite actions regarding Libya, Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. The U.S., Europe, Middle East, and al-Qaeda teams discussed the regional situation within and between teams over the course of a two-hour session. The U.S. team looked to maintain and rely upon Egypt as a stable ally, prevent ISIS's expansion, and support a political solution to the Libyan conflict. The Europe team, on the other hand, primarily focused on protecting against refugee overflow and internal security breakdowns. Within the Middle East team, the Egypt participant sought to increase its internal and external crackdown against all forms of political Islam, beyond just ISIS or jihadist groups. The Saudi Arabia participant supported these actions, while the Qatar participant quietly worked to support the Libya Dawn coalition. The al-Qaeda team continued its existing lines of effort and increased its operations in Mali in order to take advantage of strained French forces in that area.

ISW designed the simulation to reflect the probability that ISIS would aggressively pursue its global strategy as other nations reacted to ISIS's actions. At various points during this morning session, members of the control group gathered the participants to present a fictional news story. ISW designed these "injects" to stress teams' strategies with possible and in most cases assessed likely developments. Many dealt with ISIS's efforts to expand its areas of influence and prove its capacities inside and outside the Middle East. Early on in the session the control group announced that ISIS had declared a wilayat, or governorate, in the Caucasus, thus signaling its intent to strengthen relationships with jihadist groups in the area. The inject added that Russia had intensified its anti-terror efforts in response, pledging increased support to the Egyptian government in its fight against ISIS. This development provoked both the U.S. and Europe teams to increase their support of Egypt with few conditions, so as not to allow increased Russia influence while fighting continued in Ukraine. ISIS's announcement also worried the al-Qaeda team, as al-Qaeda has a longstanding relationship with the Islamic Emirate of the Caucasus. Al-Qaeda also relies heavily on the region for foreign fighters. In an effort to counter ISIS's growing regional influence the al-Qaeda team chose to order the Syria-based Khorasan Group to carry out a spectacular attack on a Western airliner, which control ultimately prevented.

ISW presented participants with injects related to fictional attacks that would challenge existing frameworks for countering ISIS. In the first inject, a member of ISIS launched a crude IED in a historic Christian church and pilgrimage destination in southern Italy. The operative had entered Italy disguised as a refugee, which increased the Europe team's concern about increased refugee flows. The significance of the target caused the U.S. and Europe teams to discuss the possibility of invoking Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, which requires an attack on one state to be considered as an attack against all. Each team decided not to invoke Article 5, as they were unwilling to formally commit to a regional counter-ISIS effort. In the second fictional attack, individuals linked to ISIS's members in both Libya and Syria collaborated together to detonate a bomb in public place in Spain. The control group released this inject in order to test the perspective of participants who claimed that ISIS would not pose a regional, resilient threat if it was adequately countered in Iraq.

Briefings by each team at the end of the first round revealed differing prioritization by each group in the fight against ISIS. The U.S. team claimed that it did not have the resources to lead simultaneous counter-ISIS operations in Iraq, Syria, and North Africa. Thus it supported and resourced Egypt as the regional partner that would lead operations against ISIS in Libya and the Sinai. The Egypt team, for its part, decided to use the U.S.'s support as an opportunity to prevent the emergence of an Islamist government in Libya, consistent with its overall domestic and international objective. The Egypt team also chose to target Islamist armed groups in Libya broadly, and increased its internal crackdown in the Sinai Peninsula. The Europe team claimed that it lacked resources to participate heavily in new fronts of the counter-ISIS fight. Thus the players chose to contain the violence in Libya by interdicting refugee and weapons flows in the Mediterranean, with military and monetary help from the U.S. As explained above, the al-Qaeda team attempted an airline attack in order to assert its dominance in the global jihadist sphere after ISIS announced its expansion to the Caucasus region. The Khorasan Group's attempted airline attack failed because the control group declared the cell members arrested. Beyond that action the group continued its existing lines of effort focused on Syria, Yemen, and the Sahel. The al-Qaeda team viewed ISIS as a deviant organization, and believed that it would eventually burn out. For this reason the al-Qaeda team chose not to prioritize Libya, which al-Qaeda views as less important to its strategy than the aforementioned theaters.

The second round of the simulation highlighted the danger of executing a regional strategy focused solely on ISIS. The round began with a fictional update, dated July 10, 2015, which explained that the U.S. had provided money and



weapons to Egypt in support of Egypt's efforts against ISIS in Libya. Instead of focusing specifically on ISIS, however, Egypt initially targeted Ansar al Sharia in Benghazi, the designated terrorist organization responsible for attacking the U.S. consulate and killing an American ambassador to Libya in 2012. Meanwhile, the European Union initiated interdiction efforts in the Mediterranean, but was still overwhelmed with an influx of refugees. The Iraqi Security Forces were engaged in an intense urban battle for Mosul. In response ISIS launched large explosive attacks across the country, including in Baghdad. ISIS also coordinated a series of simultaneous international attacks, targeting France, Italy, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Libya, though not all successfully. Al-Qaeda and ISIS were thus both presented with an opportunity in the form of an emerging insurgency in Egypt. As Egypt conducted its internal crackdown, violent groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood organized and launched small attacks in Egypt's mainland. These groups released statements pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda's leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, who is an Egyptian native.

The second round demonstrated that certain regional players could have effects against ISIS in multiple theaters. Early on in the round the control group also sent a message to the U.S. team from Turkey, expressing the Turkish government's opposition to Egyptian airstrikes in Libya, and its willingness to mediate discussions between Libya's rival governments in support of a political solution. The U.S. team acknowledged Turkey's importance to the counter-ISIS fight in both Iraq and Syria, and as a result began to explore ways to limit Egypt's broad targeting of GNC-allied forces in Libya. The U.S. and Europe teams also recognized that Egypt's counterterrorism operations could fuel the rise of violent groups in the country, and so hesitated to back the Egyptian government without any limitations or requirements.

Events in the second round suggested that the U.S. and its allies will struggle to change strategically, even when adversaries launch significant attacks. During the second round the control group announced that jihadists of unknown affiliation had taken hundreds of passengers hostage on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean. The development was modeled from the case of the Achille Lauro, an Italian cruise ship that was hijacked by members of the Palestinian Liberation Front off the coast of Egypt in 1985.<sup>22</sup> The inject was designed to test the way in which the European Union might respond to a threat close to home, involving a European flagged vessel, that also challenged ongoing interdiction efforts. The Europe team asked the U.S. team to provide Special Forces for a rescue mission, which the U.S. team willingly supplied. Fascinatingly the event failed to provoke a strategic change in any group, including the al-Qaeda team.

The Egypt team continued to threaten broad action against all forms of political Islam. The group also lobbied for financial and military support from the U.S. team and the Europe team, explaining that it did not have the capability to conduct precision strikes. The U.S. team recognized that sloppy counterterrorism operations, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula and in Libya, likely would generate animosity towards the Egyptian government and encourage individuals in the area to join ISIS. For this reason the U.S. team offered to provide air tasking orders for Egypt's counterterrorism missions in Libya. That choice ensured that the U.S. could constrain the Egyptian government in order to diminish civilian casualties and orient more heavily on ISIS's forces in Libya, rather than other Islamist groups.

The U.S. team designated the fight against ISIS in Iraq as its top priority, however. The Europe team also prioritized efforts in Iraq over Libya, but chose to devote most of its resources to increasing its internal security. Members of the Europe team acknowledged that increased law enforcement efforts could alienate their domestic Muslim populations if conducted overzealously. The Europe team was unable to offer any concrete safeguards against that possibility, however. The Egypt team chose to send ground troops to the Libyan border, and continued airstrikes with air tasking order from the U.S. The Egypt team also increased its internal security operations in both Sinai and the mainland, with the support of the Saudi Arabia team. The al-Qaeda team maintained its existing lines of effort in Syria, Yemen, and the Sahel, deciding against outreach to Egyptian groups.

Overall the U.S. team deprioritized countering ISIS in Libya in favor of continuing the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. The group argued that the U.S. could not devote additional resources to U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) without harming the operations of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). Because of this limitation, the U.S. team supported the Egypt team's efforts to lead an Arab coalition against broader extremism in the region. The Egypt team capitalized on that support, and initiated operations not only against ISIS, but also against its own political opponents and against forces allied with Libya's General National Congress (GNC). When the game concluded the Egypt team was working to subdue a domestic insurgency in the Egyptian mainland through military means, with implicit backing from the U.S. team.

The succession of events demonstrated the need for U.S. leadership in uniting regional partners to counter ISIS. The U.S.'s strongest partners in the Middle East, namely Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are more focused on counterbalancing Iran and on quelling internal unrest than on combatting ISIS. Providing unconditional support to regional allies



## Wargame I Outcomes: February 27, 2015

This wargame tested responses to ISIS's regional expansion through a scenario in which ISIS's Libya affiliates targeted Egyptian interests, after which multiple armed groups mobilized in Egypt.

	U.S.	Europe	Egypt	Al Qaeda
<b>Round 1:</b> Expansion of ISIS in Libya	Fund Egyptian counterterrorism operations	Interdict refugees and weapons in the Mediterranean	Airstrikes campaign in Libya, security operations in Sinai Peninsula	Attempt spectacular attack on a Western airliner
<b>Round 2:</b> Violent Uprising in Egypt	Focus on Iraq and Syria, provide air tasking to Egypt	Increase internal security	Continue airstrikes and send troops to Libyan border	Continue existing efforts

Participants chose to respond to ISIS in Libya by providing resources to regional partners, such as Egypt. ISIS and al Qaeda both expanded their operations in North Africa, unconstrained by these measures.

by Harleen Gambhir and ISW's Counterterrorism Team

for the counter-ISIS fight may backfire as those allies use U.S.-provided resources and political capital to broadly target opponents. In Egypt's case, U.S. resources supported targeting of political Islam. As of July 2015 this situation appears to be unfolding in reality, as Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has "criminalized street protests, sentenced hundreds to death in mass trials, and...imprisoned some 40,000 political opponents and their supporters."<sup>23</sup> Concurrently the U.S. chose in March 2015 to lift a ban on arms sales to Egypt, restoring a \$1.3 billion aid package that had been withheld after Sisi ousted former president Mohammed Morsi in 2013.<sup>24</sup> ISIS and other violent jihadist groups likely will use the Egyptian government's actions as an opportunity to gain support and to encourage enmity with the U.S. The U.S. can prevent this possibility by making support to Egypt contingent on compliance with certain democratic and security requirements.

Notably, neither the Europe team nor the al-Qaeda team was willing to undertake military action to counter ISIS's expansion. The Europe team focused on the security concerns raised by large refugee inflows, and prioritized naval interdiction over directly addressing the Libyan conflict. The al-Qaeda team believed that ISIS would eventually burn out, and so did not count it as a formidable rival. In fact, the al-Qaeda team claimed that it would benefit from ISIS's regional actions in the long term, as ISIS was exacerbating conflicts and spreading jihadism in areas where al-Qaeda had not been active.

### Game 2 - March 16, 2015

ISW updated its simulation prior to the second session in order to incorporate insights from the first session. As noted above, ISW added teams to portray Russia and Turkey, both of which emerged as key decision-makers in the first simulation. ISW also updated and augmented information on ISIS's operations within Iraq and Syria in order to force participants to conceptualize ISIS as an enemy that is active on multiple battlefronts. These two changes helped participants frame the fight against ISIS in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the train and assist missions and air operations in Iraq and Syria. Unfortunately the simulation did not include an Iran or Yemen team or factor in the accelerating conflict in Yemen. The inclusion of those events likely would have increased the Saudi Arabia and Egypt teams' desire to create a pan-Arab alliance to counterbalance Iranian and jihadist actors.

The second simulation used the same basic format as the first. ISW's staff distributed a fictional update dated April 15, 2015 that summarized major events related to ISIS. As with the first session, ISIS reportedly had gained support from certain Islamist rebel groups in Libya, and in response the Egyptian government initiated a train and equip program in support of forces allied with the Tobruk-based government. ISIS subsequently had kidnapped 20 Egyptian soldiers and threatened to execute them. ISW altered the portion of the update pertaining to Mosul, in light of actual ground



conditions in Iraq. The new fictional update explained that the Iraqi Security Forces and Shia militias recaptured Tikrit in early April 2015, but were struggling to hold the city amidst frequent guerilla attacks by ISIS. The update also stated that the ISF operation to retake Mosul had been delayed until after Ramadan. This delay forced simulation participants, particularly those on the U.S. team, to consider ISIS's operations in its Interior and Near Abroad rings as simultaneous issues.

Once again each team had to determine and then brief their strategic objectives, desired interim end states and requisite actions regarding Libya, Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. The second simulation's U.S. team was determined to avoid American participation in a single side of an ethnic, sectarian or national rivalry in the Middle East. For that reason, the U.S. team claimed that its objective was to contain ISIS through multilateral efforts. The Europe team chose to focus on countering ISIS in Iraq, believing that defeating the organization there would enable the defeat of ISIS as a whole. As with the first simulation, the Egypt team chose to increase its internal and external crackdown against all forms of political Islam.

The Turkey team recognized that its cooperation would be necessary for most counter-ISIS strategies, because of its strategic location. As a result the group resolved to draw as many concessions as possible from the other players, in order to advance Turkey's economic interests and ensure the ouster of Bashar al-Assad from Syria. The Russia team maintained its strategic focus on the Ukrainian conflict, and as a general rule resolved to undermine NATO's power and authority. The al-Qaeda team once again chose to continue its ongoing prioritization of efforts, focused on working with local insurgencies in Yemen, Syria, and northern Africa.

During the morning round of the March 16 simulation ISW used fictional news updates similar to those distributed during the February 27 session. Participants' responses to these stressors varied somewhat from the first session. Early in the session ISW's staff announced that ISIS had declared a governorate in the Caucasus region, but unlike the first simulation made no statement regarding Russia's response since there was a team playing Russia. The Russia team itself pledged to intensify its domestic anti-terror effort, and pledged to support the Egyptian government's operations against ISIS. The Russia team also took the event as an opportunity to blame the United States for the success of ISIS specifically and for failed leadership in the Middle East generally. ISIS's announced expansion to the Caucasus once again worried the al-Qaeda team, but to a lesser extent than it did in the February 27 session. The al-Qaeda team believed ISIS would eventually burn out. Thus it concentrated on its

existing strategy and enjoyed increased freedom of operation because of the international community's focus on ISIS.

ISW also released news updates related to fictional attacks by ISIS operatives, first in southern Italy and then in Spain. These events increased the Europe team's resolve to halt refugee flows and increase internal security, but they did little to change the way that the U.S. team perceived the threat of ISIS. The U.S. team implicitly accepted that there would be a baseline of violent events related to ISIS and refused to consider a change in strategy because of attacks in Europe. At the end of the first round, the U.S. team did not offer any alterations to the actual U.S. approach to the fight against ISIS. The team chose to continue offering air support in Iraq and Syria while training Iraqi Security Forces and small groups of Syrian rebels. The group did not propose any action to counter ISIS in Libya or to support Egyptian counterterrorism efforts beyond increased funding.

The Europe team cited a lack of leadership from the U.S. when explaining its decision to avoid additional military action. The team concurred with the U.S. team's implicit focus on Iraq, and decided that it could not solve the broader conflicts that enabled ISIS's affiliates. The Egypt team for its part proposed multiple security operations, including a rescue operation for the kidnapped soldiers, a crackdown in the Sinai Peninsula, and the creation of a buffer zone on the Egyptian side of the Egypt-Libya border. The Egypt team ultimately declined Russia's offer of financial support, choosing the backing of the U.S. team instead. However, Egypt was able to use Russia's offer as a bargaining chip to secure increased funding from the U.S. For the rest of the round the Russia team primarily worked to limit action by NATO, for example by working with Turkey to propose that Mediterranean interdiction efforts be organized through the United Nations rather than through NATO.

After these briefs ISW distributed a second fictional update, dated July 10, 2015. This document retained key developments pertaining to Libya and Egypt from the first simulation. Specifically, the update explained that the U.S. decided to resource Egypt's train and equip program in support of Libya's Tobruk-based government, while the EU began naval interdiction efforts in the Mediterranean. Egypt initiated a broad security crackdown that encouraged an emerging violent insurgency on the Egyptian mainland. The update also preserved ISIS's affiliates' simultaneous attack attempts in France, Italy, the U.K., Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Libya.

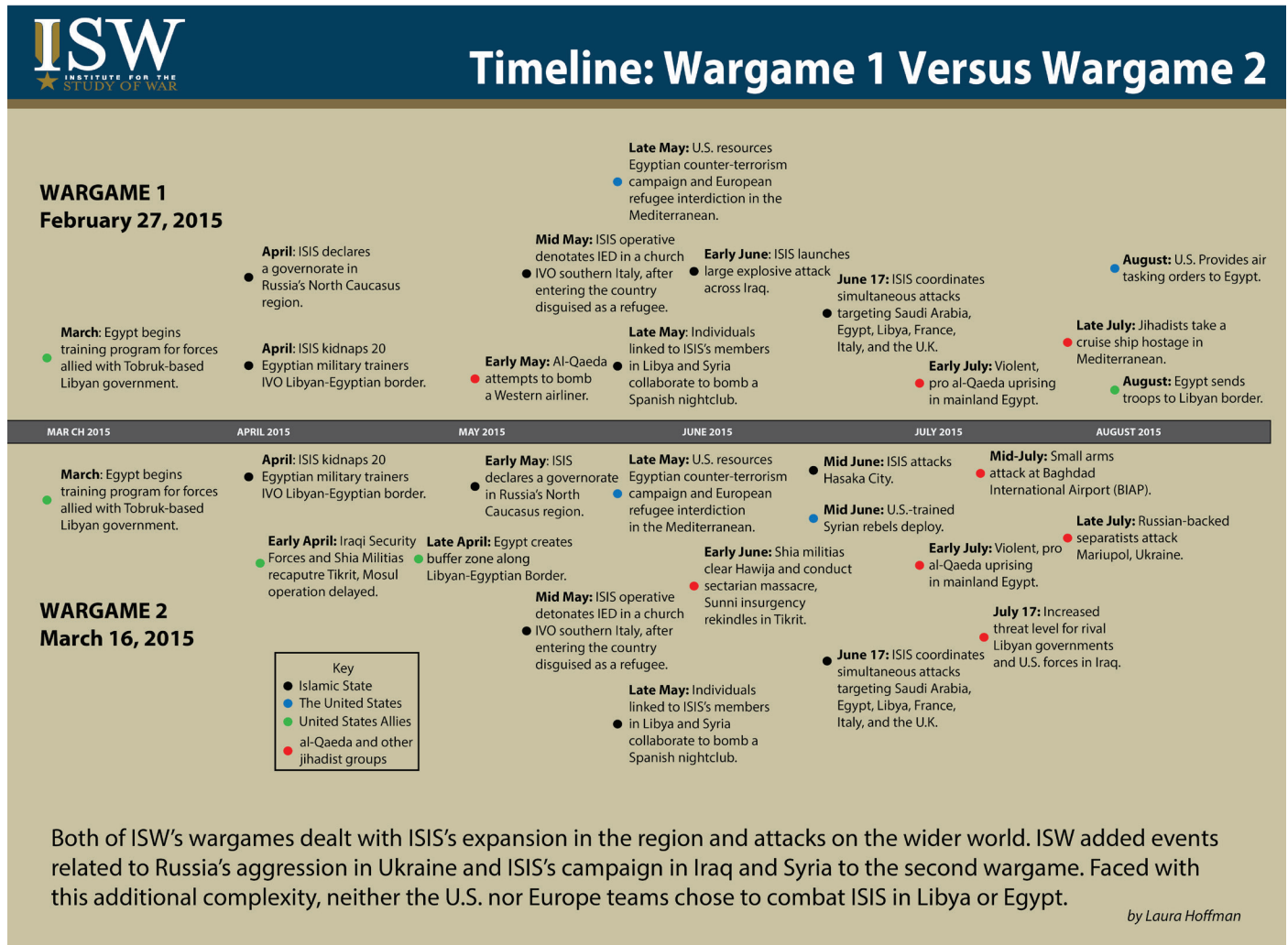
ISW added much more information related to the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria for the second simulation in order to force participants to fully consider the simultaneity of ISIS's Interior and Near Abroad campaigns. The changes played forward actual ground conditions that were present

in March 2015. The update explained that by June 2015, Iraqi Shia militias had cleared ISIS's stronghold of Hawija, securing a major victory with minimal involvement from the Iraqi Security Forces. However, reports soon emerged about a Shia militia massacring Sunni civilians near Tikrit. In response, an incipient Sunni insurgency in Tikrit began to threaten action. This development suggested to participants that security in Iraq was not assured if ISIS was pushed out of major cities. Failure to provide for Iraq's Sunni people could in fact foster conditions conducive to ISIS's re-emergence, or for the creation of a violent movement distinct from ISIS. Finally, the update also included information on the first graduated class of Syrian rebels, who made small gains against ISIS north of Aleppo city. Concurrently ISIS launched significant attacks on Hasaka city in northeastern Syria, demonstrating the expanse of its Syrian operations.

In order to encourage discussions on resource sharing and division of responsibility among combatant commands (COCOMs), ISW passed out two fictional intelligence updates early in the round. The first described a small arms

attack that occurred at Baghdad International Airport (BIAP), and warned of an increased threat level for U.S. troops on July 17, 2015, the last day of Ramadan. The second warned that ISIS's forces in Libya were planning to launch simultaneous, explosive attacks on meetings of the Tripoli and Tobruk-based governments, also on July 17, 2015, in order to prevent the possibility of a political solution to the Libya crisis. The U.S. team did consider division of responsibility amongst COCOMs after the distribution of these updates. However, the group decided to make no major change to the actual balance of tasks. CENTCOM remained the main effort in the fight against ISIS, while AFRICOM supported, primarily through a campaign to counter violent extremist messaging.

The simultaneous threats in Iraq and Libya prompted a resource consideration for the U.S. team, but not for any other players. The Egypt team remained focused on Libya and on its internal affairs, while the Saudi Arabia team remained focused on its internal affairs and on Iran. The al-Qaeda team once again benefited from the U.S.'s focus on ISIS, and continued its work with local insurgencies in other



Both of ISW's wargames dealt with ISIS's expansion in the region and attacks on the wider world. ISW added events related to Russia's aggression in Ukraine and ISIS's campaign in Iraq and Syria to the second wargame. Faced with this additional complexity, neither the U.S. nor Europe teams chose to combat ISIS in Libya or Egypt.

by Laura Hoffman



## Wargame 2 Outcomes: March 16, 2015

This wargame tested responses to ISIS’s global strategy through a scenario in which ISIS increased its operations in Libya, Iraq, and Syria concurrently. Additionally, Russia’s aggression in Ukraine featured in the scenario.

	U.S.	Europe	Russia	Egypt	Turkey	Al Qaeda
<b>Round 1:</b> Expansion of ISIS in Libya	Prioritize Iraq	Prioritize internal security and Ukraine crisis, contribute to Iraq	Increase aggression in Ukraine	Buffer zone with Libya, security operations in Sinai Peninsula	Negotiate for Libyan unity government and Syrian regime transition	Continue existing efforts
<b>Round 2:</b> Violent Uprising in Egypt	Continue existing efforts	Continue existing efforts	Attack Mariupol	Airstrikes campaign in Libya, security operations in Sinai and mainland	Continue existing efforts	Continue existing efforts

Egypt responded to ISIS’s regional expansion with domestic security operations and airstrikes on ISIS in Libya, but inflamed domestic tensions in doing so. Other teams prioritized Iraq and Syria, indicating the difficulty of countering threats on multiple fronts.

by Harleen Gambhir and ISW’s Counterterrorism Team

places. Even the Europe team was concerned about Libya only insofar as it exacerbated the refugee crisis.

The Europe team did encounter internally diverging priorities due to ISW’s final fictional update, which involved Russian-backed rebels assaulting Ukrainian Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) forces outside Mariupol. This development made some nations even less likely to suggest new action regarding ISIS, as the threat of Russian aggression was deemed more proximate and existential. At the end of the round the Europe team once again chose to contribute minimally to the fight against ISIS in Iraq, letting the U.S. lead. However, the team made clear that its overall priorities were dealing with Russia and with internal security issues arising from refugee inflows. The Russia team, for its part, chose to accelerate activity in Ukraine to take advantage of perceived international attention on Libya, Iraq, and Syria.

The al-Qaeda team maintained its efforts to incite jihadism globally through encouraging spectacular attacks and partnering with local insurgencies. The group noted that no other actor had taken significant action against it during the game. The Egypt team began conducting airstrikes in Libya, using support and funding from the U.S. team. The Egypt team made clear that it would target all perceived extremist groups in Libya, not just ISIS. The Turkey team, for its part, decided to renew efforts to negotiate for a Libyan unity government and a Syrian regime transition.

The U.S. team overall was reluctant to act. The group did not provide air tasking orders for the Egypt team’s air campaign

in Libya, in contrast to the U.S. team’s choice in the February 27 session. This choice limited the United States’ ability to command and control the fight against ISIS in Libya, and prevented the execution of a nested cross-border strategy. The U.S. team explicitly chose to protract most decisions, believing that commitment to action would bind the group to an unfavorable outcome. The U.S. team acknowledged the need to address the root economic causes of extremism in the Middle East and North Africa, for example, but explained that there was no political will to do so. The group could not suggest a more specific solution to ISIS’s expansion or to disorder in the region more broadly.

The outcome of the second simulation presents a bleak picture. The U.S. and its allies had divergent understandings of threats emanating from the Middle East. No actor was able to articulate a course of action to counter ISIS’s expansion or extremist forces besides ISIS. As a result, regional powers undertook security measures that would likely alienate elements of their own populations, eventually aggravating the underlying radicalization problem. Both simulations highlighted several challenges inherent in developing a global counter-ISIS strategy.

### TAKEAWAYS

ISW designed the simulation to assess how the United States, regional actors, and jihadist groups likely would react to ISIS’s likely courses of action across each of its global rings. Both sessions illustrated several difficulties that the U.S. will face in trying to counter ISIS, particularly in the Near Abroad.

These insights may be helpful for immediate planning purposes for the U.S. and its allies. They are also useful for evaluating and shaping the United States' long-term strategy for countering violent extremism in the Middle East and North Africa, as they indicate difficulties that must be taken into account during strategic planning. Overall, the exercise underscored the importance of measured action informed by early appraisal of the capabilities and objectives of adversaries and partners, rather than incremental action prompted by developing events. Key elements of that evaluation are described below.

➤ *ISIS likely will expand regionally and project force globally in the medium term. ISIS has articulated its global strategy and demonstrated its means for pursuing that strategy. The organization's actions therefore are forecastable in a manner that should allow the United States to avoid strategic surprise.*

ISW's simulations in February and March 2015 accurately forecasted numerous events related to ISIS's global expansion. As predicted, ISIS increased its operations in Libya, exacerbated regional conflict, targeted Westerners in the Mediterranean, and expanded into Russia's North Caucasus region by June 2015.<sup>25</sup> ISW reached these conclusions before executing the wargame, through a study of ISIS's stated intent, strategy, and capabilities, alongside regional trends. It is possible to forecast ISIS's likely courses of action in the region and wider world, and the U.S. and its allies must do so.

ISIS is pursuing a global strategy and perceives of itself as a global actor. Counter-ISIS strategists therefore must analyze ISIS with a unified framework that considers the organization's current operations and its long-term aspirations. Wargame participants incorrectly framed ISIS's expansion as piecemeal and ad hoc. This perception increased the likelihood that ISIS would cause strategic surprise with each new development. The U.S. and Europe teams in particular parsed ISIS's actions on a case by case basis, delaying their formulation of a cohesive strategic vision to counter ISIS. This failure caused the U.S. and Europe teams to retain a reactive posture throughout the game.

➤ *Few countries are willing or able to counter ISIS as a global phenomenon. No simulation participants took multi-front action to limit ISIS's regional expansion, even though most participants opposed ISIS. This was true even of al-Qaeda.*

No team in either simulation proposed actions to counter ISIS's regional expansion directly. Western teams maintained ongoing efforts in Iraq and Syria and suggested limited operations to cut off weapons and fighters flows to Libya. No

group took steps to limit the Egypt team's internal overreach either, which in the simulation led to violent uprising that aided ISIS's Wilayat Sinai. Participants in the Europe teams gravitated towards reflexive responses such as a National Guard deployment, while participants in the Egypt teams favored high visibility, low footprint responses such as temporary airstrikes in order to appear effective. These actions had little impact on ISIS's expansion, because the organization is willing to wage unending war.

Meanwhile, the al-Qaeda team explicitly chose to avoid conflict with ISIS for as long as possible. The group reiterated its belief that ISIS would burn out, and only responded to actions by ISIS that compromised al-Qaeda's main operations in Syria and Yemen or foreign fighter flows. For example, the al-Qaeda team in the first simulation responded to the declaration of a "Wilayat Qawqaz (Caucasus)" by sending a delegation of mediators to conduct outreach and reaffirm its jihadi relations in the region. The group argued that it wished to compete with ISIS on a strategic rather than operational level, and as a result would concede some territory to ISIS in order to accelerate its own spectacular attacks and ongoing campaigns in other locations.

Because anti-ISIS teams placed no concerted limits on ISIS's regional expansion, ISIS fared well in the scenario. Despite pressure from the Iraqi Security Forces and U.S.-trained Syrian rebels in its Interior Ring, ISIS was able to exacerbate emerging conflicts in Egypt and Libya to its advantage. ISW forecasted that over the timeframe of the game, ISIS's affiliates would expand their training camps and begin governance efforts in Libya, while also reaching out to disenfranchised populations within Egypt. Within the game ISIS also declared operations in the Caucasus and conducted outreach to groups in Southeast Asia. These external operations give ISIS resiliency and allow it to project a message of success even as it suffers losses due to coalition efforts in the Interior ring.

➤ *Avoiding or delaying action against ISIS will not necessarily preserve strategic options in the future. Instead, U.S. strategic options may narrow as adversaries grow in strength and potential allies suffer losses and turn to other partners. Participants did not consider that smaller, early action might prevent the need for more drastic steps later on. Simulation participants expressed concern about overreach and unwittingly playing into sectarian conflicts. However, participants did not recognize that their inaction might also play into those conflicts.*

The U.S. and Europe teams stressed the importance of avoiding emotional or irrational responses to attacks on Western interests, given the wars of the past two decades. The teams were reluctant to take part in what they saw as an ultimately unwinnable conflict. In particular, the U.S. team





# WARGAME FORECAST

## PREDICTED EVENTS

FEBRUARY 2015

## ACTUAL EVENTS

EARLY 2015

### Egypt

The U.S. will lift the weapons ban on **Egypt**.

Groups related to **Egypt's** Muslim Brotherhood will mobilize.

March 31: The U.S. lifted the weapons ban on **Egypt**.

July 1: **Egypt's** Muslim Brotherhood called for its supporters to mobilize.

### Libya

ISIS will expand its control on **Libya's central coast**.

May 28: ISIS seized a major airbase and consolidated its control over **Libya's central coast**.

### Russia

ISIS will create an affiliate in **Russia's North Caucasus**.

June 23: ISIS announced an affiliate in **Russia's North Caucasus**.

### Global

ISIS will launch simultaneous attacks on **multiple continents** during Ramadan.

June 26: ISIS supporters launched attacks in **multiple continents** on the same day in Ramadan.

### Mediterranean

ISIS will conduct a major attack against Western tourists in the **Mediterranean**.

June 26: ISIS claimed a shooting that killed tourists at a beach resort in **Sousse, Tunisia**.

### MENA

ISIS's affiliates will launch ground offensives in the **Middle East and North Africa**.

July 1: ISIS's Wilayat Sinai launched a ground assault across **North Sinai**.

*Graphic by Noelle Rutland*

[www.understandingwar.org](http://www.understandingwar.org)



in the second simulation feared exhibiting unwitting partiality in regional ethnic, sectarian, or political competitions. The U.S. team's solution was therefore to advocate for as broad an anti-ISIS coalition as possible, while delaying any additional action beyond the current mission. This latter choice was justified as an effort to not be "boxed in." Participants failed to recognize that ethnic, sectarian, and political tensions increased as the simulation developed, limiting the options available to the U.S. and driving allies to take matters into their own hands. The inaction of the U.S. team allowed adversaries such as the Assad regime to continue harmful and radicalizing actions. It also forced the U.S.'s allies to look for other potential partners. The Egypt team looked to the Russia team for weapons during the second simulation, for example, while Iranian-backed Shi'a militias angered Sunni populations in a manner likely to damage the reputation of the Iraqi Security Forces operating with them. These choices by other actors decreased the leverage of the U.S. team over time. ISW's control group discussed the costs of inaction with members of the U.S. team during the simulation, but the participants emphasized the potential costs of action instead.

The U.S. and Europe teams largely reacted defensively to losses, and did not prioritize offensive non-military or military action that might preserve options in Iraq, Syria or the region at large. The Western teams continued their existing approach in ISIS's Interior, and did not respond to indications of a growing Sunni insurgency in Iraq or to the growth of other jihadist groups in Syria. Participants observed these developments, but chose not to initiate new action to support Iraqi Sunnis or moderate Syrian rebels, for fear of unforeseen effects. The Western teams also relied heavily on Egypt and Saudi Arabia to conduct counter-ISIS campaigns in ISIS's Near Abroad. The groups funded and supported these regional players without pressuring them for political change that may have prevented the violent uprising in Egypt or limited the spread of the Libyan Civil War within the scenario. Finally, the Western teams, particularly the Europe teams, dramatically increased internal law enforcement and security efforts in ISIS's Far Abroad. The participants recognized but did not act to limit the stress that these activities likely would place on European immigrants and minority communities in the long term. Western teams missed critical opportunities in each of ISIS's global rings, and in doing so allowed sectarianism, radicalism, and instability to fester in the long term.

➤ *The military planners in the simulation perceived that the United States does not have enough armed forces to undertake a multi-theater campaign to degrade and defeat ISIS on its own. The U.S. therefore must choose between increasing its armed forces, relying on coalition partners to achieve the defined mission, or changing the defined mission against ISIS.*

U.S. military personnel in both simulations argued that the U.S. does not have the resources to "degrade and defeat" ISIS in locations outside of Iraq and Syria. The participants claimed that resource constraints limit the possible missions that can be taken against ISIS in its Near and Far Abroad. Participants concluded that a counter-ISIS mission within Libya, if declared, would need a more limited military scope than the current mission to "degrade and defeat" ISIS within Iraq and Syria.

Almost all U.S. military personnel agreed that the U.S. could not degrade and defeat ISIS within Libya, the Sinai, and other Near Abroad areas while maintaining current efforts in Iraq and Syria. However, a portion of the group argued that a "degrade and defeat" mission is not necessary outside of ISIS's Interior. These individuals argued that defeating ISIS within its core terrain would accelerate the holistic destruction of the group, making action outside of Iraq and Syria unnecessary. This latter observation may have been valid during the time period covered in ISW's simulation. However, the control group noted during the session that ISIS likely would gain regional resiliency in the medium term if no group challenged its Near Abroad operations. Countering ISIS once the organization achieves regional resiliency likely will require parallel but distinct missions in ISIS's Interior and Near Abroad.

➤ *The U.S. must define the global counter-ISIS mission, and then determine the nested objectives for ISIS and each of its affiliates in support of that mission.*

Combating ISIS globally does not require launching equivalent offensives globally. Rather, it requires defining and prioritizing missions in a way that incorporates the complete scope of ISIS's action. This includes non-military solution instruments of power, and the U.S. and its allies need a strategic concept that addresses ISIS's economic, political, and ideological strengths. Current leaders of the anti-ISIS coalition have acknowledged this requirement, but have not translated it to encompass ISIS's activities outside of Iraq and Syria. A comprehensive counter-ISIS framework needs not only the overarching strategic mission to degrade and defeat ISIS, but also nested operational objectives - including military objectives at the operational level of war - that address the different geographic rings and ideological planes upon which ISIS operates. Simulation participants partially identified this necessity, affirming that a counter-ISIS effort in Libya should only seek to contain, while a counter-ISIS effort in Iraq should likely seek to defeat.

➤ *In the absence of an explicit strategy to counter ISIS's regional expansion, the U.S. and its allies likely will rely on stable and semi-stable states, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. In both simulations the U.S. team's implicit long-term strategy was to contain regional chaos as best possible through these partners, rather than adopt a campaign against extremist groups directly.*

The U.S. teams' approach in both simulations required partners in the Middle East and North Africa capable of maintaining internal stability while combatting ISIS and other extremist groups directly. Participants focused on the example of Syria, whose internal chaos compromised the security of Iraq, Lebanon, and other neighboring states. The U.S. teams sought to limit the effects of both the Syrian and Libyan Civil Wars by supporting regional allies, actions consistent with stated U.S. policy. Events since ISW's simulation have demonstrated the importance of regional allies in executing effective operations against ISIS. For example, the U.S.'s efforts to establish bases for drone surveillance against ISIS in Libya currently as limited by a lack of North African partners willing to cooperate with the U.S. and risk reprisal by extremist groups.<sup>26</sup>

The U.S. team within the simulations discussed the creation of UN programs to help Libya's neighbors, namely Tunisia and Algeria, improve their internal policing and border control efforts in order to stem the flow of fighters to Libya, Iraq, and Syria. In addition to these efforts, the U.S. team expressed a desire to preserve positive relations with Morocco and to maintain the stability of Nigeria, whose fall could significantly destabilize the African continent. All members of the U.S. team agreed on the importance of these efforts. However, the individuals representing the leadership of the U.S. military establishment did not devote time to plan concrete action along these lines of effort during the simulation. Individuals representing political leadership within the U.S. also failed to designate support to stable states as a military priority. All members of the group focused resources on states facing active insurgencies, such as Iraq and Egypt, rather than on stable and semi-stable states in the region.

➤ *ISIS has an asymmetric advantage because it can project force from disparate regions, potentially exploiting fissures between multiple international organizations and U.S. combatant commands.*

The United States faces structural challenges to undertaking a multi-theater war, particularly against an enemy with varied strength across theaters. Coordinating across regions necessitates a substantial expenditure of time and resources because the U.S. military is divided into geographic unified combatant commands (COCOMs). This cost increases when multinational action is desired or required. Each nation in an existing or newly created alliance has its own objectives

and capabilities which must be taken into account. This structural and bureaucratic challenge manifested in several ways during both simulations. Externally, the U.S. team was forced to balance Turkey's cooperation in training and equipping moderate Syrian rebels with Turkey's opposition to international action harming the Libyan General National Congress. The U.S. team also had to counteract Russian attempts for influence in Egypt while continuing to limit Russia's influence in Ukraine.

Internally, the U.S. team faced a significant challenge coordinating amongst COCOMs. Participants in both iterations of the simulation agreed that U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) should be the supported command, and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) the supporting. However, there was significant disagreement about how resources would actually be divided among the commands, especially given AFRICOM's limited capabilities at present. In addition to this resource debate, the U.S. team struggled with plans to coordinate across COCOMs. Participants noted the lack of institutions designed to handle synchronization across COCOMs and discussed possible solutions, including delegating responsibility for coordination to SOCOM, creating a U.S. Supreme Allied Commander in the fight against ISIS, or creating a Joint Task Force similar to the current joint headquarters in the Horn of Africa.

Proactively identifying supported and supporting commands unfortunately does not solve the inherent challenge of integrating efforts across multiple combatant commands into a coherent strategy. Overcoming bureaucracy and uniting disparate counter-ISIS efforts is an overall challenge to the U.S. mission to counter ISIS globally. This challenge manifested especially in the second simulation, which featured a large U.S. team representing multiple sectors and agencies that suffered from multiple communication breakdowns.

The U.S. team in the second simulation also found navigating external alliances extremely difficult because of internal divisions. This group affirmed the benefits of a broad, inclusive anti-ISIS coalition, but also acknowledged the hurdles of matching the priorities of partners with mission tasks. One participant suggested the creation of several bilateral and multilateral alliances in order to address specific aspects of the fight against ISIS. These alliances might deal with specific theaters or elements of ISIS's power, such as foreign fighter flows or the Syria campaign. The participant claimed that this solution would mediate between conflicting state interests and would minimize the risk of nations spoiling certain efforts. An approach based on multiple bilateral alliances might alleviate the effects of diverging priorities among partner states. This method requires skillful management, however, either by the United States or another

# U.S. Geographic Unified Combatant Commands

HE WORLD 1:60,000,000

THE WORLD WITH COMMANDERS' AREAS OF RESPONSIBILITY

EDITION 8 NGA  
BASED ON  
UNIFIED COMMAND PLAN  
17 DECEMBER 2008

SERIES 1107



Source: United States Central Command website.<sup>27</sup>

supervising strategic body. Such a body must ensure that partners' pursuit of their own national objectives continue to serve the overarching counter-ISIS strategy. Egypt may choose to focus on operations in Libya and the Sinai, for example, but its efforts can derail the overall mission if they are not properly nested.

The division of the anti-ISIS coalition into bilateral and multilateral alliances would not solve the problem of divergent priorities and capabilities entirely. The U.S.'s allies could still withdraw support from one alliance in order to protest the actions of another alliance. For example, during the simulation ISW explored the possibility of Turkey threatening aspects of the training program for Syrian rebels in order to achieve objectives related to the Libyan Civil War. Given the bureaucratic, multilateral environment, the U.S. must make a concerted effort to formulate a coherent, synchronized campaign against ISIS on all of the organization's global fronts. Otherwise ISIS will have an advantage over the U.S. and its allies as they deal with each new event in a piecemeal fashion.

➤ *ISIS's Near Abroad and Far Abroad campaigns likely will exacerbate cleavages amongst European actors, leading to interstate and intrastate divergences on security approaches and prioritization of threats.*

The Europe team faced significant internal disagreement on the best way to respond to ISIS's activity in Libya. In general, southern European states such as Spain, France, and Italy were more concerned about ISIS's ability to encourage and launch attacks into Europe using refugee populations and European minority communities. In addition, the France participant felt some responsibility towards Libya because of its encouragement of NATO airstrikes in the 2011 Libyan Civil War. The France participant also had a higher appetite for military intervention given the nation's recent perceived success in Mali. The Italy participant, meanwhile, was strongly concerned about the economic and security challenges from the conflict's heightened refugee flows. The British participant was willing to assist with efforts against ISIS, but like the Germany participant did not feel directly threatened by ISIS's expansion to North Africa.

Most European actors looked to the Germany participant for financial support in their internal security and external military efforts. However, the Germany participant's attention was fixed on Russia's participation in the Ukrainian Civil War. The Germany player was unwilling to commit significant resources to Italy's refugee crisis, for example, for fear of losing focus on Eastern Europe. The Germany participant did express concern about cultural tensions



arising from the Libyan and Syrian Civil Wars, particularly because of its large Turkish population. However, there was not a Europe-wide consensus on how to prioritize the threats of ISIS in Libya, ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and Russia in Ukraine.

➤ *Turkey, Russia, and Egypt each have a disproportionate ability to spoil or facilitate counter-ISIS strategies devised by the U.S.*

In both iterations of the simulation the U.S. and Europe teams found the success and relevance of their military action largely dependent on the results of diplomatic efforts with Turkey and Egypt. The Turkey team found opportunity in every crisis, extracting concessions from the Western teams for basing or diplomatic support, and retained the ability to spoil collective action by NATO. The Russia team also sought to limit actions by NATO, in support of its ongoing efforts in Eastern Europe. The group also expressed its intention to increase the costs of any efforts taken against Assad. Thus the U.S. team was forced to evaluate every possible action within the region in terms of the potential reaction of Turkey and Russia.

The Egypt team also increased its influence during the course of the simulation, by promoting itself as the leader of regional efforts against extremism. The Egypt team received funding and political support for the Western teams in this campaign, despite its continued insistence on targeting all forms of political Islam, rather than simply violent extremism. The U.S. team in the first simulation attempted to shape Egypt's counterterrorism operations by providing air tasking orders to the Egypt team. This choice yielded some beneficial results, as the Egypt team used the U.S.'s guidance to target ISIS within Egypt and Libya. However, the Egypt team continued its inflammatory, broad targeting of domestic groups, which eventually led to violent uprising within mainland Egypt.

The choices made by the Turkey, Russia, and Egypt teams each had the potential to derail the U.S. team's efforts to counter ISIS and contain disorder in the region. Policymakers within the U.S. likely will need to devote considerable political and possibly military and financial resources to shaping or counteracting actions by each of these actors within the region. Conditions in July 2015 reflect this reality, as Turkey resources Islamist-affiliated rebel groups in Syria, Russia provides additional arms to the Iraqi Security Forces, and Egypt faces growing militancy from ISIS and possibly Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated violent actors.<sup>28</sup>

➤ *The U.S. risks strategic failure even if ISIS does not attempt coherent action across global fronts. The campaigns of ISIS's affiliates and supporters across multiple regions may distract and divide the U.S.'s allies and resources, as may other conflicts such as the conflict in Ukraine.*

The U.S. team in the first simulation was more willing to undertake military action against ISIS, and thus had to deal with the challenges of limited resources early on. As explained above, ISIS is a deadly opponent because of its potential ability to launch coherent attacks on U.S. interests in multiple regions. However, the U.S. may be overwhelmed even if ISIS does not act with coherency. ISIS has currently fixed many CENTCOM resources in Iraq and Syria.<sup>29</sup> In ISW's near-future simulation ISIS also required certain AFRICOM resources. Participants noted that because of these conditions, the U.S. would not have the capacity to deal with a contingency in another part of the world, such as in North Korea. ISW stressed this vulnerability in the second simulation by forcing participants to consider the developments of the Ukrainian Civil War as they ran in parallel to events in the Middle East and North Africa.

The U.S. cannot design a proactive counter-ISIS strategy in a vacuum. The global nature of the ISIS threat must be considered alongside ongoing security threats beyond ISIS. This requirement increases the complexity of the strategic task. However, it also complements the aforementioned objective that the counter-ISIS strategy act upon ISIS coherently and asymmetrically. If American planners identify ISIS's centers of gravity on a global scale, the U.S. will have the potential to counter ISIS in a way that does not sap resources excessively.

➤ *ISIS's global campaign likely will increase policymakers' tolerance of frequent, high-level, and widespread violent events, creating opportunities for the United States' adversaries.*

The majority of ISW's fictional news updates used during the simulation reflected actual terrorist attacks seen frequently over the past seven months. ISW expected that these stories would introduce new geopolitical complications and perhaps divergent prioritization amongst actors. Instead, the U.S. and Europe teams primarily responded to these stressors by adopting a higher bar for state response to threats. Both teams articulated a desire to remain focused on the fight against ISIS in Iraq, and as a result simply continued ongoing lines of efforts while increasing domestic security.

Only one group in both iterations of the game independently considered what sorts of action by ISIS might necessitate a broader response by their team. When prompted, the U.S. team hypothesized that included an attack on the homeland, the execution of American military members, or the destabilization of allies like Jordan or Saudi Arabia might change the U.S.'s strategic calculus in the region. Real-world events leading up to ISW's simulation, such as the execution of American citizens, the immolation of a Jordanian pilot, or the declaration of ISIS's new affiliate in Afghanistan were not judged by the team to have hit this bar. Similar fictional actions by ISIS announced throughout the

game did very little to change any team's focus. This trend is encouraging in that it precludes a "soccer ball" effect whereby international attention turns to the location of the latest spectacular attack. However, participants' high bar for strategic recalculation indicates that the U.S. and its allies may find it difficult to discern true indications of threat evolution or acceleration. Accepting higher levels of baseline instability and categorizing increased terrorist attacks as noise risks ignoring opportunities for pre-conflict, Phase O action. This is especially true of Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which ISIS likely threatens with a longer-term destabilization campaign. The U.S. will need to respond to ISIS's various campaigns with different instruments of national power. However, the increased rate of ISIS's attacks should not indiscriminately raise the bar for what instigates national action.

➤ *The U.S. and its allies cannot conduct counter-ISIS operations without considering the context of other extremist forces in the region. A strategy focused on ISIS alone likely will allow other violent, radical actors to thrive.*

ISIS is a brutal, high velocity actor that has dominated policymakers' attention, particularly in relation to Iraq and Syria. However, ISIS's actions also facilitate the growth of equally deadly low velocity actors. ISW's simulation highlighted this reality in several ways. First, the game's written scenario included early warnings of a nascent Iraqi Sunni insurgency in areas cleared of ISIS but not rehabilitated by the Iraqi government. Second, al-Qaeda teams in both simulations calculated that Western and regional focus on ISIS in Iraq and Libya provided an opening for expanded operations in Mali and Syria. The al-Qaeda team chose to re-surge its efforts in Mali, judging that France and other actors would not act due to overextension and the higher tolerance for disorder described above. At the same time, al-Qaeda benefited from counter-ISIS efforts in Syria, in that no action by the U.S., Europe, or the regional team limited al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra's efforts to embed with the Syrian resistance.

The implicit popular assessment that al-Qaeda is a lesser evil than ISIS plays into al-Qaeda's strategy of patiently shaping Salafist populations.<sup>30</sup> It furthermore overlooks the fact that ISIS and al-Qaeda are not engaged in a zero-sum game. The organizations are executing different phases of a similar strategy, such that ISIS's focus on regional expansion does not necessarily conflict with al-Qaeda's desire to launch spectacular attacks on the West. The groups certainly are in conflict, both on an ideological level and on select battlefronts, such as in Syria. Overall, however, ISIS and al-Qaeda are conducting parallel campaigns that target Western interests, rather than each other.

Defining security threats in the Middle East requires a balanced perspective. Opposition to Salafism in general risks alienating political Islamists in a way that may increase regional instability. At the same time, an ISIS-specific definition of the extremist threat risks overlooking the danger of other violent radical groups, including al-Qaeda. This is especially relevant because destroying ISIS does not ensure the destruction of ISIS's ideology and military methodology. Salafi jihadist groups will likely seek to emulate ISIS's example even if the organization is defeated. In addition actors such as al-Qaeda may look to leverage a Sunni insurgency in a post-ISIS Iraq. American leaders must clearly determine the scope of the current regional strategy, with the recognition that a reasonable framework likely lies somewhere between countering ISIS and countering regional instability.

## CONCLUSION

ISIS is executing a coherent global strategy across its Interior, Near Abroad, and Far Abroad rings. These parallel efforts give ISIS resiliency, and allow it to pressure adversaries from multiple directions. ISIS's ability to act simultaneously across its geographic rings gives the organization an asymmetric advantage over the U.S.-led coalition. The coalition is focused on Iraq and Syria, and it is reacting disjointedly and ineffectively to ISIS's activities in Libya, Egypt, Afghanistan, and other places. ISW's wargame demonstrated how this failure enables ISIS to strategically outpace the U.S. and its allies.

The United States must change the way that it frames the fight against ISIS. An effective counter-ISIS strategy requires a globally scoped mission, with distinct and synergistic campaigns against ISIS in its Interior, Near Abroad, and Far Abroad. Strategies to counter ISIS in the Near Abroad do not need to mimic counter-ISIS strategies on the Interior within Iraq and Syria, because ISIS's capability and intent vary across the rings. Rather, the U.S. and partners can develop supporting efforts in the Near Abroad, through enhanced ISR and thoughtful basing scenarios for example, which can improve the U.S.-led coalition's ability to act coherently across the rings better than ISIS does. This approach will allow the U.S. and its allies to act with strategic coherency, avoiding the creation of identical resource-draining wars across the world. The U.S. faces several challenges in uniting its partners for this mission. Some, like Saudi Arabia, primarily are focused on countering Iranian influence. Others, like Egypt, may be more focused on perpetuating the perception of efficacy than on taking meaningful action. Still others may govern in a way that runs counter to American values, or have few resources to contribute. Marshalling these divergent capabilities and priorities requires sustained diplomacy and management on the part of the U.S.



ISIS is unfortunately not the only violent non-state actor that the U.S. faces. Al-Qaeda benefits from increased levels of conflict and violence in the world. Surgical victories against individual actors do not neutralize the aggregate radicalism that has allowed Yemen, Libya, and Syria to serve as safe haven for a range of extremist groups. The U.S. faces an increased threat from disparate terrorist organizations that are pursuing similar goals through independent lines of effort. Each group benefits from the disorder and violence produced by the others. In aggregate, the organizations may achieve strategic resonance, producing large-scale systemic failure.

The U.S. needs to adapt to this new context of warfare, in which partnerships are challenged and adjacent threats thrive as conditions of disorder increase. To do so the U.S. must maintain awareness of the evolution of the threat environment and must embrace forecasting and early action as a matter of course. The U.S. also must work to preserve and support its partners in the face of growing insecurity. These efforts can be heterogeneous, but they should be part of a coherent vision of dampening disorder in a proactive and systemic fashion.

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