

I. Articles

A Long Way from Success: Assessing the War on the Islamic State

by Charles Lister

Abstract

Since the U.S.-led coalition initiated military action against the Islamic State (IS) in northern Iraq in August 2014 and in Syria the following month, a number of victories have been achieved. However, progress thus far can best be described as a series of loosely linked tactical gains, rather than a significant strategic advance. The stated coalition objective is to “degrade and destroy” IS as a militant organization, but it remains a potent armed force capable of capturing valuable territory and inflicting considerable material damage on its adversaries. The time has now come for a bold and critical re-evaluation of the current anti-IS strategy and the core analytical understandings driving counter-actions. In addition to honestly assessing progress thus far in countering IS, this article highlights three key issues requiring acknowledgment and recommends their inclusion within the foundational thinking of a new and more effective counter-IS strategy.

Keywords: Jihadism, ISIS, Iraq, Syria, strategy, foreign policy

Introduction

Since the Islamic State’s (IS) declaration of a Caliphate (*khilafa*) in late-June 2014 and the initiation of U.S.-led coalition airstrikes against IS targets in northern Iraq in August 2014 and in Syria in September 2014, the terrorist organization has become an increasingly international phenomenon. In the weeks and months that followed, growing numbers of jihadist militants began swearing their loyalty (*bay’a*) to IS, answering IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s call for worldwide pledges of allegiance to his self-declared authority.

By early August 2015, IS and its “Leader of the Faithful” (*amir al-mu’minin*) Baghdadi – also referred to as Caliph Ibrahim – had accepted into the fold groups operating in Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Nigeria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan-Afghanistan (Af-Pak) and Russia’s North Caucasus, in addition to its already existing force in Syria and Iraq. While some of these new IS affiliates – designated as “provinces” (*wilayat*) within the Caliphate – are operationally smaller than others, all have carried out attacks following their inclusion within the IS umbrella. Nonetheless, it remains unclear to what extent each international faction and each of the existing 36 provinces has established and consolidated solid command and control (C2) links to the IS central leadership in Syria and Iraq.

The clear and present threat posed by IS justifies, and indeed demands a counter-reaction by international states and the local governments who directly face IS on the battlefield. After nine months of coalition operations, a series of tactical-level victories have been won against IS in parts of Iraq and northeastern Syria, but these do not yet appear to amount to anything close to strategic progress in genuinely degrading and destroying IS as an organization. In fact, some facets of the strategies adopted may even prove counterproductive in the long-term.

Considering the sheer scale of IS operations in Syria and Iraq and the questionable nature of its command and control (C2) links with groups in other countries, the strategic priority for the international community should remain countering IS in its Iraqi and Syrian heartlands. However, the existing strategy is neither

sufficient in scale or design to effectively achieve this objective or to transform tactical gains into long-term strategic progress.

Progress Assessment

Iraq

Since the U.S. and its allied coalition began airborne operations against IS in northern Iraq on 8 August 2014, it has steadily lost a series of battles. Indeed, as Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello wrote in late April 2015, “the Islamic State has been on the defensive in Iraq for more than eight months and it has lost practically every battle it has fought.”[1] In Iraq’s largely Kurdish north, IS forces have faced defeat en route to Irbil, at the Mosul Dam and in Sinjar. Within the country’s interior and around the capital Baghdad, IS forces were defeated at the Haditha Dam, outside the Ayn al-Asad base, in Tikrit, Amerli, Dhuluiya, and Jurf al-Sakhar, to name only a few locations.

However, the Iraqi Army itself remains a debilitated force incapable of leading its country’s anti-IS operations. With approximately 48,000 active personnel, the army has been outnumbered and outperformed in Iraq’s core territories by the irregular Popular Mobilization Units (PMU, or *al-Hashd al-Sha’bi* in Arabic),[2] which count as many as 100,000 men within their ranks.[3] Formed in June 2014 following a *fatwa* issued by Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani that called upon his countrymen to mobilize and protect “their country and their people and their holy places,”[4] the PMUs are dominated by Shia Iraqi militias, including Asa’ib Ahl al-Haqq, Kata’ib Hizballah, Kata’ib al-Imam Ali, Kata’ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas Forces and the Badr Organization.

With Iranian backing – including training, C2 coordination and supplies of both weapons and vehicles – the PMUs have emerged as effective counter-insurgent forces, leading the capture of Tikrit in mid-April 2015, for example. The increasingly visible presence of highly mobile Iranian *Safir* jeeps equipped with multiple rocket launchers (MRLs), launching platforms for improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs), and more recently modified versions of the American BGM-71 TOW anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) have become telltale signs of expanding Iranian military assistance to PMUs in Iraq. However, the close relationship with Iran and their largely sectarian makeup, sporadic allegations of anti-Sunni war crimes, looting,[5] and population displacement suggests the PMU’s short-term tactical victories may be outweighed by long-term damage caused to the central government’s reputation within Iraq’s Sunni heartlands.

Since its first days of operational existence in Iraq in 2003 as Jama’at al-Tawhid wa’l-Jihad, IS has sought to engender and exploit chaos by rupturing foundational social fabrics, especially inter-sectarian trust and cooperation. The preeminent role of a largely Shia force – whose leaders include commanders designated as international terrorists by the U.S. government[6] – in combating a Sunni extremist organization on Sunni territory is unlikely to heal existing societal rifts or to defeat the sectarian dynamics that IS has encouraged and fed off in Iraq for so many years.

When IS captured its third provincial capital, the city of Ramadi, on 17 May 2015 after more than a year of battle, Iraq’s Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi was forced to call upon the PMUs to launch a counter-offensive. While Abadi was clearly stuck between a rock and a hard place in making such a decision, broader fears over the implications of a Shia-dominated militia force leading an assault on the provincial capital of Iraq’s most fervent Sunni heartland appeared reinforced when the operation was initially named *Labayka ya Hussein* (We are at your service, Hussein) – essentially a Shiite slogan.[7]

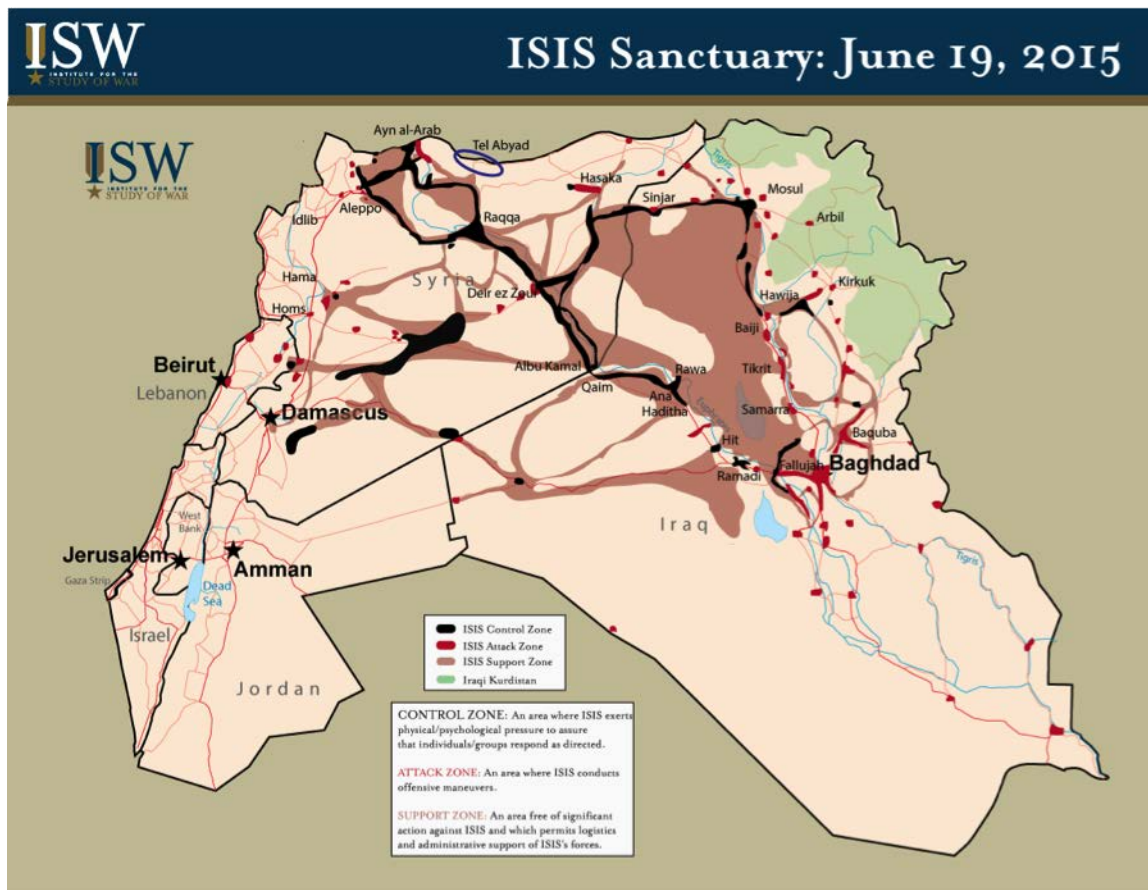
Syria

Meanwhile, in Syria, IS has faced a more limited coalition of countries targeting it from the air, with the U.S.-led effort seeking mainly to strike openly available targets largely in isolation from broader battlefield dynamics on the ground. The exception to this latter assessment thus far has been the coordination of strikes with Kurdish fighters combating IS in northern Syria, beginning most notoriously in Kobane (or Ayn al-Arab) in late 2014 and continuing elsewhere in the northeast in early 2015.

While Kobane attracted the world's attention and drew IS into expending hundreds-upon-hundreds of its fighters, the town was in fact of little strategic (let alone existential) value to IS, and its near total destruction and depopulation by March 2015 took away any sense of victory for the Kurds or the U.S.-led coalition. Despite this, the Kurdish militia Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG) has been consistently effective, with its forces – often in coordination with coalition airstrikes – recapturing as many as 200 villages and towns in northeastern Syria in May 2015 alone. Moreover, its capture of the border town of Tel Abyad – a target of genuine strategic value to IS – in mid-June and of the nearby 93rd Brigade base on 22 June suggested Kurds had the military potential to threaten IS' de facto capital of Raqqa, provided coalition air support continued.

However, it remains unclear how committed the Kurdish YPG would be to expanding military operations and committing valuable resources beyond what is core Kurdish territory. Notwithstanding some statements suggesting that Raqqa city remains a YPG target, increasing tensions between the Kurdish militia group and the broader largely Sunni Arab opposition – which accused the YPG of ethnic cleansing in mid-June – may complicate their role when moving further into Syria's interior. Moreover, Turkey's recent airstrikes against IS in northern Aleppo and its resumption of conflict with the PKK threatens to undermine the YPG's role within anti-IS coalition operations. Although Turkey has at times made subtle distinctions between the YPG and PKK, the Syrian faction is nonetheless structurally part of the PKK's broader organisational umbrella and should Turkey-PKK hostilities continue to escalate, dynamics across northern Syria could fundamentally transform.

Moreover, reports that the Assad regime has begun using the predominantly Kurdish northeastern Hasakah governorate as a new base for Iranian military personnel and avowedly pro-regime Baathist Sunni militias[8] could serve to open new conflict fronts that may neutralize the potential for Kurdish progress against IS altogether.



Credit: Institute for the Study of War, June 2015.

IS' most strategically valuable territories – those that ensure the movement's long-term survival – in eastern Aleppo, Raqqa and throughout the governorate of Deir ez Zour have largely remained untouched, save for the daily targeted coalition strikes on vehicles, makeshift oil refineries, tactical weapons systems and groups of fighters. The key to IS's further degradation and sustainable long-term defeat in these regions lies with the predominantly Sunni insurgency, which proved its determined opposition to IS in early 2014 with a successful offensive that forced the group out of the governorates of Latakia, Idlib, and western Aleppo by March 2014. Insurgent forces have since prioritized the fight against the Assad regime, notwithstanding a few localized anti-IS offensives in western Qalamoun near the Lebanese border, around Damascus, in rural Homs, and in pockets of the southern governorates of Quneitra and Deraa.

Within today's current dynamics and the intensely complex nature of Syria's multi-front conflict, the moderate opposition *Syrian* insurgency – encompassing secular nationalist, 'moderate' and mainstream Islamist, as well as Salafist factions – remains either incapable or otherwise distracted from launching any all-out strategy to rid Syria of the acknowledged IS threat. The deployment of the first 54 members of the U.S. 'trained and equipped' New Syrian Forces (NSF) into northern Aleppo in mid-July has thus far been a catastrophic failure. In the days before being 'turned on' by their American backers, NSF leader Colonel Nadim al-Hassan, one of his deputies and four other fighters were kidnapped by Jabhat al-Nusra in an ambush and swiftly accused of being American agents sent to undermine the jihad in Syria. A day later, Jabhat al-Nusra launched a night-time assault on the headquarters of Colonel Hassan's 30th Division, killing five, wounding 18 and taking 20 prisoner. Commenting after the attack, unnamed U.S. officials remarkably claimed that they had expected Jabhat al-Nusra to "welcome" the 30th Division "as an ally in its fight against the Islamic State." [9]

It therefore seems likely that IS will retain control of much of its most valuable territories and indeed continue its ongoing and gradual infiltration and acquisition of new territory from both regime and opposition forces. In fact, increasing reports of suspected IS suicide bombings and assassination attacks targeting Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham and Faylaq al-Sham in the northwestern governorate of Idlib suggest IS may be preparing the ground for a more overt expansion westwards.[10]

Re-assessing Strategy

Since the initiation of coalition anti-IS operations, progress has clearly been made against the group in parts of Iraq. The group's operational momentum there has been definitively slowed, but IS nonetheless remains a potent militant force capable of inflicting considerable death and destruction and indeed, capturing territory – Ramadi being the case in point. While Kurdish forces have also made progress across the border in northeastern Syria, IS is sitting far more comfortably elsewhere in the country and despite its loss of Tel Abyad, appears to face no immediate existential threat.

In addition to its international expansion and declared management of 36 “provinces” across 10 countries, IS has operationally adapted in order to sustain an internal sense of momentum on the battlefield. While control of population centers is undoubtedly of critical value in providing the group with its most important source of revenue (tax and extortion, worth an estimated \$600 million in 2014 in Iraq alone[11]), the control and freedom of movement across a depopulated desert has proven crucial as strategic depth and a launching ground for varying levels of military and guerrilla activity.

IS has also set about fortifying its control of major urban centers – like Raqqa, Mosul and now Ramadi – through the use of trenches and constructed walls, the demolition of bridges, as well as the emplacement of huge numbers of booby traps and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) both inside towns and cities and on transport routes leading to them. For example, IS laid over 100 IEDs on one 8km stretch of road leading to Tikrit,[12] while Kurdish Peshmerga defused more than 6,000 IEDs on roads leading to IS-controlled territories in northern Iraq from August 2014 to March 2015.[13] Such defensive strategies aim to slow IS' adversaries, drain their resources and provide opportunities for IS militants elsewhere to launch diversionary operations. While IS has so notoriously proven itself capable of acting like a light infantry force, it remains at heart a determined and capable insurgency, which highly effectively exploits Robert Taber's famed image of a flea and a dog:

The guerrilla fights the war of the flea, and his military enemy suffers the dog's disadvantages: too much to defend; too small, ubiquitous, and agile an enemy to come to grips with.[14]

IS is clearly a determined enemy and poses a potent threat that the current coalition strategy is failing to effectively 'degrade and defeat.' In order to better counter IS and the broader terrorist threat emanating from Iraq and Syria, three key issues need to be addressed and acknowledged: IS's driving force(s), tactical gain vs strategic victory, and the importance of Syria.

IS's driving force(s)

That IS is driven by a particularly extreme apocalyptic Salafi-jihadi ideology appears to have become an established view. Indeed, a close monitoring of the group's public rhetoric and propaganda materials underlines this assessment clearly. At its ideological heart, IS seeks to overthrow the existing world order, which it deems to be corrupt and inherently un-Islamic; to convert all people to Islam; and to rule all Islamic lands and eventually the world according to its fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. The establishment

of an Islamic State (first in Iraq in 2006, then again in Syria in 2013) and then its Caliphate (in June 2014) is seen as the foundation upon which this transnational and transformative Islamic order would be established.

Fatwas and other judicial writings by IS scholars on the treatment of Christians and Jews, as well as other ethnic minorities and sects, follow a similarly extremist vision of the world. The self-justification of the enslavement of Yazidis in Iraq and the taking of their women as concubines served as but one example of IS' driving Salafi-jihadi ideology.[15]

However, while this extremism feeds into IS' international propaganda, fuels its recruitment, and portrays the kind of fearsome image that can at times weaken the will of its adversaries on the battlefield, IS is similarly invested in another ideological driving force. On a more local and less internationally-visible level, IS' has consistently sought to portray itself as a movement devoted to defending the rights of disenfranchised, disaffected and repressed Sunni communities. In both Syria and Iraq, IS presents itself as a both an army and an alternative "state" to defend against and replace repressive or failed political systems perceived as oppressive to Sunni Muslims. In areas of both countries, it has been this socio-politically focused image that has been most effective at securing IS the kind of roots into sectors of society that provide the potential for long-term survival.

While this social driver, which could be said to be more akin to a "Sunni nationalism," has given IS opportunities to offer itself as a viable alternative, it has consistently followed this "carrot" up with a "stick" – in the form of overwhelming societal control through absolutist forms of law and order and behavioral codes. In times of chaos and instability – something IS actively seeks to cause and sustain – such a "carrot and stick" approach can potentially prove a highly effective method of territorial and population control, so long as the "carrot" is at least equal to if not superior to what else could be alternatively offered. By supplementing lost momentum in Syria and Iraq with the perception of growth more internationally through the acquisition of new affiliates, IS further enforces a sense of permanence within its controlled communities.

In isolation, it is thus right and justified that academics and practitioners seek to understand IS' extremist ideology and to design effective counter-narratives. However, a powerful counter-narrative requires a delivery mechanism sufficiently credible to convince those within IS and others potentially vulnerable to its message. This is an extraordinary challenge and one that no Western nor Middle Eastern government appears to have yet achieved.

Consequently, the most potent materially-focused policy one can use today against a group like IS is to ameliorate the socio-economic and political failures and divisions that are so evident within the countries IS is operating in – especially Syria and Iraq. Practically speaking, this would serve as a highly effective counter-narrative, of sorts.

In Iraq, the government in Baghdad must accelerate and expand on attempts to recover a nationalist image of a strong, united, multiethnic and multi-confessional society. In this respect, the international community has an urgent duty to coerce divisive elements within parliament and the broader political system to bolster the voices of credible Sunnis and to guarantee that continued financial and military assistance to the Iraqi government is made strictly conditional on progress in this regard. Considering the still primary role being given to the military effort to counter IS in Iraq, the role of Sunnis must be expanded significantly. Plans to form, train, arm and support a Sunni National Guard force and re-established local police forces drawn largely from Sunni tribes in Anbar must be followed through and be given preeminent roles on the frontline in both capturing territory and then holding it.

In Syria, it must be acknowledged that the continuation of the Assad regime remains one of IS' most effective recruitment tools and the Syrian security apparatus has been clearly duplicitous in facilitating – both directly and indirectly – the growth and expansion of IS as a means of harming and dividing the opposition insurgency. Despite countless international diplomatic statements declaring the Assad regime's loss of legitimacy, the U.S. and its coalition allies have consistently failed to defiantly confront the regime's survival. Thus far, this has only provided further time and space for jihadists like IS to operate unchallenged.

Without solving the foundational political issues in these countries, societal divides, instability and power vacuums will always exist for violent extremists to exploit. Only by acknowledging IS' use of such social cleavages to grow roots and expand will the international community stand a chance of genuinely challenging the survivability of the IS phenomenon.

Tactical Gains vs. Strategic Victory

As a result of IS' well-known and preeminent slogan of 'lasting and expanding' (*baqiya wa tatamaddad*), it has been assumed that removing the group's operational momentum would catalyze its degradation and eventual destruction. When combined with the expectation that a Caliphate initially restricted to parts of Syria and Iraq should subsequently continue to grow in order to maintain its legitimacy, this assessment of IS' strategic weakness or vulnerability would appear justified.

However, the fact that IS' self-proclaimed Caliphate came under attack by foreign powers – who IS labels "Crusaders" – less than six weeks after its establishment lent the group an insurance policy. Any major future losses to the Caliphate could then be blamed on these "Crusaders" and their perceived "War on Islam," thus – IS would hope – encouraging further support from Muslims around the world.

This above-mentioned scenario is based on IS suffering serious strategic losses of territory and assets, which as has been explained, has not yet occurred as a result of the existing strategy and dynamics on the ground. Consequently, the kinds of losses imposed on IS in areas of northern Iraq, in Diyala and Salah ad Din, around Baghdad and in northeastern Syria should be read as important initial progress in preparing the ground for a more determined attempt at "rolling back" the group from its most valuable areas of control. Thus far however, these aforementioned victories have amounted by and large to tactical gains rather than strategic defeats to the IS movement.

Throughout the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq in the 2000s and especially during the latter years of the surge – during which IS sustained debilitating losses to its senior leadership – IS demonstrated remarkable resilience. Since August 2014, IS has adapted its force structure and operational tactics in order to sustain offensive operations amid more challenging circumstances. In addition to its more orthodox military assaults that have at times displayed "textbook infantry tactics,"[16] IS has demonstrated an ability to operate as an organization capable of hybridized warfare. In other words, depending on the specific dynamics prevalent within a single area of operations, IS has demonstrated a "shape-shifting ability" that both allows it to remain a step ahead of its adversaries while improving its chances of evading defeat on the ground or by air.[17] By maintaining such asymmetric capabilities, IS heightens its inherent advantage over conventional military adversaries.

Consequently, the current strategies being employed in Iraq and Syria to counter IS are vastly insufficient. Air power alone in Syria – except for in the Kurdish northeast – has only a minimal chance of even slowing IS' capacity to expand, which it has in fact continued to do since strikes began in September 2014, into additional areas of Homs, Damascus, Deir ez Zour and the Qalamoun. Although coordination between local ground forces and international air assets has been more common in Iraq, IS has yet to face a local

Sunni adversary that is capable of recapturing ground, countering the IS social and religious narrative, and supported by a central government perceived as sufficiently representative of Iraq's Sunni community. As effective as they have proven to be on the battlefield, neither Kurds nor Iranian-backed Shia militias possess such stabilizing capabilities.

Importance of Syria

Since the beginning of anti-IS coalition operations in August 2014, Iraq has assumed priority status for the use of airstrikes, the provision of support to and coordination with armed actors on the ground, and other such activities. The partiality of coalition members to act in Iraq is entirely understandable considering the more favorable diplomatic circumstances and the perception that the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdish authority in the north are bodies potentially worthy of partnership. Moreover, it is incontrovertibly true that the vast majority of IS' history has been developed on Iraqi territory.

However, countering IS should not be so Iraq-focused. Since its emergence in Syria as an active militant entity in May 2013, IS has invested heavily in dominating strategically valuable territory in parts of the country, including placing its capital in the city of Raqqa. It is no coincidence that the attack on Mosul in early June 2014 included units of fighters who had crossed from northeastern Syria and that after Mosul's capture, vast quantities of weaponry and finance were transported across the border into Syria within 24 hours.

The intensity of the Syrian conflict; the proliferation of armed factions on all sides; the huge influx of weapons; the divisive involvement of multiple regional and international states; as well as the brutality of the fighting itself makes the war in Syria a ripe candidate for intractability. All jihadist groups in the country, including IS, have invested in Syria precisely for this reason. The longer the conflict continues, the more unmanageable it will become and the more jihadists will find themselves operating within an environment that secures their long-term future. Thus, by placing the fight against IS in Syria on the backburner, the international community is in fact gifting the group with more time to consolidate its presence.

Moreover, the contiguity of IS' territorial control along the Euphrates River from Raqqa, through Deir ez Zour and across the border into Iraq's Anbar province en route to Baghdad provides IS with a critically important C2 and supply link between different fronts. The fall of Ramadi to IS on 17 May 2015 underlined the extent of IS' potential in Iraq's Anbar province and as of early June 2015, the group was in an even stronger position in Syria's eastern Deir ez Zour governorate, where regime forces held only half the provincial capital and an airbase on its southern periphery.

Whatever happens in Iraq and so long as the international community fails to more definitively push for a political transition in Damascus, Syria will remain a critical area of IS operations and a region of invaluable opportunities for the group. To counter IS most effectively, Syria and Iraq must be treated with equal importance and as part of a single unified strategy.

Looking Ahead

President Obama confidently proclaimed on 11 February 2015 that "our coalition is on the offensive, ISIL is on the defensive, and ISIL is going to lose." [18] Two weeks later, the commander of U.S. Central Command, General Lloyd Austin III, told the U.S. Congress that coalition operations had killed an estimated 8,500 IS militants since August 2014, [19] and in late-July, that number stood at an estimated 15,000. [20] Considering the CIA had assessed IS' total manpower to have been no more than 31,500 in September

2014, these numbers appear quite remarkable. However, these figures could in fact potentially be considered realistic. After all, the UN estimated in April 2015 that at least 22,000 foreign fighters had travelled to fight jihad in Syria and Iraq since 2011,[21] a majority for IS. Considering local fighters are likely to count for considerably more, the CIA's estimate appears to have been conservative.

In fact, it seems feasible that when incorporating locally based recruits and those placed on standby or in civil guard-type roles within IS territory that the group could number as many as perhaps 70,000. In August 2014, Iraqi expert Hisham al-Hashimi suggested IS may have contained as many as 100,000 members.[22] A great deal of those fighters however, could be deemed only marginally loyal to the core IS cause. Should local governments and the international community succeed in "rolling back" IS from its core power centers and ensure the provision of a credible socio-political alternative to IS, the group may dwindle to a smaller core akin to the 20,000-31,500 the CIA suggested.

Numbers notwithstanding, U.S. Deputy Special Presidential Envoy to the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL Brett McGurk was absolutely right in April 2015 when he clearly stated that IS "remains an adaptive and formidable foe ... so this is going to be a long-term campaign that is going to take years, not months." [23] However, while it is crucial that IS' proven ability to adapt and endure amid concerted attack be acknowledged, the lengthy duration of any fight against the group should not take away from the urgency of ensuring the strategy is right from the start. Recapturing villages and towns on IS' periphery is an important first step, but only if it comes as part of a broader strategic appreciation of the challenge ahead. Slowing IS momentum does not necessarily mean the group has been placed on the road to defeat, just as the destruction of makeshift oil refineries does not mean IS finances have been dealt an existential blow.

While some success has been secured since August 2014, the current counter-IS strategy does not appear sufficient to produce a sustainable and peaceful post-phase. There is today an urgent need for a bold and objective assessment of the thinking behind the coalition's current plan. An appreciation of the three points outlined in this paper is crucial, but more important perhaps than anything else is an acceptance that it will not be military action alone that stands a chance of degrading, let alone defeating an organization like IS. In fact, it could safely be said that IS will *never* be entirely defeated from the outside, but rather constrained to a minimal operational capability whereby its own internal dynamics under such pressure may lead to its self-destruction.

The key to defeating IS is solving the societal and political failures in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi central government and its security forces must be strongly pressured to become more genuinely representative of Iraq's diversity. Meanwhile, Iran's increasingly preeminent role in shaping paramilitary forces in Iraq should be restrained, both by nationalist Iraqis and if necessary, by the international community. In Syria, the international community must finally acknowledge that Bashar al-Assad does not represent anything close to a unifying figure for his country and it will only be through a political solution in the shape of a managed transition that Syrians can begin to take back control of their territory from groups like IS. A Syrian rebel train and equip program that envisages success in years and not months is miles from a recipe to success.

Finally and above all else, when considering both current and future regional and international security, today's IS-focused lens must be broadened. While IS' dramatic gains, brutal violence and declaration of a Caliphate may have temporarily out-performed al-Qaida in the global competition for jihadist pre-eminence, the latter organization is undergoing a process of renewed confidence, this time emanating from its affiliates in Syria and Yemen, rather than from its senior leadership in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) region, where the recently reported death of Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar is likely to spark an at least temporary period of uncertainty and instability.

The consistent rise in power of al-Qaida's Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra has been complemented by its adoption of pragmatic attitudes on the ground, which has thus far ensured its place as a recognized integral component of the overall opposition insurgency against the Assad regime. Since late 2014, Jabhat al-Nusra has exploited this position – which contrasts sharply IS' brazen unilateralism – to build a formidable stronghold in the northwestern governorate of Idlib, bordering Turkey. Now home to the majority of the so-called 'Khorasan Group' and countless other senior veteran al-Qaida commanders dispatched from Af-Pak, Yemen, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Idlib will likely become a hub of transnationally minded jihadist militancy for years to come. In Yemen meanwhile, the outbreak of civil conflict between Houthi fighters and forces supportive of Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi in 2015 has revealed a gaping power vacuum into which al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been able to step and re-expand. A significant escalation in AQAP-related violence and international plots can therefore be expected in the coming months and into 2016.

Combating terrorist organizations is an intricately complex task, requiring a credible and united multinational effort that incorporates multi-disciplinary action within politics, diplomacy, society, religion, economics, development, military affairs and many other such areas. While a group like IS, which represents a qualitative step beyond a mere 'terrorist organization,' is militant at its core, it is reliant above all else upon societal and political instability, which can generally only be solved through a constructive engagement with those root causes. Naturally, this requires a parallel military component that aims to strategically weaken the organization on the ground, but this must be directed and led by local Sunni actors, backed up if necessary by external powers.

IS is arguably the most potently powerful and capable terrorist organization the world has faced in modern times, but its strategic thinking is comprehensible and its weaknesses are clear. Only by grasping the true nature of these fundamental issues can we begin to think about more practically implementing a blueprint to 'degrade and destroy.'

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Notes

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