

## Let Them Rot: The Challenges and Opportunities of Containing rather than Countering the Islamic State

by Clint Watts

### Abstract

*A year after invading northern Iraq, the Islamic State has built and governed a state under a long professed jihadi vision. To date, international efforts to counter the Islamic State have been incomplete and hesitant, haunted by recent memories of the U.S. effort to conduct regime change in Iraq. Seeking to avoid deploying military forces into Iraq and Syria, the U.S.-led coalition must examine alternative strategies for uprooting the Islamic State's gains. The Algerian government's use of containment in their campaign against the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) during the 1990s suggest an alternative lens for examining how to defeat the Islamic State from internal pressures rather than external military action. An assessment of "Let Them Rot" as a strategy against the Islamic State suggests it may offer several advantages over sustained direct force, but also reveals many gaps in the current U.S.-led coalition's ability to loosen the group's grasp on Syria and Iraq.*

**Keywords:** Containment, counterinsurgency, ISIS, Jihadism, Iraq, Syria, Algeria

*"You are bound to fail. Only in your spirit and determination are you prepared for war. In all else you are totally unprepared, with a bad cause to start with. At first you will make headway, but as your limited resources begin to fail, shut out from the markets of Europe as you will be, your cause will begin to wane. If your people will but stop and think, they must see in the end that you will surely fail."*

- U.S. General William Tecumseh Sherman's response on 24 December 1860 to the succession of the Confederate States of America. Sherman later conducted the siege of Atlanta en route to defeating the Confederate Army.[1]

The past decade's military efforts to rid the world of jihadi extremism show that overt force alone cannot erode the appeal of jihadi rhetoric and may further foment recruitment to the cause of al Qaeda, IS and affiliated jihadi groups. Case studies from Algeria and lessons learned from the Cold War suggest that if the strategic goal truly is the complete defeat of IS, success will likely come more from IS internal failings rather than external military force. While a strategy of avoidance and negligence can clearly lead to blowback as seen by the fall of Western Iraq just one year ago, deliberate containment of IS may be far more effective over the longer term in bringing about the group's complete defeat through erosion of their local and global popular support. Executing a sustained containment strategy, referred to by the Algerians in their fight against the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) as "Let Them Rot", requires compliance with some basic assumptions and several pre-planned steps.

Much of IS's appeal to global jihadis has been their quest to build a State. From IS's perspective and that of their followers, living under a Caliphate unopposed by outside influences will yield an ideal lifestyle. The appeal of the IS model comes largely from theory rather than reality – only the Taliban in Afghanistan have ruled in such a manner during modern times. Jihadis attracted to IS's vision of statehood have never felt the burdens of living under such a repressive system.

Using external force to prevent the formation of these barbaric extremist versions of a state continues to keep the dream of Sharia governance alive. What might happen if IS were left to its own devices? Would jihadis

living under such a system continue to support the ideology should they be forced to live under their flawed utopia?

### ***Between strategic containment and siege warfare***

Containment strategies for degrading IS have been batted around in both government and public discussions but not seriously examined thus far. At a strategic level, the U.S. and NATO pursued containment as a long-run strategy against the Soviet Union for almost fifty years. In its original form, U.S. diplomat George Kennan introduced containment as a strategy in his work *The Sources of Soviet Conduct* where he outlined an approach in which the U.S. would outlast the Soviets. Kennan viewed the Soviets as an “ideological-political threat” rather than a military one and saw diplomacy and economic investment, now commonly referred to as soft power, as the strategic levers for undermining the Soviet Union. While the U.S. did pursue this approach, often heavily using military force namely in Korea and Vietnam, Kennan in 1994 deemed his own strategy “one of the great disappointments of his life,” citing that containment, “took too long to get results and the costs were too high.”[2] Using the purist version of a containment strategy against IS seems an unacceptable option for the international coalition who lack the patience to sit through IS’s continuing violence, and few diplomatic or economic options are available to undermine the largely self-sufficient IS.

The military equivalent of containment comes in the form of siege warfare. Military historian Matthew Waxman notes that “punishment of civilians is a commonly used strategy of coercion” designed to bring about the end of conflicts.[3] By containing a city or area controlled by one’s adversary, military force can be applied over a sustained duration while exhausting and eliminating the city’s resource base, ultimately leading to the defending military surrendering to save their population. Even at a tactical level, siege warfare seems both unpalatable and impractical in the fight against IS. The international coalition currently lacks the manpower and resources to sufficiently stop IS advances and siege warfare would quickly become logistically intensive. Furthermore, siege warfare’s results have been mixed, with some sieges strengthening the resolve of the population under siege to resist the attackers. Siege warfare against IS might likely increase Sunni Arab popular support under IS and accentuate grievances between Sunni and Shia and between Sunni and the West.

The U.S.-led coalition against IS needs a containment strategy somewhere between Kennan’s containment and siege warfare. As described above, the approach must not rely too heavily on diplomatic and economic levers unavailable in today’s Iraq and Syria setting. Likewise, a containment approach cannot take many years to come to fruition nor further alienate the already disenfranchised Sunni populations under IS control. The strategy must both stop IS advance and turn local populations against IS without employing excessive force. One historical example bridging the gap between international relations containment theory and siege warfare may be the “Let Them Rot” method once utilized selectively in Algeria during the 1990’s.

### ***“Let Them Rot”: The tactics of Algeria in their fight against the GIA***

Algeria fought a particularly bloody war during the 1990s against an internal jihadi group seeking similar aims as IS; the Armed Islamic Group known by the acronym GIA. Algeria initially began fighting the GIA through large-scale military operations, killing many GIA members and many civilians in the process. These military efforts did little to erode popular support for the GIA and in many cases may have further pushed some communities into the arms of the jihadist group.

Recognizing how urban military operations against the GIA often exasperated rather than degraded the GIA, the Algerian military began using a tactic known as “Let Them Rot” against districts that were sympathetic to Islamists, particularly those in Kibylia. Historian Luis Martinez described the “Let Them Rot” tactic as a method “to avoid human losses for non-strategic zones, but also to lessen the demoralizing effects of the ‘dirty job’ on the troops.”[4] The Algerian military isolated districts and deliberately left control to GIA Emirs who implemented their own local version of Sharia governance. The government essentially gave the GIA Emirs exactly what they wanted – an opportunity to govern in accordance with jihadi ideology.

Governance quickly became a burden for local GIA Emirs more versed in insurgency than the minutiae of administration. GIA controlled districts became Islamist ghettos in which populaces sympathetic to the GIA were not allowed to leave. GIA districts became enclaves disconnected with the outside world and rapidly found trouble creating and sustaining legitimate economic industry and services to the populations they governed. Emirs under this state of siege naturally turned to corruption and violence to sustain their hold on the districts.

With time, local populaces who had initially been sympathetic to GIA Emirs saw them instead as the new oppressors, slowly becoming more receptive to the Algerian government as the promises of Sharia governance fell short of reality.[5] After a period of isolation, the Algerian government reemerged offering those under GIA siege opportunities to participate in local militias and new economic programs. Businessmen involved in trade often actively pushed for the formation of militias seeing the breaking of the siege and security of the new militia as a mechanism for economic development. “Private interdepartmental cooperatives” served as a conduit for nationally sponsored employment in security and service positions. This cooperative program looked to sponsor young projects created by entrepreneurs within zones controlled by GIA Emirs.[6] These Algerian government job creation efforts took potential recruits away from the GIA. Ultimately in these select districts, the Algerian government didn’t destroy the GIA, they instead let the GIA defeat itself.

### ***“Let Them Rot” as a strategic approach to countering IS***

Conceptually, “Let Them Rot” as a strategic approach to countering IS may represent an appealing alternative to overt military intervention based on several assumptions currently underlying the situation of present day Syria and Iraq. First, the U.S.-led coalition’s slow and limited response to IS already reflects elements of the “Let Them Rot” approach. For example, the U.S. has sustained air strikes and slowly supported the Iraqi military and Kurdish militias as they’ve advanced and succeeded against IS. Second, those populations living under IS jihadi visions of a caliphate for a year or more do not seem overly enthused by governance implemented by violent, young jihadis. IS’s uneven governance, corrupt practices and harsh violence has created local backlash in some locations currently governed by IS.[7] Three, while IS picked up the jihad where al Qaeda left off, both groups have enticed their followers by promoting a vision of an idealistic jihadi state. Jihadis commonly put forth Western intervention as an excuse for why their vision of statehood has failed. Actually letting IS pursue a state that fails under its own weight will truly erode the faith of believers in jihadi ideology – much in the way the fall of the Soviet Union revealed the shortcomings of communist ideology. This strategy will only work, however, if the local populace perceives the governance failings of IS as the result of the inherent shortcomings of the group’s violent ideology and not as the result of the oppression of the U.S.-led coalition.

Before pursuing the “Let Them Rot” approach as a strategy, we should check several assumptions regarding the local populations under IS rule and the resilience and willingness of the U.S.-led coalition to pursue such an approach. First, local populations subjected to IS governance must be willing to see jihadi ideology as a failed vision even as governance fails. As seen with the decline of the Soviet Union, some Soviet citizens continued to believe in communist ideology and governance despite the economic shortcomings and political collapse mounting around them during the 1980s. As mentioned above, those in IS administering governance and those under IS rule must be willing to accept the failure of jihadi ideology should their governance model collapse. Second, viable security and economic alternatives to IS must be presented to populations subjected to Caliphate governance. Third, local populations governed by IS must be amenable to offered alternatives and the entity that offers them. In Western Iraq for example, local Sunnis may ultimately be willing to repel IS but they likely find little reason to work with a Shia dominated central government. Fourth, the U.S.-led coalition must gain consensus across partner nations on the “Let Them Rot” approach. While all participants have agreed to participate in airstrikes, offering alternative governance strategies or resolving the Syrian conflict may prove difficult amidst the competing interests of participating countries. Fifth, the U.S.-led coalition must observe patience amidst persistent atrocities. To date, IS’s flamboyant terrorist attacks, destruction of historical sites, beheading and burning of captives and unparalleled violence have prompted emotional, visceral responses from participating countries. Sustaining a “Let Them Rot” approach would require nations to stand by and observe but not intervene to stop human rights abuses and refugee flows. Should these assumptions be met, there are several sequenced actions the “Let Them Rot” strategy must adhere to if the approach is to succeed.

### *Containment*

The leading principle of the “Let Them Rot” strategy and all related siege warfare is containment. The Algerians were able to implement the approach as a tactic because the districts to which they laid siege were relatively small and manageable in comparison to the size and scale of today’s IS. The U.S.-led coalition, were it to implement a containment strategy, must seal off the borders of Turkey, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and unmarked internal boundary areas in Iraq. While it is likely infeasible to absolutely stop the flow of all humans and goods across some portions of these borders, successful containment at a minimum would require the control, inspection and monitoring of all migration into IS held territory, reducing all manpower and resources available to IS. The containment perimeter would consist of tens of thousands of miles but would be aided by the desert terrain limiting ingress and egress routes to only certain corridors along many of these borders. With the exception of the Israeli border with Syria, each of these border areas currently has significant refugee flows which IS has on many occasions exploited.[8] Implementing effective containment would thus require a significant investment of resources by all partners.

Successfully implementing “Let Them Rot” strategically will require the cutting of not only black market smuggling but the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq. Many border countries may not have the capacity and commitment to seal their borders. Turkey has tacitly permitted the flow of foreign fighters into Syria for nearly four years. Sealing the Turkish border to contain IS will unfortunately harm other militias fighting the Assad regime. Inside Turkey, the border appears littered with jihadi sympathizers.[9] Lebanon, like Turkey, has shown limited capacity to control their eastern border with Syria, which provides a pathway for both Sunni and Shia fighters into the Syrian conflict.

### *Starvation*

Starving IS requires both isolation (through containment) and stripping of their resource base hindering the group's ability to govern. IS's success in developing a state—as compared to the failed attempts of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahel and al Shabaab in Somalia—comes in large part from their ability to consistently self-resource. IS currently blends four key resource streams to successfully resource itself; oil revenues, internal state taxation, illicit schemes and global donations.[10]

Successful containment will hurt many of IS's illicit enterprises and may curb global donations, but this will not significantly hurt the group if it continues to have access to oil revenues which they rely on more than any other stream. Denying IS internal resource support requires removal of IS control over Eastern Syria's oil fields. Their grip on oil fields provides them revenues unmatched by any other jihadi group. Airpower, to date, has done little to nothing in this regard. It is possible that the recent U.S. raid into Eastern Syria killing Abu Sayaf, an IS deputy involved with finance and oil, may represent the international coalition's quest to understand how IS sustains itself via oil operations and devise methods for disrupting this key resource stream.[11]

Assuming both oil revenues and donations from global supporters have stopped, IS will be forced to pursue more legitimate and illicit funding schemes in areas they govern – both would bring consequences for IS sustaining local popular support. Sustained pursuit of legitimate businesses by IS will be tough for cadres of foreign fighters inexperienced with such efforts. Additionally, increased pursuit of legitimate businesses will detract from IS members' ability to conduct security and military operations.[12] Increased reliance on illicit business pursuits will have a further detrimental effect as they prey on local populations harming popular support for IS while at the same time routinely leading to IS members violating tenets of their declared ideology. In the end, disrupting oil revenues, eliminating global donations and increased IS reliance on legitimate and illicit revenue schemes will erode any available local popular support for IS and make alternative security and governance options more attractive to local populations.

Even if left untouched, Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob Shapiro's analysis suggests, “from an economic perspective Daesh (IS) is extremely unlikely to be sustainable.”[13] Hansen-Lewis and Shapiro's macroeconomic analysis suggests regardless of the actions of the U.S.-led coalition, the IS economy is doomed to fail and ripe for the application of a containment strategy. In terms of starvation, the strategic question is whether to actively intervene to eliminate oil revenues and donations or wait over the longer term for IS to degrade economically.

### *Preparing Alternatives*

The Algerian government used “Let Them Rot” as a tactic to entice local traders to seek out an alternative security arrangement for the conduct of business. Traders subjected to the rule of GIA emirs for a sustained period actively pushed for the formation and recruitment of government-backed militias. Despite the harsh implementation of IS's version of Islamic law, many Sunnis in parts of Syria may actually see IS governance as the least bad option for conducting consistent secure business. For example, IS control of highways creates a single tariff across the IS region and removes what was previously a system of roadblocks and shakedowns by local groups across many different stretches of highway. Replicating the approach of the “Let Them Rot” strategy thus requires the full starvation of IS for a period of time, combined with the offering of local Sunni security solutions of equal or greater capability than IS.

The single greatest weakness of implementing a “Let Them Rot” strategy arises in the U.S.-led coalition’s limited ability to provide viable security and economic alternatives in areas currently under IS control. Repulsing IS from within requires a Sunni alternative for security. During the U.S. ‘Surge’ campaign of 2008 and 2009, the “Sons of Iraq” program incentivized Sunni tribes to fight al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Sunni militias assumed repelling extremists in Western and Northern Iraq would result in a larger, more inclusive role in governance after the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Greater Sunni inclusion never materialized and disenfranchisement from a Shia-dominated central Iraqi government remains a prime motivator for Sunnis to permit IS existence. To the east, the Syrian civil war has proven to be an intractable conflict where no viable Sunni militias (non-jihadi) appear capable of emerging.

Generating local security mechanisms after starving IS must come in two forms; one for Syria and one for Iraq. For Syria, Sunni refugee populations repressed by IS can provide some manpower to be trained under the U.S.-led train-and-equip mission started near the end of 2014 and currently moving to full capacity.[14] These new militias will be insufficient to challenge IS. Complimenting those trained and equipped by the U.S.-led coalition must be the coopting of existing Sunni militias currently battling Bashar al-Assad and IS in Syria. However, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has proven to be completely ineffective and unlikely to muster much of a fight. The strongest alternative to IS comes from another unpalatable jihadist group – Jabhat al-Nusra – an al Qaeda affiliate designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the U.S. early in the Syrian civil war.

Some alternatives for building Sunni resistance to IS, beyond the coalition’s train-and-equip effort, must be employed to build a sizeable resistance to IS. The Algerian government used a spectrum of approaches to degrade the GIA, only one of which was the “Let Them Rot” tactic, suggesting the U.S.-led coalition must explore options they have considered unpalatable for more than a decade. The Algerian government created amnesty programs for former GIA members and turned some GIA militias back against the GIA. The Algerian amnesty program alone helped dissolve more than 22 GIA militias composed of around 800 militants.[15]

IS today numbers in the tens of thousands and amnesty programs alone would, at best, likely only incentivize local Iraqi fighters and Baathists within IS who, like the local Algerian GIA members, may seek a stake in a post-IS Iraq. International foreign fighters and jihadi veterans of al Qaeda in Iraq now within IS are unlikely to be enticed by such programs, leaving a large demobilization problem should IS fail. Amnesty programs should be considered and exploited when possible, but will not alone be a holistic solution for evaporating IS ranks.

Lacking a strong Sunni partner in Syria, unable to resolve the civil war and incapable of diminishing IS from the east, would the U.S. consider negotiating with Jabhat al-Nusra or work to fracture and utilize the group’s more nationalist elements? Abu Mohammad al-Jawlani, during a recent interview with al Jazeera, stated that Ayman al-Zawahiri, al Qaeda’s leader, told Jawlani, “to refrain from attacking the West and America from Shaam (Syria).”[16] Many believe Jawlani and Jabhat al-Nusra might possibly defect from al Qaeda altogether. Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al Sham have been two of the most viable counter-forces to IS.[17] Should the U.S.-led coalition truly seek to supplant IS in the east, they will need to develop an amnesty and negotiation strategy to build their Sunni ranks.

Creating security alternatives to IS in Iraq faces different challenges. Sunni tribes distrust the Iraqi central government. IS has also mobilized former Baathist members of the Iraqi military declared unfavorable by the U.S. a decade ago. Regaining Sunni support for a local security solution may possibly come in two ways.

First, if the U.S.-led coalition can degrade IS in Iraq halting the group's territorial gains, former Baathists and local Sunnis less committed to IS ideologically may seek to maintain their local powerbase upon an IS collapse. Local Iraqi IS powerbrokers will be ripe for defection and through brokering may be inclined to break with IS to secure their local stake. A similar phenomenon has occurred in Somalia over the past three years as Shabaab clannish middle managers have split with the group under pressure from a growing coalition.[18] Second, if the U.S.-led coalition were open to alternative Iraqi governance structures, this may also entice Sunnis to break with IS. The U.S. and countries in the region resoundingly rejected a three-state federation governance model a decade ago. However, providing Sunnis the opportunity for autonomous or semi-autonomous governance in Anbar province of Iraq may bring about needed resistance to IS's current dominance.

Pursuing the "Let Them Rot" strategy presents a challenge of equal difficulty as security – the offering of economic alternatives. In Algeria, the "Let Them Rot" tactic was complimented with job creation efforts that took potential recruits away from the GIA. 'Private interdepartmental cooperatives' provided nationally backed employment. Cooperative programs sponsored projects created by entrepreneurs within these zones. [19] Currently in both Syria and Iraq, local economies survive under IS and provide the group a tax base from which to operate. At present, no central governance structure on the Syrian side exists to provide an organized economic system to replace IS. In Iraq, a petroleum-based economy will perplex most any effort to provide economic alternatives. Identifying and empowering economic alternatives as part of a "Let Them Rot" strategy might prove completely infeasible.

### ***Developing and Exploiting Fractures***

The "Let Them Rot" strategy, as a whole, essentially seeks to fracture IS through three steps – containment, starvation and development of alternatives. Analysis of IS manpower and financial resources indicates the single biggest driver of the group's unity comes from their military success leading to territorial gains. Halting IS current advances and slowly pushing them back in Iraq and into eastern Syria would ideally develop several fractures within the ranks available for exploitation.

IS manpower would likely crack along three key fault lines when contained and under stress from the U.S.-led coalition. First in Iraq, the key fissure for exploitation would be between legacy jihadis of last decades' al Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq and former Baathists and Sunni tribesmen now riding the IS wave to power. As discussed previously, local Sunni tribesmen and Baathists fighting with IS may be incentivized to defect as IS either loses ground or fails to govern as a result of starvation.

In Syria, the key fractures in a crumbling IS may come in two different ways. First, the international foreign fighters in Syria differ considerably in nationality from IS's jihadi leaders who are by some estimates more than 90% Iraqi and appear principally interested in fighting in Iraq.[20] Breaking the bonds between the international volunteers that sustain IS in Syria and the Iraqi dominated leadership would create negative incentives in global IS recruitment pipelines. The second key fissure for exploitation in Syria will be between IS and other jihadi, Islamist and nationalist militias in Syria. IS for a sustained period has used basic cash incentives combined with battlefield victories to entice fighters from other militias in Syria. Starving IS of resources while allowing competitors to grow stronger and new militias to form may incentivize further defections from IS in Syria.

The most fruitful consequence of starving IS across these three fault lines would likely be inter-IS violence resulting in the killing off of defectors in the ranks. As seen by Shabaab's killing of its popular American

foreign fighter Omar Hammami and the spilling of foreign fighter blood between Jabhat al-Nusra and IS during the spring of 2014, jihadi fratricide more than any other act clearly erodes global support for jihadi campaigns.[21] IS has reportedly already killed off defectors in its ranks. Rami Abdulrahman, Head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, stated that 116 foreign fighters, who had joined ISIL (IS) but later wanted to return home, were executed in the Syrian provinces of Deir Ezzor, Raqqa and Hasakeh since November (2014)."[22] Starved of resources and under pressure, IS senior leaders will likely continue and expand internal killings to maintain control over their troops.

### *Assessing the “Let Them Rot” strategy for fighting ISIS*

The “Let Them Rot” strategy, on the surface, provides several perceived advantages for an international coalition loath to military ground intervention. Containing IS such that they die from internal failure rather than external force may have a more enduring long-run effect in limiting the bleed-out of jihadi foreign fighters fueling Islamic insurgencies around the world. The more IS’s Caliphate fails, the less likely future jihadis will be to pursue a similar concept in other battlegrounds.

A containment and starvation campaign by the U.S.-led coalition not only undermines the jihadi narrative of pursuing a state but provides two key advantages to those countering IS. First, containment over invasion conserves the resources of the U.S.-led coalition – no participating nation seeks to expend resources at the pace and scale the U.S. did last decade. Second, containment as opposed to military invasion prevents further unintended violence against and resulting backlash from local Iraqi and Syrian populations caught in the crossfire.

Despite these advantages, the “Let Them Rot” strategy may be incongruent to the disparate needs of participating nations. Pursuing this strategy may prove difficult given the power struggle between Sunni Arab nations and the Iranian-backed Assad regime and Iraqi central government. Serious doubts remain as to whether partner nations can truly seal their borders to contain IS or collaboratively develop alternative security forces, economic incentives and resulting governance to occupy any space left behind by IS. For the U.S., it is unlikely that the train-and-equip mission will ever be sufficient to repel IS. At the same time, the U.S. seems set against amnesty programs or negotiation with any existing group in Syria or Iraq with ties to jihadi groups – a position leaving the coalition with few if any alternatives. Most importantly, the “Let Them Rot” strategy, or any other for that matter, seems unlikely to succeed absent a larger effort to end the Syrian civil war. The Algerians were successful in defeating the GIA because they had unity in their command and controlled the entire battle space under which the GIA operated. Today, the U.S.-led coalition can drive success through Iraqi and Kurdish forces. But IS sustains safe haven in two different countries; losses in Iraq can be recouped through unmet advances in Syria. Even if Iraq was retaken, Syria would continue to provide safe haven for IS.

As time moves forward and IS continues its advance, one might wonder if the U.S.-led coalition will pursue the “Let Them Rot” strategy by choice, or maybe instead, by default.

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## Notes

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