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## Profiling the Islamic State

Charles Lister

# PROFILING THE ISLAMIC STATE

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 | Foreign Policy  
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# BROOKINGS

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*[Note: This paper was concluded on October 20, 2014, and the analysis contained within is based on events up to this date.]*

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Charles Lister  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The threat posed by Sunni jihadi militancy has been evolving for some time. While terrorist plots against Western targets continue to surface, the principal threat to Western interests today is posed by increasing instability in the Middle East, which jihadi groups have exploited in order to emerge, expand, and consolidate operations.

Intense turmoil in Syria and Iraq in recent years has created socio-political vacuums in which jihadi groups have been able to thrive. Most notable in this respect has been the rise to prominence of the Islamic State (IS), previously known as the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

After IS declared the establishment of a caliphate stretching across 423 miles of Iraq and Syria on June 29, 2014 the perceived threat posed by the group has led to the initiation of air and cruise missile strikes against IS targets in Iraq and northern Syria in August 2014. While led by the United States, this ongoing intervention has been a coalition initiative, involving local, regional, and international states opposed to IS's existence.

Although currently centered within Syria and Iraq, IS's roots lie in Jordan and Afghanistan and date back to at least 1999. However, IS has evolved considerably since then, transforming from a small and loosely structured body with broad international ambitions to a vast organization focused on governing as an Islamic state across nation state boundaries.

Throughout this 15-year period, IS and its various predecessors have undergone a significant process of operational and organizational learning. While a first attempt at Islamic state building in 2006-2008 proved overzealous and alienating, a second attempt from 2013 onwards has proven more sustainable, although concerted international intervention begun in 2014 will pose a serious challenge to its success. Nevertheless, through its impressive advances across large swathes of Iraq and Syria in 2013 and 2014, IS has arguably proven a more successful organization than al-Qaeda.

From a military point of view, IS commands as many as 31,000 fighters, approximately 20,000-25,000 of which are core, ideologically loyal full-time members. Through its capacity to sustain offensive momentum and maintain consistent material gains, IS has become an impressively versatile organization, operating simultaneously as a terrorist, insurgent, and light infantry force.

Backed by extreme ideological determination, IS militants have exploited local dynamics and an environment of instability to serve their own ends. Through direct and indirect intimidation, guerrilla and insurgent warfare, and more orthodox large-scale military assaults on multiple axes, IS has proven a militant force capable of defeating national armies and rival insurgent factions.

Internally, IS has evolved into a highly bureaucratic organization focused on earning a sufficient income to finance widespread governance initiatives. Its focus on maintaining financial independence—in comparison to the traditional al-Qaeda model of relying on external donors and financiers—has induced the group to develop multiple sources of income, including oil, gas, agriculture, taxation, extortion, kidnapping for ransom, black market antique selling, and other illicit trades. By September 2014, IS was earning approximately \$2 million per day, making it the wealthiest terrorist organization in the world.

IS should be assessed and countered as representing a more advanced threat than a simple terrorist organization. Its explicit objective is to establish and maintain a self-sufficient Islamic state and, as such, IS has attached its ability to rule and govern as a determinant of success. Within a broader context of instability and conflict, IS's combination of tough law and repression with the provision of key services and assistance has at times led to a measure of tacit acceptance on a local level.

IS maintains ambitious objectives in both Syria and Iraq, and since the start of coalition strikes, has openly encouraged attacks by its members or supporters in the West. Moreover, an expansion of IS operations into other Middle Eastern states, including Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia should not be discounted. Continuing pledges of allegiance from existing jihadi factions around the world underline the influence IS exerts within the international jihadi community.

While IS will always be a terrorist organization at its most basic level, its effective attempt at establishing a proto-state across Syria and Iraq has demonstrated the scale of its goals and capabilities. By expanding amidst a tremendous wave of regional instability and by exploiting and exacerbating such conditions, IS successfully gained military power, a multiplying international membership,

and unprecedented financial resources. The key to undermining IS's long-term sustainability, therefore, is to solve the socio-political failures within its areas of operation.

More immediately, local, regional and international states can adopt a series of policies aimed at: 1) countering IS's financial strength and ability to fund the provision of governance and social services to civilians; 2) neutralizing IS's capacity for military mobility and the rapid re-deployment of manpower; 3) collecting and acting on intelligence relating to IS's senior leadership and military command and control structure; 4) weakening and delegitimizing IS's effective use of social media for recruitment and information operations; and 5) seeking to stabilize the existing conflict dynamics in both Syria and Iraq.

## INTRODUCTION

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The threat posed by Sunni jihadis has been evolving for some time. Since the late-2000s, al-Qaeda affiliates have increasingly focused on establishing local bases of operations and acquiring and consolidating territorial control from which to launch more expansive attacks on what they call the “near enemy,” meaning local governments. While terrorist plots against Western targets have continued to emerge, the principal threat to Western interests today is posed by increasing instability within the Middle East, which jihadi groups have exploited for their own benefit.

Today, this instability plagues the heart of the Middle East, stretching across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and encompassing the border regions of southern Turkey and northern Jordan. While the militarization of the Syrian revolution from mid-2011 has played a critical role in destabilizing the region, an actor whose roots lie primarily in Iraq has come to pose the most significant risk to its long-term stability.

On June 29, 2014, the first day of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) spokesman Taha Subhi Falaha (Abu Muhammad al-Adnani) announced the restoration of the caliphate under the leadership of Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarra'iyy (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). Adnani declared the group would henceforth be known as the Islamic State (IS) and Baghdadi as Caliph Ibrahim. This bold move came just weeks after ISIS seized Iraq's second city of Mosul on June 10, thereby inflaming the armed Sunni uprising against the government of Nuri al-Maliki. Meanwhile, ISIS was also on the offensive in eastern Syria and consolidating its hold over the area surrounding the northern city of Raqqa, the group's capital. Consequently, by the time “Caliph Ibrahim” made his first public appearance on July 4, IS controlled territory stretching from al-Bab in Syria's Aleppo governorate to Suleiman Bek in Iraq's Salah ad Din province, over 400 miles away.<sup>1</sup>

ISIS likely retained assets of at least \$875 million prior to seizing Mosul.<sup>2</sup> Judging by the scale of American-made Iraqi military equipment captured in June and that IS was assessed to be earning \$2 million per day by smuggling oil from Iraq

and Syria by September, IS represents a formidable militant organization likely worth close to \$2 billion.<sup>3</sup>

This impressively managed, almost obsessively bureaucratic organization has become a serious threat to regional and international security. In fundamentally challenging al-Qaeda's place as the recognized leader of transnational jihadism, it continues to attract recruits from across the globe. The scale of this threat has been demonstrated by the initiation of airstrikes by a broad international coalition in Iraq and Syria in recent months. While IS has shifted underground, it continues operations in Syria and Iraq. Moreover, its beheading of foreign hostages has presented a concerning element of leverage over the international community's ability to counter its influence.

This paper seeks to provide an in-depth analytical profile of IS and its various predecessors—something that is lacking in contemporary open sources. It addresses IS's history, evolution, current status, structure, military strategy, internal policy, and mode of governance. The paper concludes with an exploration of IS's future objectives and the policy options available to confront this new and growing threat in both the immediate and long-term. Ultimately, addressing the socio-political conditions in Iraq and Syria that IS has engendered and exploited to fuel its growth over the years must be a foundational aspect of any counter-IS strategy.

## PART I: 15 YEARS OF EVOLUTION

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Over the years, IS fighters have frequently been heard proclaiming “*baqiya wa tatamadad*” (lasting and expanding). This simple statement represents IS’s fundamental modus operandi as an organization. IS has deep roots dating back to at least 1999, when its notorious father figure, Ahmad Fadl al-Nazal al-Khalayleh (Abu Musab al-Zarqawi) was released from prison in Jordan. Although this prolonged evolutionary period has seen IS’s predecessor factions challenged militarily by the U.S.-led invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, the organization has generally met its simple objective of lasting and expanding.

### 1999-2003: FROM JORDAN TO AFGHANISTAN

Zarqawi was released from Jordan’s al-Sawwaqa prison after serving 5 years of a 15-year sentence for weapons possession and being a member of the Bayat al-Imam—a militant organization founded in 1992 by the notorious Jordanian jihadi ideologue Issam Muhammad Tahir al-Barqawi (Abu Muhammad al-Maqqdisi). Zarqawi then moved to Afghanistan, arriving in Kandahar province with a letter of *tazkiyya* (a personal recommendation or reference) from then-London-based Abu Qatada al-Filistini.<sup>4</sup> He made contact with al-Qaeda’s leadership, acquiring permission and a \$200,000 loan to establish a training camp.<sup>5</sup> Zarqawi used this camp as a base for building his own newly established jihadi group, Jund al-Sham.<sup>6</sup> Within months, the group was renamed Jama‘at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (JTWJ).

Primarily consisting of Palestinians and Jordanians, JTWJ quickly attracted international attention for its plot to attack Amman’s Radisson Hotel and at least two other popular tourist sites in December 1999.<sup>7</sup> The foiling of this “Millennium Plot” by Jordan’s General Intelligence Directorate forced JTWJ underground until the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks. Zarqawi’s JTWJ fought alongside al-Qaeda and Taliban forces before eventually fleeing to Iran in December 2001.<sup>8</sup> Zarqawi’s followers were provided housing and given other assistance by elements linked to Hizb-e-Islami Gulbuddin in Iran. Shortly thereafter, Zarqawi’s cadre relocated to northern Iraq with the facilitation of Ansar al-Islam.<sup>9</sup>

## 2003-2004: INITIATING IRAQ'S INSURGENCY

By the time U.S. forces invaded Iraq in March 2003, Zarqawi had established a small JTJWJ base in Biyara in the Kurdish province of Sulaymaniya—which was targeted in the initial U.S.-led air campaign in March.<sup>10</sup> This proved to be Zarqawi's initiation into a conflict that would come to define him and his fledgling militant organization.

JTJWJ revealed its strategic intent in August 2003 with three significant attacks. On August 7, JTJWJ detonated a car bomb—the first of the insurgency—outside Jordan's embassy in Baghdad, killing 17 people. Then, on the 19<sup>th</sup>, a suicide car bombing outside the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq killed 22 people, including the UN Special Representative in Iraq. Lastly, on August 29 the group targeted the Shi'ite Imam Ali Mosque in Najaf with another suicide car bomb, killing 95 people, including Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, the spiritual leader of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq.

JTJWJ of course targeted coalition forces, but these attacks demonstrated its other principal targets: Zarqawi's traditional enemy of Jordan, the international community, and the Shia, which Zarqawi viewed as the chief threat to Sunni power in Iraq and the wider region. This three-pronged targeting strategy represented Zarqawi's ultimate objective: to undermine occupying forces while simultaneously sparking a sectarian conflict. Zarqawi believed his organization could take advantage of the resulting chaos to cast itself as the defender of the Sunni community and to usher in the establishment of an Islamic state.

While partly influenced by the unique power politics of Iraq, the sectarian element of this strategy held a particular personal importance for Zarqawi. His writings were consistently riddled with anti-Shia rhetoric harking back to the words of historical Islamic ideologues. He frequently quoted Ibn Taymiyya's well-known warning: "They are the enemy. Beware of them. Fight them. By God, they lie."<sup>11</sup> In fact, in his final public address before his death on June 7, 2006, Zarqawi exclaimed, "The Muslims will have no victory or superiority over the aggressive infidels such as the Jews and the Christians until there is a total annihilation of those under them, such as the apostate agents headed by the *rafida*."<sup>12</sup> Zarqawi demonstrated his personal commitment to targeting the Shia and sparking sectarian conflict early on by authorizing his second wife's father—a veteran of the group's Afghanistan days—to carry out the Imam Ali Mosque bombing.<sup>13</sup>

**“Zarqawi believed his organization could take advantage of the resulting chaos to cast itself as the defender of the Sunni community.”**

## 2004-2006: IRAQ CONSOLIDATION, AL-QAEDA TENSIONS

JTWJ ramped up its attacks from 2004 through 2006, including the use of multiple suicide bombers in mass casualty attacks. Zarqawi himself was increasingly feared for the kidnapping and beheading of foreign hostages, beginning with American businessman Nicholas Berg in May 2004. Due to its prominence and extensive international recruitment networks, JTWJ increasingly represented the center of a growing jihadi umbrella in Iraq, incorporating other similarly minded groups. In September 2004, after eight months of negotiations, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden.<sup>14</sup> From that point onwards, JTWJ was known as Tanzim Qa'adat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, often simplified to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).

However, Zarqawi's relationship with al-Qaeda was fraught with tension, particularly because of AQI's brutality and mass targeting of Shia civilians. This represented a fundamental difference of opinion between Zarqawi and his masters in Afghanistan and Pakistan. While Zarqawi thought society had been corrupted and needed cleansing through terrifying violence, al-Qaeda insisted on combating "apostate" regimes and avoiding, where possible, damaging the image of the jihadi project. This was famously revealed within letters from al-Qaeda leaders Ayman al-Zawahiri and Jamal Ibrahim Ashtiwi al-Misrati (Atiya Abd al-Rahman al-Libi) to Zarqawi in 2005.<sup>15</sup> While AQI wanted fast results through dramatic and unforgiving brutality, al-Qaeda, at least following the U.S. invasions, was adopting a more patient strategy. Nonetheless, Zawahiri's 2005 letter did encourage AQI to prepare to establish an Islamic state in Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

AQI's sustained prominence continued to attract the support—whether ideological or pragmatic—of other Iraq-based insurgent groups. On January 15, 2006, AQI announced its merger with five other groups (Jaysh al-Ta'ifa al-Mansura, Saraya 'Ansar al-Tawhid, Saraya al-Jihad al-Islami, Saraya al-Ghuraba, and Kataib al-Ahwal) to form Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen (MSM), a coalition whose aim was to unite and better coordinate Iraq's jihadi insurgency. Zarqawi's death (along with his spiritual advisor, Sheikh Abd al-Rahman) in Baqubah on June 7, 2006 might have been perceived as a potentially fatal blow to the fledgling MSM, but it actually catalyzed a strengthening of the organization. Within five days, AQI appointed Abu Hamza al-Muhajir (Abu Ayyub al-Masri) as its new leader, and four months later the MSM announced the establishment of al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq, or the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), with a fully structured cabinet. Then, on November 10, Masri pledged *bay'a* (allegiance) to ISI leader Hamid Dawud Muhammad Khalil al-Zawi (Abu Omar al-Baghdadi).

Although it took years for the significance of these events to become clear, Masri's pledge of allegiance to ISI combined with the lack of any formal ISI pledge of allegiance to al-Qaeda catalyzed a gradual divorce between the two entities. Through the late 2000s, al-Qaeda remained determined that ISI continue as its subordinate by ordering it to attack specific targets, but by 2010-2011, the relationship had eroded significantly.<sup>17</sup>

### **2007-2009: GOVERNANCE FAILURE & THE SAHWA**

The establishment of ISI was intended to represent a qualitative evolution whereby an insurgent group transformed into a military-political actor responsible for governing territory. By late 2006, it had reached financial self-sufficiency, raising \$70-200 million per year through a combination of ransoms, extortion, and oil smuggling.<sup>18</sup> However, as had been the case with AQI, ISI proved unwilling to compromise its absolutist ideology. Where it attempted to govern, communities ended up opposing their presence. Put simply, ISI overestimated its capacity to engender Sunni support and overstretched its forces, leaving them vulnerable to what was coming.

By early 2007, locally formed tribal *Sahwa* (Awakening) councils had begun actively combating ISI territorial control in Sunni areas of Iraq, particularly Anbar province. Backed by U.S. and local security forces, these Sahwa militias—with their extensive local knowledge—proved effective at counterinsurgency. This shift in dynamics shook up the status quo significantly, encouraging ISI to lash out against rival Sunni insurgent groups and minority communities seeking to rid themselves of Sunni influence. This latter point was demonstrated on an extraordinary scale on August 14, 2007 when 4 ISI car bomb attacks against Yazidi villages in northern Iraq killed nearly 800 people.<sup>19</sup>

Although ISI succeeded in assassinating the leader of the Sahwa councils on September 13, 2007, the proliferation of ISI enemies meant that by 2008 the group was under extreme pressure in Iraq. Many of its foreign fighters left the country and sectarian violence decreased measurably.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the perceived threat from ISI diminished to such an extent that the United States lowered the reward for information leading to the capture or death of Masri from \$1 million to \$100,000 in May 2008, after reducing it from \$5 million in 2007.<sup>21</sup>

Having operated as a model insurgent force in the mid-2000s, AQI, MSM, and ISI had initially been moderately successful, seizing territory and establishing localized governance structures. Such structures, however, were popularly rejected, thus presenting an opening for a traditional counterinsurgency strategy. Targeted, intelligence-led strikes against ISI's leadership structure were complemented by a

broader bottom-up fight, led by the Sahwa councils and backed by the U.S.-led coalition. Consequently, ISI suffered significantly during 2007-2009.

### 2009-2011: RESTRUCTURING & RECOVERY

While pressure on ISI continued through 2011, Sahwa efforts were weakened by the initiation of U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq from June 2009 to August 2010. The resulting transfer of security responsibilities to Iraqi forces dramatically reduced the Sahwa councils' capabilities and boosted ISI's confidence and local recruitment. Nonetheless, continued pressure forced ISI into a process of rapid operational learning. By early 2008, ISI began—with impressive speed—

extensive structural reforms whereby it “devolved” back into a typical “terrorist” group.

“The move to Mosul facilitated ISI's re-centralization of leadership with power focused around Baghdadi...

One particularly significant decision was to shift ISI's headquarters to the northern city of Mosul, where existing Arab-Kurdish tensions could be exploited. Initially, everyday ISI management in Mosul was led by Abu Omar al-Baghdadi's deputy, Abu Qaswarah al-Maghribi. Following

his death in October 2008, Maghribi was likely succeeded by Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani, the current leader of Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.<sup>22</sup> The move to Mosul facilitated ISI's re-centralization of leadership, with power focused around Baghdadi and two deputies. While provincial-level strategy was directed by the national-level leadership, responsibility for specific operational planning and an enhanced focus upon income generation was delegated to provincial governors. This bureaucratic structure required tight discipline, something encouraged in public propaganda releases.

ISI continued to exploit existing political and social divisions. With the U.S. military withdrawal underway, Sahwa militias were growing increasingly disenchanted with Nouri al-Maliki's Shia-led central government due to its lack of support and unpaid wages. By mid-2010, ISI was offering larger salaries than the government and recruiting Sahwa members.<sup>23</sup> By early 2010, ISI also sought to rebuild its senior leadership—34 of the group's 42 most senior officials had been killed or captured, with only some being adequately replaced. To address this shortfall, ISI began launching well-planned, large-scale assaults on prisons where their leaders were being held.

ISI also adopted a strategic shift, initiating an information campaign aimed at re-emphasizing the legitimacy of their Islamic state project. One facet of this strategy was to stress Abu Omar al-Baghdadi's alleged membership of the

Quraysh tribe, which according to Islamic tradition will produce the next caliph. Although Baghdadi was killed along with AQI leader Abu Ayyub al-Masri on April 18, 2010, his replacement as ISI leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, is also allegedly a Qurayshi. Similarly, ISI at times compared its political and territorial influence with that of the Prophet Muhammad during his time in Medina, thereby claiming religious legitimacy.<sup>24</sup>

More practically, ISI accompanied this internal change with an escalation of attacks in many areas of Iraq, particularly Baghdad. Between August and December 2009, ISI carried out 3 of the largest and most significant attacks to strike central Baghdad since 2003, killing at least 382 people. Although Iraq saw fewer such large scale attacks in 2010, the frequency of multiple-bombing attacks began to increase, signaling a bottom-up revitalization of ISI's operational structure. Perhaps most crucially, ISI had become far more Iraqi in terms of its membership. This improved its social grounding, and operations at the provincial and local levels were designed with community dynamics in mind. It also gave ISI an enhanced ability to acquire intelligence sources within the Iraqi security apparatus—something it has since exploited extensively. Nonetheless, the scale of ISI's leadership losses in 2010 meant it remained, with respect to its structure and operations, a “terrorist” organization, albeit one that was increasing its influence in a growing number of Sunni areas.

#### **2011-MID-2014: SYRIA, IRAQ, AL-QAEDA, & A CALIPHATE**

While the eruption of the civil war in Syria and ISI's expansion of operations into that country undoubtedly energized the organization's base, its recovery and expansion was clearly well underway prior to 2011. In early 2011, with the Arab Spring in full flow, ISI continued the process of expansion and professionalization that it had begun in late 2009. It significantly escalated its military operations in Iraq, both geographically, incorporating southern Shi'ite areas and the Kurdish north, and in terms of scale, carrying out 20-30 attacks in multiple provinces, often within the space of an hour. For example, suspected ISI militants carried out 22 seemingly coordinated bombings in Baghdad and 12 other locations across Iraq on August 15, 2011.<sup>25</sup> These intense and wide-ranging attacks aimed not only to inflict material damage on the government but to diminish the morale of Iraq's security forces.

In July 2012, ISI initiated a 12-month campaign entitled “Breaking the Walls” with the principal objective of freeing its imprisoned members. ISI launched eight major attacks on Iraqi prisons over the following year.<sup>26</sup> The September 2012 attack on Tikrit's Tasfirat Prison liberated 47 senior ISI leaders from

death row.<sup>27</sup> The campaign's finale was an assault on Abu Ghraib prison on July 21, 2013 that enabled approximately 500 prisoners to escape.

ISI also placed an increased focus on collecting and exploiting vast amounts of intelligence, which was hugely valuable as leverage over local authorities. This gave the group extensive influence across much of Sunni Iraq and was advanced further when what was then ISIS launched a second 12-month plan, Operation Soldier's Harvest (July 2013-July 2014). This campaign aimed to undermine the capacity and confidence of security forces through targeted attacks and intimidation. It entailed a 150% increase in "close-quarters assassinations" of security personnel and threats directed at individual commanders, soldiers, and police, including the bombing of their homes, drive-by shootings against their checkpoints and personal vehicles, and similar targeted attacks.<sup>28</sup>

The last three years have been extremely consequential for ISI's dramatic evolution and growth into an organization capable of conquering and governing territory.

Most significantly, ISI has expanded into Syria, exploiting that country's revolution and civil war.

“**Jowlani arrived in Syria's northeastern Hasakah governorate in August 2011 and began connecting with local jihadi cells.**

ISI and its antecedents had maintained links in Syria since 2003, when recruitment networks, facilitated by Syrian intelligence, funneled fighters from the Arab world into Iraq through Syria. By 2007, the U.S. government claimed that "85-90%" of foreign fighters in Iraq had come via Syria.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the emergence of a

popular revolution in Syria in early 2011 attracted the attention of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who sent his Ninawa operations chief, Abu Muhammad al-Jowlani, to Syria to establish an ISI front.<sup>30</sup>

Jowlani arrived in Syria's northeastern Hasakah governorate in August 2011 and began connecting with local jihadi cells across the country in order to establish what would become Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>31</sup> Many of these cells had been formed by individuals released in a series of amnesties granted by President Assad, particularly Decree 61 on May 31, 2011.<sup>32</sup> Jabhat al-Nusra emerged publicly on January 23, 2012, claiming a December 23, 2011 suicide bombing in Damascus that killed at least 40 people.<sup>33</sup>

In the following six months, Jabhat al-Nusra operated similarly to ISI, but insisted it had no links to ISI or al-Qaeda. Although Jabhat al-Nusra's targets were primarily government-linked, civilians bore the brunt, making the group unpopular with the Syrian opposition. However, this dynamic changed significantly beginning in late

2012. By this time Jabhat al-Nusra had become a sizeable militant organization, numbering approximately 2,000 members, with particularly effective deployments in Damascus and Dera'a in the south, and Idlib and Aleppo in the north.<sup>34</sup> This expansion allowed Jabhat al-Nusra to transform itself from a typical terrorist group into an insurgent force, especially in the north. By mid-January 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra had led the seizure of two major military facilities in northern Syria—the Hanano barracks in Aleppo in mid-September 2012 and the Taftanaz airbase in Idlib on January 11, 2013—and cemented its reputation as a valued member in the fight against the government. In fact, when the U.S. State Department designated Jabhat al-Nusra as a terrorist organization on December 11, 2012, the theme of that week's Friday protests across Syria was "We are all Jabhat al-Nusra."<sup>35</sup>

**“While Jabhat al-Nusra shared power and governance, ISIS demanded complete control over society.**

This remarkable rise prompted Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi to attempt to reign in his increasingly independent Syrian subordinate. On April 9, 2013, Baghdadi confirmed in an audio statement that Jabhat al-Nusra was an offshoot of ISI and that henceforth, it would be subsumed into the expanded Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). Jowlani promptly rejected this edict and despite several months of wrangling, Jabhat al-Nusra maintained its independence. ISIS had to reestablish itself as a component of the Syrian conflict. To assert itself, this new Syria-based ISIS force—composed largely of former Jabhat al-Nusra foreign fighters—began aggressively expanding across northern and eastern Syria. This quickly prompted opposition; while Jabhat al-Nusra shared power and governance, ISIS demanded complete control over society.

ISIS's July 2013 killing of a senior Free Syrian Army commander in Latakia was the first sign of the inevitable. Six months later, in January 2014, a coalition of moderate groups launched operations against ISIS across northern Syria, eventually forcing their withdrawal east towards Raqqa in March 2014. By that time, ISIS's refusal to submit to independent opposition courts and to al-Qaeda-appointed mediators had pushed Zawahiri to announce in February that "ISIS is not a branch of the al-Qaeda group, we have no organizational relationship with it, and the group is not responsible for its actions."<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, from 2013 onwards, ISIS's unrivaled information operations and exploitation of social media brought a renewed energy toward its cause of controlling territory and establishing an Islamic state.

Although the emergence of an anti-ISIS front in northern Syria caused the group to lose considerable territory in early 2014, the setback was temporary. Having

consolidated its capital in Raqqa, ISIS forces in Iraq exploited conditions in the Sunni heartland of Anbar to march into Fallujah and parts of Ramadi in January 2014. This marked ISIS's renewed venture into overt territorial control in Iraq and set the stage for its gradual expansion in Anbar, particularly along the Syrian border. ISIS then began a concerted counter-attack against opposition groups in Syria's eastern Deir Ezzor governorate in April 2014, focused along the Euphrates and Khabur rivers. ISIS's operations in Iraq and Syria were becoming increasingly interrelated, with funds, fighters, and weapons crossing borders more frequently. It was under this emerging reality that ISIS led the rapid seizure of Mosul on June 10, thereby inflaming the wider Sunni armed uprising across Iraq.

To underline their accomplishments and goals, as well as to attract a wider following, ISIS issued a series of coordinated media releases marking the start of Ramadan. The most significant of these was an audio recording, released on June 29 in five languages, that announced the establishment of the caliphate. On the same day the group published videos titled "Breaking the Borders" and "The End of Sykes-Picot" that showed the physical destruction of a land barrier demarcating the Syria-Iraq border and a militant touring a captured Iraqi border post adjacent to Syria. A July 1 audio statement in which Baghdadi celebrated the caliphate's creation was followed by a July 5 video of his first public appearance as "Caliph."

While this dramatic and choreographed series appeared to attract considerable support among a new, younger generation of potential jihadis around the world, the declaration of a caliphate was an extremely bold move, particularly considering its lack of Islamic legal legitimacy. According to Dr. Usama Hasan, a Senior Fellow at the Quilliam Foundation, part-time Imam, and expert on Islam,

An Islamist caliphate, by definition, covers the entire 'Muslim World'... The hypothetical return of a Caliph in Islamic jurisprudence implies a large degree of Muslim unity, with these united Muslim masses willingly pledging allegiance to him. This is the fundamental mistake of [IS], a fatal flaw for their theological credentials. They may have been entitled to declare an 'Islamic emirate' (as the Taliban did in Afghanistan) or even an 'Islamic state,' just as Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Mauritania are 'Islamic republics.' But to declare a caliphate for all Muslims when they rule over, at best, a few tens of millions Syrians and Iraqis out of a worldwide Muslim population of 1.2-1.5 billion, is to destroy any notion of Muslim representation or unity.<sup>37</sup>

**FIGURE 1: MAP OF IRAQ & SYRIA**



*A map of Syria and Iraq, showing both countries' governorates and principal cities, as well as rivers and main road networks. IS' area of operations currently stretches from Al-Bab in northwest Syria to Baqubah and Baghdad in central Iraq.*

## PART II: THE ISLAMIC STATE TODAY

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Since 1999, IS and its antecedents have consistently worked toward creating the necessary conditions for establishing an Islamic state. Although its initial roots lie in Jordan and Afghanistan, the vast majority of the group's operational history has been in Iraq and now, increasingly, in Syria.

After a first attempt at state building in Iraq in the mid-2000s, followed by further efforts across northern Syria in 2013, IS appeared closer to achieving its ultimate objective in 2014. International strikes notwithstanding, due to the scale and geographic spread of its operations, the extent of its territorial control and influence, its improved policy of governance, its vast wealth and revenue capacity, the professionalism of its information operations; and its continued global recruitment, IS will pose a serious threat to regional and international security for many years to come.

Developing and implementing any effective strategy to counter IS requires a detailed understanding of the organization itself. As such, IS should not be thought of as merely a terrorist group, but in fact a qualitative evolution of the al-Qaeda model. Not only is its military strategy more professionally designed and implemented, but it incorporates a practical model for social governance, one which has proven surprisingly effective within unstable environments.

However, the long-term prospects for this “state” depend on IS sustaining and exploiting instability and maintaining steady and significant sources of income. It will also need its local adversaries to remain comparatively weak and divided. As an organization, IS has benefited significantly from its financial and structural independence; however, this is also an existential weakness that can be exploited.

### MILITARY STRATEGY

By mid-October 2014 IS likely commanded as many as 31,000 fighters but, more importantly, had accumulated considerable territorial control.<sup>38</sup> It possesses a number of weapons systems and vehicles, including tanks, armored personnel carriers, field artillery, self-propelled howitzers, and multiple-rocket launchers, as well as an assortment of anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), anti-aircraft guns,

and a small number of man-portable air-defense systems. While U.S.-led airstrikes in Iraq and then Syria have contained IS and slowed its momentum, a considerable portion of IS weaponry remains in play or in concealed storage, despite being targeted.

If the group can survive strikes, its weaponry and manpower will sustain offensive operational capabilities into the long-term. However, this will also depend on IS operating as an organization of well-trained, ideologically motivated, and ruthless fighters rather than a ragtag group of militiamen. In this respect, IS has long-implemented policies aimed at professionalizing its members. The number of training camps appears to have increased since 2013, and an examination of the groups' social media output reveals that IS has been operating such camps in most sizeable municipalities under its control, both in Syria and Iraq.

According to a series of interviews with IS fighters between December 2013 and August 2014, all recruits are responsible for securing tazkiyya from an existing IS member prior to arrival in Syria or Iraq. After arriving, recruits are brought to pre-arranged accommodations shared with other new members. "I had a contact in Syria who helped me cross illegally after I was rejected at the [Turkish] border crossing. When I crossed, I drove two hours through [ISIS] territory. Everything was tranquil and beautiful and it seemed life was continuing as normal. [When I arrived] I was mainly with Syrians, but there were also Saudis, Tunisians, a handful of Brits and French," according to "Abu Dujana," a British IS fighter interviewed in January 2014.<sup>39</sup>

After a series of interviews—during which personal information is logged, passports copied, and financial donations accepted—new recruits have to undergo several weeks of religious and military training. Such training is normally focused on the use of pistols, assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, and sometimes mortars. On some occasions, additional training is offered on more sophisticated weapons. Upon completion, new recruits are ordinarily assigned to guard duty for several weeks before being entrusted with frontline military operations.

IS military operations can generally be divided into two categories. The first is mass casualty urban attacks, normally targeting Shia, Alawi Muslims, and other minority groups, often in civilian areas. These attacks, which have been more common in Iraq, see IS operate as a typical terrorist organization, managing small, covert, largely urban cells linked to a larger militant infrastructure capable of

**“IS has long-implemented policies aimed at professionalizing its members.”**

providing funding and equipment. These operations can continue amid favorable or unfavorable operating environments and are the key to sustaining offensive momentum against adversaries.

This central facet of IS's military strategy aims to spark or sustain sectarian conflict—to “provoke [the Shia] to radicalize, join Iranian-sponsored militias and commit similar atrocities against Sunnis.”<sup>40</sup> With both the Shia-led government in Iraq and the Alawi-led one in Syria perceived as repressive by many ordinary Sunnis, IS aims to present itself as the protector of true and pure Sunni ideals.

This has been clearly visible in Iraq, but in Syria, the picture is more complex. While IS has carried out sectarian attacks in Syria, they have also employed such

“**IS aims to present itself as the protector of true and pure Sunni ideals.**

“terroristic” tactics against Sunni municipalities controlled by groups hostile to IS, as a combination of retribution and intimidation.

The other category of IS's military strategy can be described as a concerted campaign of attrition against military opponents' capabilities and morale. In Iraq, such operations have focused primarily on Sunni urban centers and transport routes within primarily Sunni regions, particularly Anbar and Ninawa provinces. In Syria this has centered on resource-rich regions in the northeast and east of the country, as well as areas bordering Turkey and Iraq, but has mainly targeted opposition groups. Such operations require a more favorable environment in which shaping operations can create the conditions necessary for acquiring and consolidating territory.

IS's seizure of Mosul was preceded by several years of extensive intelligence-led shaping operations aimed at eroding the Iraqi security forces' capacity to control the city's periphery—particularly by repeatedly attacking checkpoints and patrols. Simultaneously, IS forces carried out a covert campaign of intimidation targeting military and government officials, reinforced by assassinations of senior, experienced individuals. Crucially, this impaired the government's ability to effectively control the city, thus allowing IS to establish a shadow authority capable of exerting covert influence by day, and sometimes almost overt control by night.<sup>41</sup> This, in and of itself, undermined the community's belief and trust in their government-appointed protectors. As such, by the time the final offensive on Mosul began in early June 2014, the military's capabilities and confidence had been so weakened that the city fell in a matter of 24 hours.

This strategy was the most influential factor facilitating IS successes in 2013-2014, which increasingly took the form of assaults conducted by light infantry

units. Much of the responsibility for building up this military capability can be attributed to Baghdadi's former deputy, Haji Bakr (killed in Syria in February 2014), who purged the organization of most of its non-Iraqi senior leadership, replacing it with experienced former Ba'athist security officers.<sup>42</sup>

Specifically when assaulting large and better-defended targets, IS has typically launched multiple attacks on several axes, thereby overwhelming its opponent's capacity to defend. The group's capture of Jalula in Iraq on August 11, 2014 for example, involved the use of two large suicide car bombs followed by 12 separate suicide bombers, all of whom attacked separate checkpoints across the town on foot, opening routes for several coordinated ground assaults.<sup>43</sup>

A different picture can be painted from IS's successful offensive in Syria's Deir Ezzor governorate over April-July 2014. Having been forcefully expelled by opposition groups in February-March 2014, IS initiated a kidnapping and assassination campaign targeting local rebel leaders, complemented by several large car bomb attacks against rebel command centers.

**“IS's dramatic offensive across Iraq precipitated a steady stream of rebel and tribal surrenders across Deir Ezzor.**

Roughly two months later, IS's dramatic offensive across Iraq and its establishment of a so-called caliphate precipitated a steady stream of rebel and tribal surrenders across Deir Ezzor. Each surrender strengthened IS's hand in other areas still held by rival opposition groups, which were further weakened by IS offering these groups peaceful surrenders in exchange for repentance and disarmament. Notwithstanding a rebellion by the Shai'tat tribe—which was brutally suppressed resulting in the deaths of 700 men and the disappearance of 1,800 others—IS had effectively consolidated control over much of Deir Ezzor governorate by mid-August.<sup>44</sup>

Independent of specific local dynamics, IS has proven capable of designing and implementing a multi-stage strategy aimed at engendering a chaotic power vacuum into which it can enter. Combining a typical insurgent strategy of attrition with extreme brutality (such as the execution of approximately 200 men captured at Tabaqa Airbase in late August), IS is able to acquire the leverage necessary to become locally dominant. At that point, IS units assume a central role in all local affairs, as Abu Usama, a British fighter based in Homs explained in May 2014: “Our average day here is now normally much of the same—manning checkpoints, going on patrol in the area, settling disputes between locals and between tribes, and a lot of meetings with village elders and their chiefs, so we can discuss their concerns and complaints.”<sup>45</sup>

But IS operates in complex environments. During its post-June 2014 offensive in Iraq, it managed alliances with other armed Sunni factions, many of which it would ordinarily perceive as its enemies. While these “relationships of convenience” are far from steady—there have been frequent small-scale clashes, especially with the Ba‘thist Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshbandiyya (JRTN)—they will last while the greater fight against the government continues. In fact, despite tensions, JRTN leader and former Iraqi Vice President under Saddam Hussein, Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, clearly celebrated the lead role of “the heroes and knights of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State” in an audio statement released on July 13.<sup>46</sup>

To underline its investment in such alliances, IS appointed a Ba‘thist former Iraqi Army general, Azhar al-Obeidi, as governor of Mosul shortly after capturing the city. Likewise, IS appointed Ba‘thist former Iraqi Army general Ahmed Abd al-Rashid as governor of Tikrit.<sup>47</sup> So far, managing such relations has enabled IS to influence dynamics far beyond what its size would otherwise allow.

Despite widespread accusations that IS and the Syrian government have consciously coordinated operations, there has been no genuine evidence to substantiate this. It is indeed true that by the time a major anti-ISIS front emerged in January 2014, ISIS was no longer fighting government forces (and vice-versa). However, it is more logical to attribute that to both Assad and ISIS having more immediately threatening adversaries at that point in time. Undoubtedly, Assad did have an interest in allowing ISIS to expand and for its influence to divide and weaken the opposition, but the regime’s immediate interests were also focused further south, in Damascus, Homs, southern Aleppo,

and the Qalamoun region. Meanwhile, ISIS interests were focused on the northeast, where its principal adversaries were opposition groups and the Kurdish Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG).

**“ [IS] has managed alliances with other armed Sunni factions, many of which it would ordinarily perceive as its enemies.**

IS’s pragmatic balancing of interests shifted in July 2014 when, having consolidated control in Deir Ezzor and Raqqa, it launched several major offensives against government forces

in Aleppo (at Kweiris airbase), Homs (at the al-Shaer gas field), al-Hasakah (at Regiment 121 and the city), and Raqqa (Division 17, Brigade 93, Tabaqa airbase). Put simply, IS had maneuvered itself into a comfortable enough position to re-launch operations against the Syrian government, which, theologically, it considers on par with the devil.

## INTERNAL POLICY

At its most basic level, IS is a “revolutionary actor” whose entire modus operandi is to “project a goal of radical political and social change.”<sup>48</sup> For precisely this reason, IS operates as a tightly controlled and bureaucratic organization.

While maintaining a “cabinet” composed of “ministers,” IS’s top-level leadership structure has become smaller and more exclusive since Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s accession in 2010. Baghdadi likely maintains a personal advisor or assistant (formerly Haji Bakr), and below him two immediate deputies (one for Syria, one for Iraq), an eight-man cabinet, and a military council of at most 13 men.<sup>49</sup>

At the top, Baghdadi brings a crucial image of Islamic legitimacy, justified by his apparent Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from the Islamic University of Baghdad and his history as an imam and preacher in Samarra. Though not a graduate of al-Azhar or Dar al-Ifta’ al-Masriyyah, this clerical background puts Baghdadi on a qualitatively higher religious level than Osama bin Laden or Ayman al-Zawahiri.

More significant, however, is the military and intelligence experience held by many of Baghdadi’s deputies, which has brought a level of professionalism to IS’s ability to operate as an efficient and capable organization. For example, both of Baghdadi’s deputies were former ranking officers in the Iraqi military. Abu Ali al-Anbari, the chief of Syria operations, was a major general in the Iraqi Army and Fadl Ahmad Abdullah al-Hiyali (Abu Muslim al-Turkmani), the chief of operations in Iraq, was a lieutenant colonel in Iraqi Military Intelligence and a former officer in the Iraqi Special Forces.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, according to data seized from the safe-house of former IS General Military Council leader Adnan Ismail Najem Bilawi (Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Bilawi) in early June 2014, the group maintained roughly 1,000 “medium and top level field commanders, who all have technical, military, and security experience.”<sup>51</sup>

The decision to rebrand the MSM as the ISI in 2006, and specifically as a *dawla* (state), is symbolically crucial. By perceiving and presenting itself as a state, IS has sought to control and govern territory and maintain a cabinet of ministers responsible for a broad range of “ministries,” incorporating military, civil, political, and financial duties.

According to a report detailing unpublished U.S. Department of Defense documents, ISI operated a complex and detail-oriented bureaucracy between 2005 and 2010, which, according to the author, is still largely in place.

[ISI] cells [in 2010] were required to send up to 20% of their income from local enterprises—such as kidnapping ransoms and

extortion rackets—to the next level of leadership. Higher-ranking commanders would examine the revenues and redistribute the funds to provincial or local subsidiaries that were in dire straits or needed additional money to conduct attacks... Reallocation and payroll costs—compensation to members and the families of deceased members—were by far the largest expenses... accounting for as much as 56% of all payouts at certain points of time... When it became apparent that the “apostates and Crusaders” were successfully enlisting tribal support against them... Islamic State commanders set up a new agency within the governing structure to woo back the leaders. Even these visits by members of the nascent “tribal committee” were recorded by the bookkeepers who kept close track of the cash, Qurans and other gifts given to what they referred to as “VIPs” before writing reports to higher-ups about how receptive the tribes were to the overtures.<sup>52</sup>

At times, IS’s military has appeared administratively akin to a nation-state’s army, with units rotating between active frontline duty, days off in “liberated” areas and other deployments “on base.” As British fighter Abu Uthman al-Britani explained while deployed in Deir Ezzor in June 2014, “To be honest, it’s like how you live life in the West, except you have a gun with you... [What your duties

are] can depend on where you are, but your main duty is *ribat* [frontline guard duty]... You can travel if you wish as holiday is given to you—all you need is permission on paper.”<sup>53</sup>

“By 2014, a complex extortion network [in Mosul] was generating \$12 million per month.

One aspect of IS’s internal structure and policy-making mechanisms that has proven decisive in enabling expansion is its generation of income. IS

has been almost entirely self-financed since at least 2005 and according to the U.S. Department of Defense database, external funding to AQI, MSM, and ISI between 2005 and 2010 amounted to no more than five percent of its total “income.”<sup>54</sup>

After assuming ISI leadership in 2010, Baghdadi established a financial command council and Mosul cemented its role as a principal source of income.<sup>55</sup> By 2014, a complex extortion network there was generating \$12 million per month. Notwithstanding a potential increase in private financial support following IS’s increased public prominence, the simultaneous expansion in income-earning capacity makes it likely that the group has continued to be financially self-sufficient.

While more sustainable, income earned through extortion pales in comparison to the underground sale of Syrian and Iraqi oil. Illicit oil sales are not new for IS—by 2010, the group was thought to have been “siphoning off a share of Iraq’s oil wealth, opening gas stations in the north, smuggling oil and extorting money from industry contractors.”<sup>56</sup> But by late August 2014, energy analysts estimated that the group was selling as much as 70,000 barrels of oil daily from Syria and Iraq (at \$26-\$35 per barrel of heavy oil and \$60 per barrel of light crude) to internal black market customers and external buyers in Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, and Kurdistan.<sup>57</sup> These calculations result in a daily income of \$1-3 million, which over 12 months amounts to \$365 million-1.1 billion.<sup>58</sup> The targeting of IS-linked oil facilities in Syria since late-September, however, will have significantly eroded this prospect.

**“Even in areas not under its complete control, IS still maintains extortion networks and protection rackets.”**

IS’s finances have been heavily reliant on oil and gas, but other resources are also being exploited, including agriculture, cotton, water, and electricity. The group is also known to operate an efficient kidnap-for-ransom operation, with four foreign nationals—two young Italian women, a Dane, and a Japanese national—all confirmed kidnapped by IS in August 2014 alone.<sup>59</sup> While such hostage taking has proven a powerful weapon in recent months through the public execution of American and British nationals, it may also be in the hope of securing ransoms for other captives. Despite a French denial, unnamed NATO sources in Brussels, for example, have claimed that IS was paid \$18 million in April 2014 in exchange for four French hostages.<sup>60</sup>

Even in areas not under its complete control, IS still maintains extortion networks and protection rackets. IS units have also allegedly stolen antiques and sold them onto the black market. For example, one Iraqi intelligence official claimed the group had earned \$36 million after selling 8,000 year-old items from al-Nabk, north of Damascus, in early 2014.<sup>61</sup>

While IS fighters have long imposed shadow taxation (and extortion) within areas under their control or influence, more official taxation systems have begun to be introduced since the proclamation of the caliphate. For example, IS has introduced a customs tax upon the trucking business on the main highways of western Iraq. This organized taxation system targets trucks transporting food and electronics from Syria and Jordan via Iraq’s al-Waleed and al-Tanif crossings. As of September 2014, rates were placed at \$300 per truck of foodstuffs and \$400 per load of electronic goods, with an occasional \$800 flat rate for trucks

in general. The system itself is surprisingly professional, as Mitchell Prothero explained: “Not only does IS offer protection from bandits, but its tax collectors also provide traders with paperwork that shows they’ve paid IS taxes as well as counterfeit government tax receipts that truckers can show to Iraqi Army checkpoints, which allow them to pass without further payments.”<sup>62</sup>

In addition to shielding IS from traditional financial counterterrorism measures, such independent financial capacities have also provided a source of social leverage, whether through incentives to induce tribal loyalty or by funding food provision and fuel subsidies to encourage popular support. For example, during its offensive in Deir Ezzor in May-June 2014, IS “spread \$2 million in the area to entice tribes and leaders to permit their presence,” thereby securing several strategic surrenders and pledges of allegiance.<sup>63</sup>

IS’s ability to present an image of wealth and success has strengthened its recruitment of new fighters locally as well as from abroad. As one moderate commander based in Aleppo, speaking on condition of anonymity, said in June 2014, “Syrians join ISIS for money, simply because they can afford to pay salaries.”<sup>64</sup> An Islamic Front political official, who also requested anonymity, put it similarly bluntly: “ISIS is definitely expanding—it has a lot of money and right now, Syrians are so poor. Money changes everything—people will turn to and support extremism out of desperation.”<sup>65</sup>

## COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

Another important facet of IS’s internal operations is its effective use of social media and exploitation of international media attention. Through a network of provincial-level accounts and several central media departments, IS had significantly outperformed any other militant group on Twitter until August 2014, when its entire Twitter structure was removed, possibly after a request from the U.S. government.<sup>66</sup> After briefly transferring accounts onto an independent, more privacy-focused platform known as Diaspora, IS established a more stable presence on the Russian social networking site VKontakte. This, however, was eventually eradicated in mid-September.<sup>67</sup>

IS’s coordinated release of particularly significant content has proven capable of acquiring impressively large viewership. For example, the hour-long “Salil al-Sawarim I” video, released by IS’s Al-Furqan Media on March 17, 2014, was watched by 56,998 distinct YouTube accounts within 24 hours. Two months after its release date, the video was tweeted 32,313 times over a 60-hour period—an average of 807.25 tweets per hour.<sup>68</sup>

IS has also operated several Android applications, including “Fajr al-Basha’ir” (Dawn of Good Tidings), which links to users’ personal information and releases officially coordinated group content via their accounts. Fajr al-Basha’ir was particularly active during the capture of Mosul on June 9-10, 2014, during which one of its centrally coordinated tweets became the first search result under “Baghdad” on Twitter internationally.<sup>69</sup> IS-linked accounts even hijacked hashtags affiliated with the 2014 World Cup in June, adding tags such as #Brazil2014 and #WC2014 to their military media releases in order to appear on all related searches on social media using the same term.<sup>70</sup>

An increased focus on English-language production since April-May 2014 indicated a shift toward promoting the idea of living within its new “Islamic State” at a more international level. The new Dabiq magazine—slickly designed and published in English—has incorporated subtle mechanisms to broaden IS’s recruitment base. For example, a focus on Millah Ibrahim (the Path of Ibrahim, or Abraham) in Dabiq’s first edition was likely intended to remind readers of a well-known paper attacking the Saudi royal family’s legitimacy by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Opposing the Saudi monarchy is the foundation of al-Qaeda’s most powerful affiliate, AQAP, so this focus could well have been intended to attract AQAP supporters towards IS.<sup>71</sup> In fact by mid-August, U.S. intelligence had detected “groups of fighters” defecting from AQAP and the North Africa-based al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) to join IS.<sup>72</sup>

“IS-linked accounts hijacked hashtags affiliated with the 2014 World Cup in June.”

Not only has social media attracted recruits and worldwide attention, but potential recruits have also used it to coordinate their arrival in Syria or Iraq, and to secure tazkiyya. Operating a coordinated network of inter-linked social media accounts has also allowed IS to maintain consistent messaging in multiple languages. In particular, the group’s bitter battle with al-Qaeda was played out online.

## GOVERNANCE

By declaring a state and announcing the restoration of the caliphate, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi made IS’s ability to rule and govern the determinant of success. IS therefore faces what has been “a fundamental dilemma” for jihadis: “they cannot attain their goals if they don’t govern, yet the record shows them repeatedly failing at governance efforts.”<sup>73</sup> Thus far, though, IS does control territory, including multiple urban centers, and its religio-political project has managed not only to sustain governance, but to expand it. Local citizens living under IS rule have

described its local administration as “fast and efficient” with “everything...coordinated [and all] parts of the administration are linked, [they] share information and in general seem good at working together.”<sup>74</sup>

In Iraq, the group has benefited from being able to exploit widespread Sunni discontent with Shia-led governments perceived as repressive to Sunni rights. A popular desire for a workable and stable form of Sunni governance has provided IS with a vacuum to fill. IS is filling this vacuum with a combination of municipal administration (police, Islamic outreach, tribal affairs, recruitment and training, education, sharia courts) and aid-based services (humanitarian assistance and facility management). In doing so, IS has offered civilians much of what nation-state systems do, but with more intense oversight.

Mosul has exemplified this reality. Having taken 24 hours to capture the city on June 9-10, IS released its *wathiqat al-madina* (charter of the city) on June 12, which in 16 points outlined the new law of the land.<sup>75</sup> The regulations imposed in Mosul were modeled on what was already in place in Raqqa, where it took IS five months to subvert the authority of rival groups and take unilateral control in October 2013. At that point, IS began implementing its vision of governance, which, within a Syrian context of intractable civil conflict, subsequently led to relative stability and tacit popular acceptance.

The immediate period after assuming control over populations has proven the most crucial for IS. Bold shows of military power in the opening hours of capturing territory have enforced a perception of authority, which consistently served

**“IS has offered civilians much of what nation-state systems do, but with more intense oversight.**

to encourage mass surrenders of armed men in makeshift “repentance offices” set up by IS.

The implementation of a strict form of sharia law is clearly central to IS’s governance. This includes imposing the *hudud* (fixed Islamic punishments for serious crimes); enforcing attendance of the five daily prayers; banning drugs, alcohol, and tobacco; controlling personal appearance, including clothing; forbidding gambling, non-Islamic music, and gender mixing; and ordering the destruction of religious shrines, among other rules.

The imposition of the *dhimmi* (protection) pact upon monotheistic non-Muslims has appeared in Raqqa (from late February 2014) and Mosul (from July 17, 2014). This has placed non-Muslims within a relationship of “protection” under IS, so long as they regularly pay *jizya* (poll tax) and abide by several other strict regulations, including not building additional places of worship; removing all

visible signs of faith; not bearing arms; and not selling or consuming pork and alcohol.<sup>76</sup> In practice, however, this “protection” has represented a demotion to second-class citizenship. In Mosul, IS followed its introduction of the dhimmi pact with the threat of “nothing but the sword” if they failed to agree, convert to Islam, or flee the city within 48 hours.<sup>77</sup> Property owned by Christians and Shia members of the Shabak and Turkmen communities was subsequently painted with the Arabic letters “noon,” indicating *nasrani* (Christian) and “ra,” for rafida. Within three days, the vast majority of the city’s Christians and Shia had fled.<sup>78</sup>

With regards to members of non-monotheistic faiths, IS has proven utterly uncompromising. After several months of largely uncorroborated allegations, IS admitted in October 2014 that it labeled Yazidis as *mushrik* (polytheists), and thus Satanists who could be legitimately enslaved and whose women can be made IS concubines.<sup>79</sup>

Ultimately, IS’s political project is based upon establishing a Sunni Islamic state and, therefore, non-Sunnis receive minimal rights, if any.

Considering its unstable surroundings, IS seeks to establish law and order immediately after capturing territory. Police forces—male and female—are rapidly formed and deployed to patrol the streets and enforce traditional civil and sharia laws; sharia courts are promptly established. The rapidity of such mobilization has often been facilitated by generous salaries. Despite this clear focus on law and order, the level of enforcement appears to differ in each locale. As of mid-October 2014, for example, the scope of IS’s behavioral code in Mosul has not compared with the level imposed in Raqqa. Clearly, IS adapts to the unique dynamics faced in different locations. However, one thing is consistent: the longer the group is in control of a municipality, the more hardline and confident their rule becomes. Still, nowhere has reached the level of extremity seen in 2008 when ISI banned women from purchasing cucumbers and prohibited the sale of ice cream because it did not exist during the time of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>80</sup>

“In Mosul, IS followed its introduction of the dhimmi pact with the threat of ‘nothing but the sword.’”

IS is not just about disciplinary justice, however. It also spends significant financial resources on providing social services. One of the first things IS does upon capturing a municipality is to take control of industries and municipal services and facilities so as to ensure what it perceives as a more efficient and egalitarian provision of services. Consistently, this has meant assuming authority

over electricity, water, and gas supplies, local factories, and even bakeries—all of which lend IS total control over the core needs of a civilian population.

Similarly, IS frequently subsidizes the prices of staple products, particularly bread, and has been known to cap rent prices. For example, after assuming control of much of Deir Ezzor governorate in July 2014, IS funded the reduction of bread prices from 200 Syrian Pounds to 45 and also made it mandatory for bakeries

**“IS has devised a near-complete mode of governance, which... has largely kept cities running and people tacitly content.**

to provide *zakat* (a charitable obligation in Islam) to the poor.<sup>81</sup> In Mosul, IS established a free hospital a day before capturing the city and later capped monthly rent prices at a more affordable \$85.<sup>82</sup>

Civilian bus services are frequently established and normally offered for free. Electricity lines, roads, sidewalks, and other critical infrastructure

are repaired; postal services are created; free healthcare and vaccinations for children are offered; soup kitchens are established for the poor; construction projects are offered loans; and Islam-oriented schools are opened for boys and girls. In Raqqa, IS even operates a consumer protection office, which has closed shops for selling poor quality products.<sup>83</sup> Put simply, IS attempts to provide the same services that a nation-state offers to its citizens, but, according to the group, in a more ethical manner.

Religious education and proselytizing is another key element of IS's religio-political governance. In addition to introducing new academic curriculums, public *da'wa* (proselytizing) events are frequently held, allowing the organization to “educate” their constituents on the benefits of living under IS rule.<sup>84</sup> Free meals and gifts for children are often provided and on occasion they are also used to celebrate the pledging of bay'a by local tribal leaders or other dignitaries. According to IS fighter Abu Dujana, “When ISIS entered Homs governorate, the people were very scared of us, but after four or five months, the majority of village chiefs had pledged allegiance to us and hundreds of their men had volunteered to join our ranks.... We had educated the people, taught them how to read, run vaccination clinics for children, stopped bandits and highwaymen, and allowed trade to resume properly.”<sup>85</sup>

IS has devised a near-complete mode of governance, which, when combined with the organization's extensive financial resources, has largely kept cities running and people tacitly content. The introduction of such governance within a broader context of conflict and instability means Sunni civilians have been more likely to accept the imposition of harsh norms. This factor is key to IS's survival or demise.

Executions—sometimes by crucifixion and stoning—and the amputation of limbs as punishment for murder, adultery, and robbery has presented a shocking level of brutality. This “stick” combined with the “carrot” offered by social services has occasionally meant that IS has appeared, at least in the immediate term, as a viable alternative to what are perceived as repressive, sectarian, and foreign-influenced governments and incapable, “moderate” oppositions.

## PART III: OUTLOOK

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Speaking in July 2014, U.S. State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq and Iran Brett McGurk said IS is “worse than al-Qaeda” and “is no longer a terrorist organization...it is a full-blown army.”<sup>86</sup> Indeed, as has been outlined throughout this paper, IS has expanded considerably in recent years through a deliberate and methodical strategy consisting of stoking sectarian conflict, exploiting political weakness, and exerting efficient and brutal military power.

While its fundamental structure will always be that of a terrorist organization, its expansion and objectives are more advanced than that, with an effective proto-state being built and defended across Syria and Iraq. From a military point of view, it has proven capable of fighting as a light infantry force backed by heavy weapons and as a Maoist-style guerrilla organization that melts into local populations. As such, IS should be treated and countered as something qualitatively more significant than a terrorist organization, although there should nonetheless be a significant counterterrorism component within any suitable counter-strategy.

IS’s expansion in Iraq and Syria has benefited greatly from tremendous regional instability and the weakening of nation-state borders. By exploiting and exacerbating such conditions, IS has been able to gain military power, a multiplying international membership, and unprecedented financial resources.

IS’s predecessor organizations survived the might of the U.S. military and a well-resourced tribal-based uprising and today, the socio-political conditions it faces are profoundly more favorable. The organization’s five-step process—*hijra* (migration), *jama’a* (congregate), destabilize *taghut* (tyrants), *tamkin* (consolidation), and *khilafa* (caliphate)—has now been completed.<sup>87</sup> The most significant challenge that remains is to successfully consolidate and govern what could now amount to a proto-state without falling victim to its own ideology.

This challenge has been doubled by international military intervention, thus far in the form of air and cruise missile strikes. Operationally, this has largely contained IS’s offensive operations and forced the organization underground within areas under its control or influence.

IS's ability to sustain military momentum will prove key to its future success and recruiting. Thus far, strikes have been advancing a containment strategy rather than an offensive one against IS power and territorial control. Indigenous forces in both Iraq and Syria have proven largely incapable of launching serious counter-offensives that can capitalize on international strikes. If this situation continues, it seems likely IS will seek to shift to a strategy of consolidation.

### OBJECTIVES: IRAQ & SYRIA

In Iraq, IS will likely seek to continue destabilizing social dynamics and to enforce a perception within the Sunni community that Haider al-Abadi's new government does not defend their rights. In Iraq in particular, IS is deeply dependent on fueling instability and conflict in order to maintain its various marriages of convenience with other Sunni factions, without whom it would struggle to maintain sufficient legitimacy.

Militarily, IS will seek to consolidate its authority in Mosul but without antagonizing other politically-minded factions, such as JRTN. A campaign of consolidating and expanding territorial control is also likely throughout Anbar province, including in Hit, Haditha, and Ramadi, and also in Ninawa and parts of Salah ad Din. Moreover, a concerted campaign of insurgent-type destabilization attacks and occasional large-scale bombings will likely continue to target security forces in Kirkuk and Diyala.

Moreover, IS will launch a propaganda campaign which aims to present international strikes as contrary to Sunni aspirations and akin to an indirect invasion of Iraq. Without genuine political progress in Baghdad, such perception management is more than feasible. It is likely that IS will gradually expand its bombings and other attacks across the capital and seek to spark a sectarian tit-for-tat dynamic with Shia militias, in order to neutralize any attempt at Sunni-Shia reconciliation within the central government.

In Syria, IS will seek to consolidate its control in the capital of Raqqa and in the rest of the governorate. Its offensive campaign in the northwestern, largely Kurdish governorate of Hasakah, meanwhile, will continue towards uniting the areas it controls in northwestern Iraq with northeastern Syria. This will increase clashes with the YPG, which may potentially begin to draw in assistance from Iraqi Kurdistan and place the United States in a position of needing to (directly or indirectly) support what is technically a wing of the terrorist-designated PKK—as was demonstrated around Mount Sinjar in August.<sup>88</sup>

**“IS will seek to consolidate its authority in Mosul but without antagonizing other politically-minded factions.**

Despite international strikes, IS will also seek to maintain momentum in its offensive operations in western Aleppo, particularly around the Kurdish border town of Kobane (Ayn al-Arab) and towards the opposition-controlled Bab al-Salameh border crossing with Turkey. Like in Iraq, it will also seek to portray international intervention as an act of aggression against civilians and attempt to exploit anger within swathes of the Islamist opposition for recruitment purposes.

In order to expand its operations, particularly to the south, IS could seek to exploit growing frustration within the Syrian opposition, particularly amongst those who had chosen to retain links to Western-backed structures in Jordan and Turkey. Within this context, which includes strikes also targeting the widely popular Jabhat al-Nusra and other international jihadi factions in northern Syria, defections to IS were immediately reported by opposition sources.<sup>89</sup>

#### REGIONAL OR INTERNATIONAL OBJECTIVES?

“We are getting stronger every day in Sham and Iraq but it will not end there—of course, one day we’ll defeat all the taghut regimes and bring back Islam to the whole region, including al-Quds (Jerusalem).”

- Abu Omar, Islamic State fighter, June 2014<sup>90</sup>

IS’s modus operandi is predicated on the expansion of its Islamic authority. However, the group does not yet appear to be in a rush to expand its operations. The group has established a minimal operational presence in Lebanon, having claimed a suicide bombing that wounded 11 people in a Beirut hotel on June 25 and briefly capturing Aarsal in the eastern Bekaa Valley during August 2-7 in cooperation with local Jabhat al-Nusra elements, resulting in the death of 20 security personnel and the capture of 19 others.<sup>91</sup> By early 2015, this presence will likely be fully established and active beyond border areas like Aarsal.

In Jordan, IS maintains a small but strident support base in the southern city of Ma’an and areas within Zarqa, Irbid, and Salt. Recent estimates suggested that half of the approximately 2,000 Jordanians fighting in Syria and Iraq were IS members.<sup>92</sup> However, the Jordanian Salafi community’s tendency to side with al-Qaeda, and thus Jabhat al-Nusra, represents a more notable threat to internal security, at least in the immediate term. The presence of multiple veteran jihadi ideologues—Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, Abu Qatada al-Filistini, Iyad al-Qunaybi and Ayman al-Bilawi—in Jordan in late September indicates the sheer clout that this pro-al-Qaeda community still possesses.<sup>93</sup>

Saudi Arabia has over 1,000 nationals fighting in Syria alone (mostly for IS) and almost certainly has an appreciable IS support base at home. The repeated appearance of pro-IS graffiti and leaflets and increasing terrorism arrests underlines the heightening concern regarding the dangers posed by this apparent support base.<sup>94</sup> It is still likely, however, that AQAP retains greater potential to carry out attacks in Saudi, although the significance of the proclamation of support for IS by former senior AQAP leader Mamoun Hatem and other affiliated elements should not be ignored.<sup>95</sup>

Turkey has been widely blamed for the ease with which foreign fighters have been able to cross its border into Syria; it is also well known that IS maintains recruitment and facilitation networks in Ankara, Istanbul, and the southern border region.<sup>96</sup> Although the group was blamed for killing three people in Turkey's Niğde province in March 2014, such a seemingly permissive environment makes it unlikely that IS will seek to expand operations into Turkey in the short term.<sup>97</sup> However, Turkish concerns that the large refugee population in the south could be used to establish a militant presence are rising. As Omer Faruk Cantenar, the Chief of Training at NATO's Center of Excellence-Defence Against Terrorism explained, "Islamic radical terrorists are a big security concern for Turkey...there are nearly one million refugees in Turkey and half of them are not in camps. This makes...it very difficult to have 100% control over the activities of those individuals."<sup>98</sup>

In North Africa, there is apparently a minimal pro-IS presence in the Libyan town of Derna, and rumors persist regarding the allegiances of Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia and Ansar al-Sharia in Libya.<sup>99</sup> Pro-IS factions have begun to emerge in Algeria and Gaza, and the Egypt-based Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis formally pledged allegiance to IS on November 10, 2014.<sup>100</sup>

Further afield, Nigeria-based Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau appeared to proclaim that the Gwoza Local Government Area of Borno State had become "part of the Islamic Caliphate" in late August.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, a splinter faction of Pakistan's Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan known as Jamaat-e-Ansar announced its support for IS, but remained at least officially loyal to al-Qaeda.<sup>102</sup> Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters and a splinter faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group led by Isnilon Hapilon both announced their allegiance to IS.<sup>103</sup> In Indonesia, the imprisoned former Jamaah Islamiyya leader Abu Bakar Bashir pledged his allegiance to IS after allegedly facilitating the transfer of finances to the organization.<sup>104</sup>

**“Turkish concerns that the large refugee population in the south could be used to establish a militant presence are rising.”**

Within the Levant or beyond, IS will seek to develop a support base capable of provoking domestic instability before attempting to establish an actual operational presence. This process takes time, of course, making it unlikely that IS will seek to do more than encourage localized instability in neighboring states in the coming months. However, should it succeed in consolidating its “state” in Syria and Iraq, it is quite possible that it could choose to expand in 2015 beyond its recently announced *wilayat* (provinces) in Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya and Algeria.

### FOREIGN FIGHTER BLOWBACK?

Judging by recent statistical studies, there are likely to be at least 15,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq from at least 90 different countries.<sup>105</sup> Considering the unprecedented scale of this foreign fighter flow, the issue of “blowback”—or citizens returning to their home countries to carry out terrorist attacks—has generated a great deal of attention.<sup>106</sup>

While some coverage, based on interviews with foreign fighters via social media, has belittled the perceived threat of blowback, foreign fighters operating public accounts online represent a very small portion of IS’s manpower.<sup>107</sup> While some of these fighters have resorted to bold claims of revenge for international airstrikes, most have proclaimed no intent to return home and instead seem resigned to being “martyred” in battle. For example, British IS fighter Abu Dujana explains, “Before I left, I was just an average guy who wanted to help the oppressed. I wasn’t a criminal and didn’t have any issues with anyone or the police. But it wasn’t difficult for me to [decide to come to Syria]...it is a duty of all Muslims...If we wanted to blow up buses, we could have learnt how to on the Internet and done so. Our objective is

Assad, not Cameron... We all have no intention of returning as we knew going to Syria was effectively revoking our citizenship...helping the oppressed is better than a red passport.”<sup>108</sup>

“**There are likely to be at least 15,000 foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq from at least 90 different countries.**

Realistically, however, the chance that a foreign fighter might choose to return home to carry out an attack is quite unpredictable and should be

treated as plausible. Judging by data from 1990–2010, approximately 11 percent of foreign fighters have become active security threats after returning home—not a small number.<sup>109</sup> For Western Europe, from which there are approximately 3,000 fighters in Syria, that would amount to 330 potential terrorists.<sup>110</sup>

Notably, the last three prominent terrorist attacks in the Western world involved individuals with travel experience in foreign conflict zones—Syria, Dagestan, Kenya, and Somalia.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, there is already a precedent for fighters with

experience in Syria returning to their home countries or for individuals influenced by IS commanders plotting or successfully carrying out attacks. The cases of Mehdi Nemmouche in Brussels and Ibrahim Boudina in France suggest such fears are already being realized.<sup>112</sup>

Rising concerns have led European countries to intensify domestic security measures in 2014. Authorities in the United Kingdom, for example, carried out at least 500% more Syria-related terrorism arrests in 2014 compared to 2013, and on August 29 the British government raised the domestic terror threat level to its second highest.<sup>113</sup>

Ultimately, the threat of foreign fighter blowback is not posed by IS-linked individuals alone. Syria in particular is home to a considerable number of foreign fighter groups, such as:

- Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar, from Russia's North Caucasus (now a wing of Imarat Kavkaz);
- al-Qaeda;
- Harakat Sham al-Islam, primarily from Morocco;
- East Turkestan Islamic Movement, from China;
- Katibat Suqur al-'Izz, primarily from Saudi Arabia;
- Katibat al-Khadra', primarily from Saudi Arabia;
- Jund al-Sham, primarily from Lebanon;
- Junud al-Sham, primarily from Russia's North Caucasus;
- Katibat al-Battar al-Libiya, primarily from Libya;
- Usud al-Khilafa, primarily from Egypt;
- Katibat Imam al-Bukhari, primarily from Uzbekistan;
- Firqat al-Ghurabaa', primarily from France; and
- The De Basis and Sham al-Malahim networks, primarily from Belgium and the Netherlands.<sup>114</sup>

Many of these groups have expressed—directly or indirectly—an intention to continue operations within their home countries and on September 24, the United States designated both Jaysh al-Muhajireen wa al-Ansar and Harakat Sham al-Islam as terrorist organizations.

Meanwhile, individuals outside Syria and Iraq are equally liable to attempt to demonstrate their loyalty to IS by carrying out attacks at home. This is especially

true since Adnani's September 22 statement in which he called on IS supporters around the world to attack citizens of countries involved in airstrikes against the group.<sup>115</sup> Even prior to that, 19 Malaysian jihadi fighters loyal to IS were arrested outside Kuala Lumpur in mid-August while plotting bomb attacks around the city.<sup>116</sup> The cases of Abdul Numan Haider, Adam Dahman and Omarjan Azari in Australia in September also spoke to this potentiality.<sup>117</sup>

IS presents itself as a superior alternative to al-Qaeda in controlling territory, governing populations, and posing a threat to enemies both near and far. So far, however, it has failed to eclipse its competition in directly attacking the “far enemy.”

### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

“If the international community cannot live up to its values and promises to the Syrian opposition, then ISIS will be the only benefactor. Unfortunately, this is already happening and eventually, Syria will be worse than Afghanistan.”

Political official from Alwiya al-Habib al-Mustafa, June 2014<sup>118</sup>

IS has grown into an expansive, multi-layered organization with involvement in military, religious, political, economic, and social affairs. Rendering much of the Iraq-Syria border irrelevant, IS has succeeded in destabilizing Iraq and creating conditions that have promoted disunity and paranoia within broad swathes of Syria's opposition.

When considering measures to counter IS's growth and eventually to defeat it altogether, one must treat it as more than a terrorist organization. A counter-strategy must incorporate counter-terrorism practice but also involve aspects of economic, political, diplomatic, social, and religious policy. Effectively countering IS will take a long time and, crucially, will require local actors taking the lead with the support of Western states, not vice-versa.

For Syria, the existing policy of bolstering moderate opposition groups—through the provision of training, weaponry, and intelligence—should be accelerated and expanded. The groups should be shaped around a more representative “national army” or a unified Hay'at al-Arkan (General Staff Command) based inside Syria. Only such a body would realistically have the potential to defeat IS.

The lack of measures aimed at genuinely protecting civilians from international strikes in Syria has isolated much of the armed opposition from Western policy.

Within three days of the first strikes in Syria, the Western-backed Supreme Military Council and Western-supported Harakat Hazm, Jaysh al-Mujahideen, and Furqat 13, along with at least 15 other major groups, had all condemned the intervention.

So long as Syrian military opposition groups do not receive what they perceive to be sufficient military and financial assistance, IS will benefit. Moreover, progress in moderating Islamist and Salafi groups backed by the Gulf states, particularly members of the Islamic Front, should be capitalized upon before the pendulum swings back. “If ISIS arrives in our areas, we will have two simple options: fight them or join them,” said one mainstream Islamist fighter from Damascus.<sup>119</sup> That latter possibility should not be ignored.

In tandem with such initiatives, increased effort should be made to suppress Russian and Iranian military assistance to the Syrian government and to persuade both states that long-term stability will be better served by ensuring a peaceful transition in Damascus. Iran’s pivotal role in removing Maliki in Iraq, while so far insufficient, is a model that could be replicated in Syria, thereby encouraging a compromise political solution based on Assad’s removal.

In Iraq, existing contracts for military assistance to the government should be honored, but further assistance should be made strictly conditional. IS and other Sunni groups have captured a significant quantity of Iraqi military equipment, much of which was provided by the U.S. government, thanks to the wholesale collapse of large parts of the Iraqi Army, particularly in June 2014. This collapse was emblematic of serious internal issues and the continued provision of weaponry to such a body should be questioned without proven progress. An expanded program to monitor the rebuilding of the Iraqi armed forces should be established, through which suitability assessments can be made. The influence of supporting Shia militias should also be reduced considerably.

Relationships developed with Sunni tribes during the occupation of Iraq should be reconstituted and used as sources of leverage against IS. Over a longer period, initiating a second Sahwa or tribal-based “National Guard” should be a serious objective, although placing too much trust in diffuse and impulsive tribal forces should be avoided.

Amid the collapse of government authority in northern Iraq, the Kurdish peshmerga has proven a more reliable force, and one capable of confronting IS.

**“Increased effort should be made to suppress Russian and Iranian military assistance to the Syrian government.”**

This should be exploited for military and intelligence purposes. The significant expansion of the Irbil CIA station is a valuable step forward in this respect.<sup>120</sup>

In both Syria and Iraq, a broad strategy should be built, developed and implemented that explicitly targets IS's most significant strengths, specifically its revenue stream, the mobility of its forces, its effective leadership and command structure, its use of social media, and ongoing regional instability.

**Cut off IS's revenue stream:** Much of IS's income is earned through the illicit production, refining, and sale of oil. The targeting of the resources themselves—which began in late September 2014—is ill-advised, especially considering the approaching winter and the effect that a lack of supplies will have upon civilian populations. A wiser strategy would be to target the transportation infrastructure used to truck the oil to customers. This would have the added benefit of cutting off key nodes of IS communication and command and control. An expansion and intensification of existing international sanctions targeting those who may purchase or transfer IS-linked oil and other financial resources should similarly be enacted. Taken together, this would be an intelligence-heavy operation that would require local actors to play a substantial role, particularly in identifying targets and compounding IS losses.

**Disrupt the mobility of IS manpower and resources:** In addition to neutralizing key transport routes, a focus should be placed upon targeting IS's ground mobility capabilities, particularly fleets of pick-up trucks and captured armored vehicles. IS is still a comparatively small military organization, commanding approximately 25,000-30,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq. Its consistent expansion is dependent upon continued military success, which by extension is dependent upon this mobility. Crucially, this should be a strategy carried out by local actors,

“Much of IS's income is earned through the illicit production, refining, and sale of oil.

backed by extensive air surveillance, airpower, and the provision of additional military training and equipment, particularly armor-piercing recoilless rifles and ATGMs.

**Target IS's leadership:** A concerted intelligence-led operation should be initiated at the local level by local actors with the objective of collecting information on the identity and areas of operation of IS's senior leadership and military command structures. This intelligence effort should then be fed into existing military operations against IS, led by both international air assets and by local actors on the ground. A sustained erosion of IS's experienced leadership structure would make the group more vulnerable to military ground maneuvers by rival groups in Syria and, if established, in Iraq.

**Counter IS's social media presence:** An aggressive countering of IS's presence on social media began in mid-August 2014, with positive effect—this should be continued. While deleting all IS-affiliated accounts on social media removes an extremely valuable source of intelligence, consistent pressure would be sufficient in and of itself. Moreover, the organization's religio-political doctrine could be challenged and its motivations undermined through the emplacement of “mole” accounts—managed by government-paid individuals with extensive knowledge of Islamic creed and jurisprudence—within the jihadi community online. This could be doubly effective if the same sources were used to introduce divisions within the broader online jihadi community.

**Stabilize Iraq and Syria:** IS feeds off instability and perceptions of victimization, repression, and humiliation. By removing such conditions, IS would soon find itself a fish out of water. Regarding Syria, the international community must recognize that President Assad does not represent a unifying leader for his country. Syria is a complex multi-sectarian and multiethnic state with a significant “middle-ground,” which so far remains relatively unengaged within the conflict. By replacing the binary image of opposition versus government with a focus on maintaining Syrian territorial integrity and social unity through national dialogue and engagement, the international community may encourage a peaceful solution in Syria. This would potentially be acceptable to Iran and Russia, but, crucially, will have to involve the eventual resignation or replacement of Assad. In Iraq, political progress already underway in Baghdad should be built upon and local Sunni actors, including those involved in armed activities, should be gradually engaged and drawn back into the national fold. The capacity of the government and its various structures to maintain a unified state whose constitution recognizes the equal rights of all communities must be reinforced. In this respect, Iraq is one very significant step ahead of Syria, but both states have far to go. Dedicated, long-term international support will be invaluable.

Much of this strategy will require an extensive program of intelligence collection and analysis, incorporating human, geospatial, signals, open source, and social media intelligence efforts. The conflicts in Syria and Iraq have revolutionized the use of open source platforms for the release of material relating to insurgent and militant activities and there is an extremely significant quantity of actionable intelligence available in open sources. This must be better exploited.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of this strategy is the need for a far enhanced level of engagement with local actors. They hold the key to sustainably defeating extremism and laying the foundations for stable peace. In Iraq, this means assisting the recovery of the military, coordinating with the Kurds, and re-

engaging heavily with Sunni tribes. All three of these components have already begun, but they require a substantial expansion in scale and scope.

In Syria, the United States and its allies remain far too detached from the broader gamut of opposition actors, none of whom receive nearly enough assistance (finance, training, or equipment—lethal and non-lethal) to qualitatively impact conflict dynamics. Tribes, meanwhile, remain almost totally ignored, despite their significant potential to influence local society. One largely unengaged tribe, the Shai'tat, rose up against IS in Deir Ezzor in early August 2014 and spent approximately \$6 million of credit over two weeks of fighting, before being brutally suppressed.<sup>121</sup> The Shai'tat received no assistance from the international community despite their very apparent determination to fight for the same cause.

On a multilateral level, security cooperation with regional states should be intensified, based around enhancing domestic counterterrorism, border control, and surveillance capabilities. The conflicts in Syria and Iraq have sparked sectarian and, in some cases, ethnic tensions throughout the Middle East, and these are likely to remain for many years to come. Regional states must be better prepared for threats to their internal stability and security to prevent civil conflict spreading further.

The threat of foreign fighter blowback is realistic. The scale of foreign fighter recruitment into Syria and Iraq has been extensive enough that Western intelligence agencies must now prioritize it. Instead of maintaining a broad intelligence effort focused on preventing individuals from travelling to Syria and Iraq, a more efficient and effective approach would be to concentrate specifically on the (smaller number of) individuals travelling back to Western countries.

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<sup>111</sup> Mehdi Nemmouche, charged with killing four people at the Jewish Museum of Belgium in Brussels on May 24, 2014, is suspected to have spent over 12 months fighting in Syria and to have been a member of the Islamic State. Tamerlan Tsarnaev, one of two brothers involved in the Boston Marathon bombings on April 15, 2013, had spent time in the Russian North Caucasus republic of Dagestan in 2012, where the FBI claims he spent time at a mosque in Makhachkala believed to espouse “radical Islam.” Michael Adebolajo, one of two men responsible for the murder of an off-duty British soldier in London on May 22, 2013, was arrested in Kenya in 2010 while allegedly seeking to acquire military training with Harakat Al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen.

<sup>112</sup> Umberto Bacchi, “France: ISIS Jihadi Mehdi Nemmouche to Be Extradited over Brussels Jewish Museum Attack,” *International Business Times*, 26 June 2014, <<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/france-isis-jihadist-mehdi-nemmouche-be-extradited-over-brussels-jewish-museum-attack-1454356>>; Paul Cruickshank, “Raid on ISIS Suspect in the French Riviera,” *CNN*, 28 August 2014, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/28/world/europe/france-suspected-isis-link/>>.

<sup>113</sup> Michael Holden, “Top UK Anti-Terrorism Official Says Syria-Related Arrests Soar,” Reuters, <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/08/26/uk-iraq-security-foley-britain-idUKKBN0GQ1IP20140826>>; “UK Terror Threat Raised to ‘Severe’” *BBC News*, 29 August 2014, <<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-28986271>>.

<sup>114</sup> Aaron Zelin “Syria: The Epicenter of Future Jihad,” Policywatch 2278, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 30 June 2014, <<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/26142>>.

<sup>115</sup> Yara Bayoumy, “Islamic State Urges Attacks on U.S., French Citizens, Taunts Obama,” Reuters, 22 September 2014, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/22/us-iraq-crisis-adnani-idUSKCN0HH1MB20140922>>.

<sup>116</sup> Steve Grudgings and Trinna Long, “Malaysian Militants Bought Bomb Material for Planned Attack – Official,” Reuters, 21 August 2014, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/21/us-malaysia-islamicstate-idUSKBN0GL0BQ20140821>>.

<sup>117</sup> Chip Le Grand, “Teen Terrorist Abdul Numan Haider May Not Have Acted Alone: Police,” *The Australian*, 25 September 2014, <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/terror/teen-terrorist-abdul-numan-haider-may-not-have-acted-alone-police/story-fnpdbcmu-1227070024066>>; Shane Green, “The Young Faces of Terror,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 September 2014, <<http://www.smh.com.au/national/the-young-faces-of-terror-20140926-10mf9v.html>>.

<sup>118</sup> Author’s interview.

<sup>119</sup> Author’s interview with a member of the al-Ittihad al-Islami Ajnad al-Sham alliance based in Damascus, June 2014.

<sup>120</sup> Mitchell Prothero, “Expansion of ‘Secret’ Facility in Iraq Suggests Closer US-Kurd Ties,” *McClatchy DC*, 11 July 2014, <<http://www.miamiherald.com/2014/07/11/4231510/expansion-of-secret-facility-in.html>>.

<sup>121</sup> Author’s interview with a Shai‘tat leader, August 2014.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Charles Lister is a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. He was formerly head of MENA at IHS Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, where he focused on substate security threats in the Middle East. Lister's current research assesses the state of the insurgency in Syria, particularly the growth of Salafi and jihadi groups. He is currently authoring a book, *The Jihadist Insurgency in Syria*.

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