

JULY 2014

JESSICA D. LEWIS

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 21

THE ISLAMIC STATE: A COUNTER-STRATEGY FOR A COUNTER-STATE



Cover: A fighter of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) holds an ISIL flag and a weapon on a street in the city of Mosul, June 23, 2014. Picture taken June 23, 2014. REUTERS/Stringer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Many have asked what needs to be done about the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the terrorist organization that recently took control of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city. Questions range from the acceptability of airstrikes and the viability of a national unity government in Iraq to the feasibility of a counter-offensive that depends upon the remaining capacity of the Iraq Security Forces. These are important and worthy questions, and timely, because ISIS is growing stronger. But these questions preempt the rigorous analysis that is required in order to determine what the U.S. should do about ISIS and why.

ISIS is no longer a mere terrorist organization, but one that operates like an army. It is no longer just an army, but one that is conquering land in Iraq and Syria to establish new ideological rule, in line with al-Qaeda's endgame. This is no longer a war of ideas against an extremist group with sparse networks, flashy strategic messaging, and limited technical offensive capability. It is necessary to avoid framing a U.S. counter-terrorism strategy to defeat ISIS as if it were. It is particularly important to move beyond narratives of simple or piecemeal solutions. Individual actions are insufficient to dislodge what has become an entrenched strategic adversary.

ISIS draws strength from the complex circumstances that are independently causing Iraq and Syria to fail, including domestic civil and sectarian cleavages, authoritarian leadership, and polarizing regional stressors. Any counter-strategy to defeat ISIS also requires a nuanced strategy to preserve all U.S. foreign policy objectives in the Middle East that are deeply affected by the recent take-over of Iraq's major cities by ISIS. And yet these considerations call for action rather than deterrence. The ISIS threat is growing, and it threatens the permanent destruction of Iraq and Syria, which will generate exponential threats to U.S. interests abroad.

ISIS is already a threat to the United States. ISIS is not only dangerous in a regional context because it is overthrowing modern state boundaries in ways that incur massive ethno-sectarian killing and cleansing. ISIS is also a global jihadist organization that shares al-Qaeda's ideology, such that its progress drives towards a post-state and apocalyptic vision that involves the destruction of the modern state system. ISIS already threatens to escalate violence between states in the Middle East that have been fighting proxy wars in Syria for several years such that ISIS military operations may cascade into a broader regional conflict. ISIS is now a direct threat to neighboring states in the Middle East, and ISIS is broadcasting the intent to attack Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the West. The threat of attacks against the U.S. is present.

It is therefore necessary for the U.S. to consider ways to defeat ISIS, not only to preserve the integrity of the Iraqi state, but to preserve our own security. Defeating the Islamic State will, in fact, be very difficult. Developing a strategy to do so will be very hard. But hard is not the same as impossible. As pressure grows in Washington for a response to the crisis that has engulfed the region, policymakers must move beyond the assessment phase and begin building a comprehensive strategy. This effort must begin with a close examination of the sources of strength, intentions, and vulnerabilities of the Islamic Caliphate created by ISIS. Only then can a coherent counter-strategy emerge. First, we must understand the threat.

This report provides a strategic analysis of the sources of strength and weakness for ISIS. It adapts existing military frameworks to support the development of meaningful national security strategies to counter ISIS. This report does not attempt to formulate a comprehensive counter-strategy, but instead provides a way of conceptualizing such counter-strategies in light of how ISIS forms its own strategy for military and political gain. The frameworks in this study include an evaluation of the ISIS grand strategy and its military objectives in Iraq and Syria; a Center of Gravity analysis to identify the core sources of ISIS's strength;

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and a rubric to understand how main efforts and supporting efforts can combine to bring out the strategic defeat of ISIS.

This report finds that the defeat of ISIS must address two Centers of Gravity. The first is a classical military center of gravity that ISIS uses to wrest physical control from modern states and hold what it has gained. The second ISIS center of gravity is a political capacity to provide essential state functions within the territory that ISIS controls. ISIS strength emanates from the ability to translate military control into political control, and thereby to claim that the Caliphate is manifest. A strategy to defeat ISIS must break this synergy among the military and political operations of ISIS and its layered leadership. The U.S. must consider ways to accomplish this in order to propel the strategic defeat of ISIS. Destroying its Critical Capabilities, denying its Critical Opportunities and Critical Requirements, and exploiting its Critical Vulnerabilities are additional component effects that must be synchronized in order to achieve this strategic effect.

A strategy whereby ISIS remains in control of Mosul, Raqqa, and other urban centers in Iraq and Syria will fall short of the desired outcome. Settling for lesser aims or resolving to do nothing are equal. The threat of ISIS is real and expanding, but ISIS is also vulnerable at its present political formation stage. It is vital to design a cogent counter-strategy, and soon, or this door will close.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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THE ISLAMIC STATE: A COUNTER-STRATEGY FOR A COUNTER-STATE

By Jessica D. Lewis

The Islamic “Caliphate” now governing parts of Iraq and Syria is becoming one of the most significant threats to American national security. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Brett McGurk testified before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on July 23, 2014 that the Islamic Caliphate, also called the Islamic State, is “worse than al-Qaeda.” He added that it is “no longer a terrorist organization. It is a full-blown army,” and “It is al-Qaeda in its doctrine, ambition and, increasingly, in its threat to U.S. interests.”¹ The Institute for the Study of War has been tracking the evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) first into an army and then into the Islamic State it has become.

It is refreshing to hear senior American officials recognize this development and the threat it poses to American safety, but no one has yet publicly proposed a serious strategy for confronting it. The difficulty in formulating such a strategy does not lie merely in the distastefulness of contemplating renewed American military activity in Iraq, although that concern plays a role in stunting strategic discourse about Iraq. It lies in the realization that comprehensive defeat of the Islamic State is the only way to mitigate the threat; and further that the deterioration of Iraq and Syria, a real possibility, greatly increases The Islamic State’s chance for success. After years of watching the Syrian war unfold, it is devastating to regard what has become of Iraq, and it is necessary to consider how a permanent Islamic State in the Middle East formed in the wake of these modern states will affect U.S. national security.

ISIS announced the formation of a transnational religious polity, the Islamic Caliphate, as an alternative to modern states on the first day of Ramadan, June 29, 2014.² Although they announced that they would be known as the Islamic State, this report will largely refer to the group as ISIS, tying this report into previous analytical work done by ISW. The ISIS vision is post-state, apocalyptic, and shared among global jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda.³ ISIS is advancing towards this future by erasing modern states, beginning with Iraq and Syria. ISIS prominently celebrated its bulldozing of the border between Iraq and Syria after the fall of Mosul, which it meant to symbolize the end of the era of Sykes-Picot and colonial borders.⁴ Some Western analysts wonder whether the elimination of post-colonial and “artificial” boundaries is itself a threat to the West. It is a problem when those boundary changes are violent, involve massive ethno-sectarian cleansing and killing, and when the entity undertaking them is in fact attempting to destroy the entire modern state system. It is a problem when that entity seeks to propagate sectarian war in

the Middle East to the point of lateral escalation. And it is a problem when the entity proposes a new Islamic State to serve as a beacon and sanctuary for jihadists worldwide.

ISIS is more than a terrorist organization. This is no longer a war of ideas against an extremist group with sparse networks, flashy strategic messaging, and limited technical ability to engage in terrorist attacks. A surgical counterterrorism strategy to excise individual leaders from the organization will likely fail. The military and political institutions of ISIS make it durable; and ISIS leadership wields these instruments strategically. Fighting ISIS now is indeed like fighting an army, and one whose political leadership has achieved independent victories by building state-like institutions. Defeating the Islamic State will, in fact, be very difficult. Developing a strategy to do so will be very hard. The effort must begin with a close examination of the sources of strength, intentions, and vulnerabilities of the group. Only then can a coherent and cogent strategy emerge. This report will evaluate ISIS in a way that supports this aim.

The core strength of ISIS depends upon its combined ability to wage war and build state capacity.⁵ The concept of a ‘state’ and the concomitant ideas of governance are critically important to ISIS, even though it seeks to wreck rather than join the modern state system. Although referring to itself as a state, it does not view itself through the lens of an international system that it can join as one state out of many. Rather, ISIS has declared that all states but itself are illegitimate. By declaring the Caliphate, ISIS has attached its legitimacy as a movement and an idea to its ability to rule, not merely to fight. It therefore seeks to perform certain state functions within an area of physical control that it may uphold and defend with its military. ISIS has the institutions, resources, and leadership to accomplish this vision. Its military organization is solid, and its gains are material. The ISIS political organization is

also largely formed, and ISIS leverages combined political-military strategies to secure, build, and expand the control of this Caliphate.

Admiring the problem will not yield a solution. We must examine ISIS carefully and dispassionately in order to identify ways to exploit its weaknesses and contend intelligently with its strengths. Any successful strategy will be complex, time-consuming, and challenging. It will have to combine solutions to the political problems of Iraq with answers to the thorny challenges of Syria. It will have to deal with ISIS as a regional phenomenon and within the context of the global al-Qaeda movement. It will surely have to encompass military, economic, political, diplomatic, informational, and many other tools of statecraft. Above all, it will require the attention of America's senior decision-makers over a considerable period of time and the willingness to take unpleasant actions in order to avoid devastating consequences down the road.

Analytical Approach

Analysts use multiple frameworks to communicate with military planners about the component strengths and weaknesses of a military enemy. One approach is to anticipate the enemy's strategic objectives based upon his political vision and grand strategy. Another is to identify the elements of the enemy's strategic power, or means, through a doctrinal Center of Gravity analysis. A third method is to relate these estimates by observing the ways in which the enemy has applied its means to achieve specific ends, and arrive at an understanding of the enemy's strategy in play. Understanding the ends, means, and strategic calculus of one's enemy equips a strategist to design ways to counter that strategy or overcome it. It is possible to adapt these military frameworks to support the development of meaningful national security strategies to counter ISIS.

This report will not list or recommend policy options for the U.S. to contend with the ISIS threat. The situation in Iraq and Syria is complex, and an array of U.S. interests and objectives must be taken into account. Instead this report will provide a basis for calculating what a U.S. strategy would require in order to defeat ISIS so that strategy formulation does not occur on the basis of false assumptions. Armed with the right information and frameworks, it is necessary that the conversation about the threat of ISIS move from an assessment phase to the selection of a national course of action. Developing and competing alternative strategies that are both feasible and acceptable is a separate and subsequent exercise. This report is a precursor to such a study, which must follow in short order.

ISIS POLITICAL VISION

ISIS is a religious organization with a political goal of establishing an Islamic Caliphate.⁶ On the heels of its June 2014 military victories in Mosul and other cities in Iraq and Syria, ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the formation of an Islamic Caliphate at the beginning of Ramadan and appeared publicly as a religious leader and statesman at a mosque in Mosul.⁷ ISIS expressed its plans explicitly to bring about a Caliphate that will endure in the recent publication of its English-language magazine called *Dabiq*.⁸ This magazine describes the ISIS grand strategy as predicated upon military force to establish physical control before political and religious authority are attained. The religious argumentation in this magazine is rigorous and comprehensive, indicating that ISIS has been preparing its narrative, with the help of Islamic scholars, to withstand religious counter-arguments over time.

The expansion of ISIS political messaging to include an internet-based English-language outreach campaign follows local messaging efforts that have also been rigorous. ISIS has engaged in an extensive Arabic-language *Da'wa* proselytism outreach effort both through the internet and on the ground in Iraq and Syria since July 2013.⁹ The ISIS religious-political vision is therefore not a recent development, although its recent messaging carefully explains the need for physical control to precede religious authority. Aside from this divergence from al-Qaeda Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri's vision for the proper way to bring about the Caliphate,¹⁰ the ISIS vision has a fundamental synergy with the practical theology of al-Qaeda. Both groups aim first to establish a Caliphate, then to fight an outright battle against non-believers, and ultimately to prepare the world for "the Hour," meaning Judgment Day, known to Muslims as *Yawm al-Qiyama* [the Day of Resurrection].¹¹ ISIS publications feature specifically apocalyptic narratives. *Dabiq*, the title of the English language magazine, is named for the locale in Syria where the battle between Muslims and the Roman Empire [the west] would occur before Armageddon, according to *hadith*.¹²



The above image was published by ISIS in its 4th issue of its English-language periodical, *The Islamic State Report*. The photo illustrates ISIS "erasing Sykes-Picot" by bulldozing the border between Iraq and Syria.

The ISIS narrative in *Dabiq* clearly establishes that the signature ISIS methodology, or *minhaj*,¹³ is based upon hard power. An excerpt from page 38 of the magazine reads:

“These attacks will compel apostate forces to partially withdraw from rural territory and regroup in major urban regions. The jama’ah would then take advantage of the situation by increasing chaos to the point leading to the complete collapse of the taghut regime in entire areas, a situation some refer to as ‘tawahhush’ (‘mayhem’). The next step would be to fill the vacuum by managing the state of affairs to the point of developing into a full-fledged state, and continuing expansion into territory still under the control of the taghut.”¹⁴

Later in the same passage of *Dabiq*, ISIS exalts this methodology above that of other groups, likely referring directly to al-Qaeda:

“The weak-hearted methodology of irja’ is one that can never fuel the jihad caravan on its path to Khilafah, rather it only brings indecision and fear, thus ruining the caravan’s ability to persist, and naively filling the road with obstacles that only serve the tawaghit.”¹⁵

The practical tasks associated with bringing about the Islamic Caliphate are therefore to establish, construct or preserve, and defend a community of believers within land that is acquired through military conquest. The political vision of an Islamic Caliphate is therefore realized in ISIS’s estimation by first establishing control of territory, planting a flag, and establishing functional governance that will in turn legitimize religious authority. This grand strategy, to control territory first and establish religious authority second, is drawn from the phased approach first espoused by al-Qaeda in Iraq’s leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a formative predecessor to current leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.¹⁶ ISW’s previous assessment of the political objectives of ISIS is corroborated by ISIS in *Dabiq*. These objectives are:

1. Permanently break down political boundaries in Iraq, Syria, and the region by cultivating conditions for government failure and/or sectarian civil war.
2. Establish the Islamic Caliphate by controlling terrain across Iraq and Syria, governing the population within, and defending against external threats.
3. Bring like-minded people to fight alongside and settle within the Islamic Caliphate.
4. Expand the territory of the Caliphate and connect to the wider Muslim community, or the Ummah.

The ISIS vision for the Caliphate is grand. In a second issue of *Dabiq* published on July 28, 2014, ISIS’s extended narrative contains references to moving through the Levant and eventually onwards to “the liberation of Makkah, Madinah, and al-Quds,” indicating that ISIS envisions an endgame involving both Saudi Arabia and Israel.¹⁷ ISIS also refers to future attacks against the West in this second installment by declaring that jihadis will “invade Rome and then ... conquer it.”¹⁸ Viewed apart from the ISIS grand strategy, these goals might appear too lofty to be real. However, considered in the context of the group’s ability to design methodical, adjustable, and intermediate strategic objectives, it is reasonable to consider that ISIS grand strategy effectively leverages its full strategic power in pursuit of its long term objectives.

THE ISIS GRAND STRATEGY

ISIS laid out the “phases of jihad” in the first issue of *Dabiq*. These phases outline the ISIS grand strategy, or the maximum application of all elements of strategic power to achieve “the political object of the war.”¹⁹ The ISIS political objectives described above correspond with the phases of jihad described in *Dabiq*²⁰ and provide insight into the forming of the grand strategy of ISIS:

1. Breaking down state boundaries and generating conditions for civil war are described as “Destabilizing *Taghut*,” or idolatry. Highlighting the consistency of the ISIS approach with the historical precedent set by AQI, *Dabiq* credits Zarqawi with having largely accomplished this requirement prior to the present season of warfare.
2. Establishing the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham as an Islamic Emirate corresponds with the phase of *Tamkin*, or consolidation.
3. Bringing like-minded people to fight and live within the Emirate corresponds with the phase of *Hijrah*, or emigration, which is described as the first phase. Pragmatically, it is a continuous requirement for ISIS rather than a sequential phase.
4. ISIS has expressed its expansive intent and vision for how it will interact with the rest of the Muslim world by declaring the Khalifa, or caliphate, which ISIS describes as the final phased objective.

This grand strategy fundamentally relies upon military superiority to wrest control of land and cities from modern states. ISIS also buttresses this control through consolidation, governance, and statecraft to form the practical basis of a society before establishing religious authority. This methodology typifies ISIS and distinguishes it from al-Qaeda and other global jihadist organizations that believe religious authority and social acceptance should precede physical control.²¹ The political vision of the Islamic Caliphate created

by ISIS therefore depends upon a strategy of ultimate military success. In practice, it also depends upon social control in the wake of military victory. ISIS has pursued social control largely through coercion,²² strategic messaging to encourage emigration of like-minded jihadists,²³ financial and service-based incentives to pacify civilians,²⁴ civilian displacement,²⁵ and assassinations to deter resistance.²⁶ Social control is therefore a critical requirement for ISIS to consolidate gains rather than a core element of its grand strategy. Critical requirements comprise one category of strategic power that will be used to examine ISIS later in the report.



This image, posted to Twitter by ISIS after a military parade through Mosul on June 24, 2014, demonstrates that ISIS has access to U.S. artillery pieces, armored personnel carriers, and other equipment. It also illustrates that ISIS can move this equipment, which may give ISIS offensive capability outside of its present zone of control.

The ISIS grand strategy rests on its military capability and system for achieving political control. The Islamic Caliphate possesses a powerful military force. With this force, ISIS has applied military strategies to destroy modern states, namely Iraq and Syria, and establish new rule. The depth of the organization's military power, treasury, and human resources mean that the Islamic Caliphate is not only ambitious, but capable; moreover, ISIS is also able to translate military gains into political gains by establishing governance, social control, and finally political control. Thus dual capability of military force and political control is the primary source of ISIS strategic power.

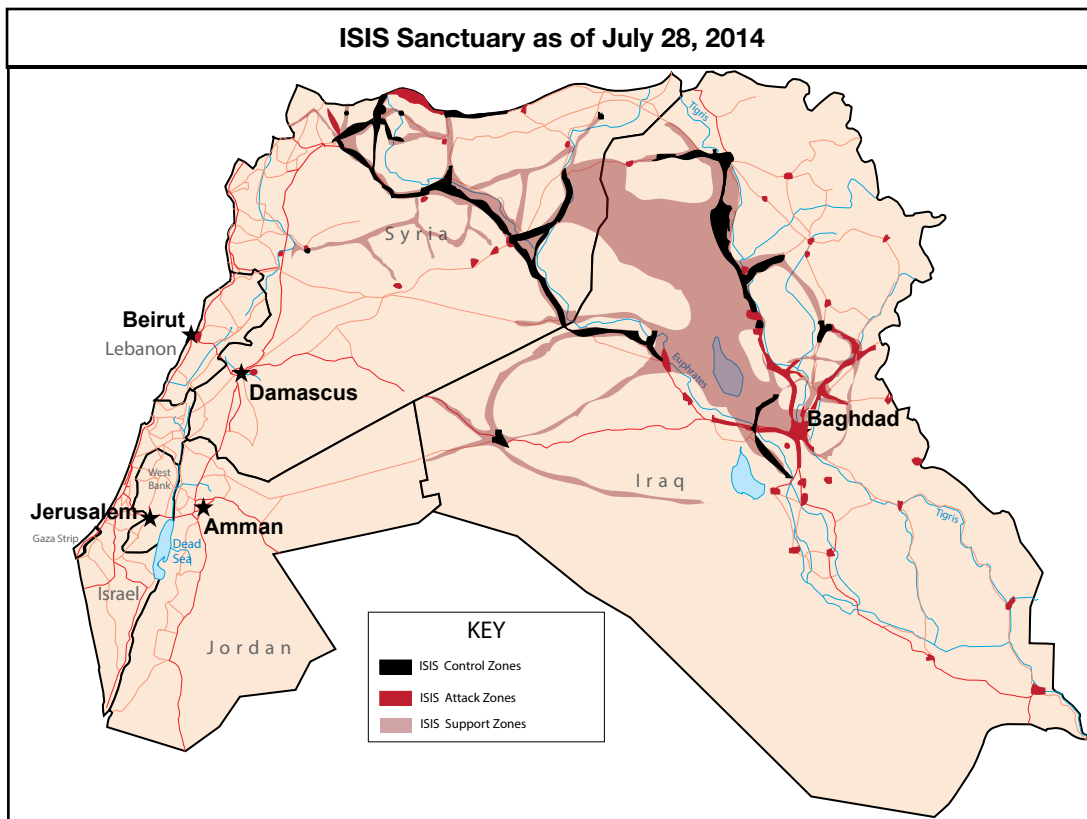
The ISIS military has noteworthy tactical and operational capabilities to conduct vehicle borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) waves,²⁷ ground offensives,²⁸ surface-to-air fire,²⁹ suicide attacks,³⁰ and combined arms attacks.³¹ ISIS applies these tactics to achieve operational and strategic objectives, such as the seizure of Mosul, demonstrating astute campaign design and strategic leadership. ISIS also grows stronger as it claims battlefield victories.³² In a literal sense, ISIS develops military capability by acquiring military equipment and fortified terrain as it seizes bases in Iraq and Syria.³³ Concern about its growing capabilities recently

escalated as ISIS added toxic chemicals, including unenriched uranium, to its arsenal after seizing Mosul and Muthanna Complex near Baghdad.³⁴ ISIS also increases its fighting force by releasing prisoners and augmenting its treasury through urban conquest, seizing wealth,³⁵ possibly banks,³⁶ and other critical infrastructure. More importantly, ISIS is also able to recruit more fighters by projecting a message of military victory or requiring service of some tribes that surrender to them.³⁷ This message of victory legitimizes ISIS, a non-state actor, over states and regimes with formal militaries that cannot defend their territory against ISIS. Through these military victories, the political vision of the Islamic Caliphate is manifest, according to ISIS.

Since the urban offensive in the Sunni heartland of Iraq that began in June 2014 and expanded into Syria, ISIS has also launched a prolific English-language print media campaign to encourage Western jihadists to participate.³⁸ ISIS attempts to portray life within the Islamic Caliphate as idyllic, stable, and prosperous in order to lure skilled professionals as well as fighters and religious figures.³⁹ The messaging of a post-war vision for a flourishing Islamic Caliphate is also core to the ISIS grand strategy of building a religious state within a military stronghold engaged in war on its frontier. ISIS statecraft depends upon this capacity for political campaign design. ISIS military force generation also depends upon this strategic messaging capability, as ISIS recruits or intimidates soldiers through a message of military victory. Meanwhile, ISIS recruits potential citizens through a message of vital religious statehood. In order to sustain this multi-pronged political strategy, ISIS must perpetuate its military victories. In order to validate its statecraft, ISIS must further demonstrate that its physical stronghold is defensible, or at least prevent rival militaries from attacking it.

ISIS must also permanently establish itself in place of modern states. The Islamic Caliphate is not realized if Iraq and Syria have the chance to recover their former likenesses. Not only must ISIS defend its physical stronghold, but it must also ensure that the Iraqi and Syrian states are destroyed. ISIS adopted separate military strategies for Iraq and Syria until June 2014 because an ongoing civil war and a prominent rival al-Qaeda faction uniquely characterized its Syrian campaign. Since the fall of Mosul in June 2014, conditions of civil war in Iraq more directly resemble those in Syria. ISIS now likely has comparable military objectives in each theater to consolidate physical control, defend controlled territory, and destroy rival militaries in both states.

The ISIS stronghold is defensible by default if no state or rival faction can challenge ISIS for control of its major cities. It is therefore likely that ISIS will attempt to destroy the offensive capability of the militaries that might project force into Raqqa or Mosul, or to destroy the regimes those militaries defend. This may also indicate the basis of ISIS follow-on



The above map depicts the terrain within Iraq and Syria that ISIS controls as well as its support zones and attack zones.

operations elsewhere in the region. This logic may already be visible as social media reporting suggests that ISIS is attacking Syrian regime positions across eastern Syria in Deir ez-Zour, Hasaka, and Qamishli, as of July 25, 2014.⁴⁰

THE ISIS MILITARY STRATEGY

Since ISIS attacked and established control of Mosul on June 10, 2014, ISIS has prosecuted an extensive urban campaign in Iraq, including cities within Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, Diyala, and Anbar provinces.⁴¹ ISIS extended this campaign to include major Syrian cities such as Deir ez-Zour and key terrain along the Syrian-Turkish border, including Ayn al Arab.⁴² The expansion of ISIS control zones, attack zones, and support zones deep into Iraq and Syria frame a visual forecast of the ISIS campaign that is still to come. In order to establish the physical integrity of the Islamic Caliphate, ISIS will seek to control the urban centers that fall within the outer bounds of its current military control. The map above is a current estimate for where ISIS has military control as of July 25, 2014. In order to control this terrain permanently, ISIS will seek to destroy the states of Iraq and Syria and prevent their return. This strategic objective supports the grand strategy to establish and expand the Islamic Caliphate by force. The military strategy to destroy modern states is formed in conjunction with a military strategy to expand

control of territory and to translate military victories into political victories through strategic messaging and statecraft. The ISIS military strategy in Iraq and Syria likely includes the following objectives:

1. To establish control of urban terrain in the Sunni heartland of Iraq that connects to the core physical strength of ISIS in Syria, forming the territory of the Islamic Caliphate.
2. To control critical infrastructure that increases the wealth and international leverage of the Islamic Caliphate.
3. To create a border exclusion zone in Iraqi Kurdistan and the ethno-sectarian mixed provinces of Diyala, Baghdad, and Babil in order to separate the Islamic Caliphate from Iran.
4. To destroy the offensive capability of the Iraqi Security Forces and the Syrian regime.
5. To destroy Iraq by denying the capital as a seat of government and as a defensible Shi'a city; to ensure that the government of Syria does not recover its legitimacy.
6. To expand the terrain that ISIS can claim as part of the Islamic Caliphate by seizing outlying cities in Syria

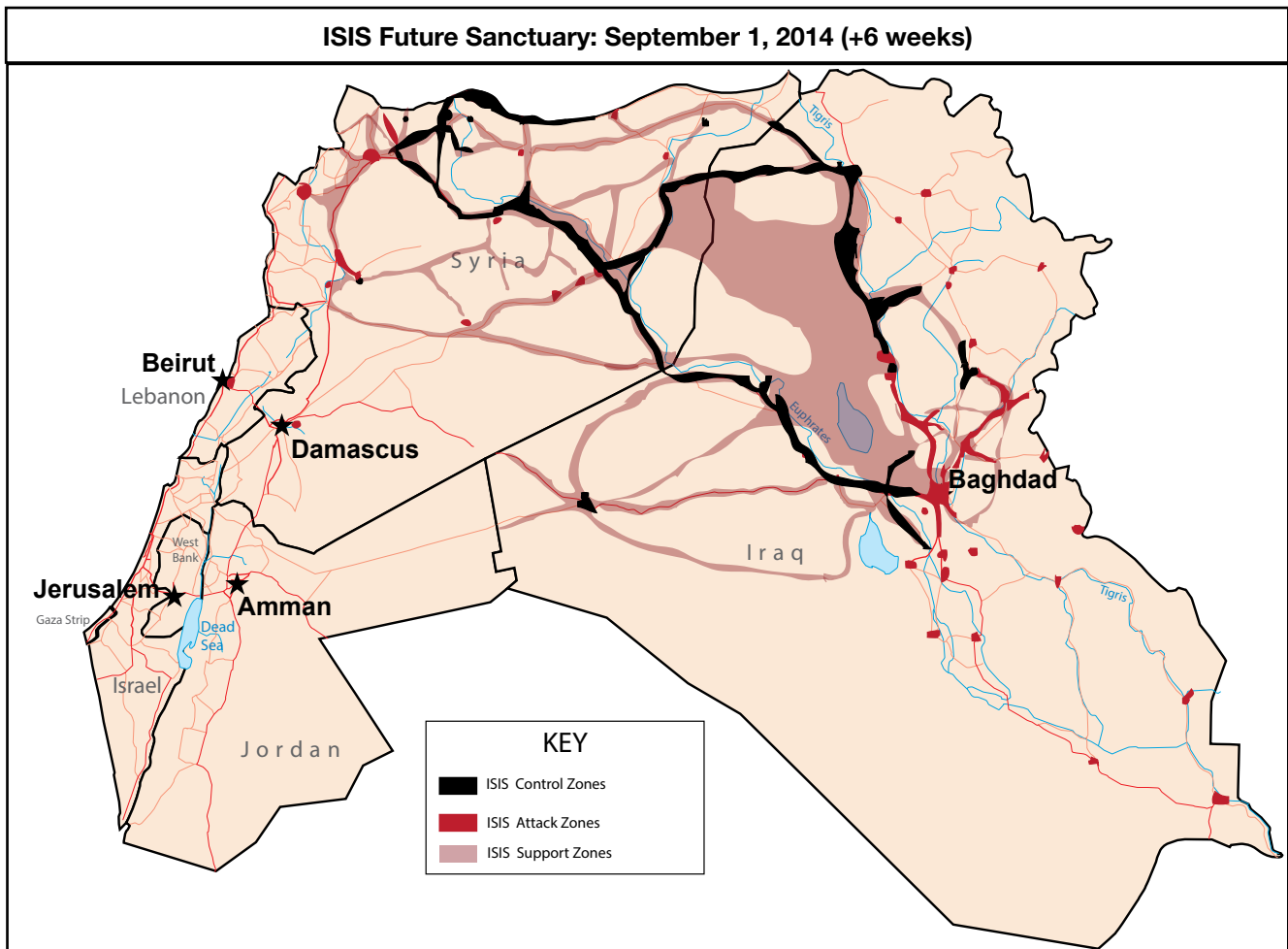
and Iraq such as Rutba and Sha'er and eventually create additional exterior lines of communication.

7. To extend the Islamic Caliphate into areas of northern and central Syria currently occupied by the Syrian opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra and eliminate resistance.

ISIS already controls a contiguous zone within the Sunni heartland of Iraq and Syria in pursuit of the first objective. The stronghold that connects Mosul in the east and Raqqa to the west constitutes a zone of core physical strength for the ISIS military. This zone also contains military bases and robust lines of communication that facilitate the outward expansion of the Islamic Caliphate. From its stronghold, ISIS has pushed southward into remote Anbar and Deir ez-Zour to carve out a wider control zone that connects the Tigris and Euphrates river valleys. This intermediate desert zone is bounded by the urban Sunni heartland in Iraq and Syria under ISIS control. The designation of the Islamic Caliphate requires ISIS to adhere to positional warfare and defend its stronghold as well as essential new positions along the Tigris and Euphrates corridors. This is both an expression of strength and vulnerability for ISIS, as this report will explore.

ISIS is competing in both Iraq and Syria with regime security forces and pockets of resistance for permanent control. ISIS will seek to complete its control of the Euphrates by seizing complete control of Deir ez-Zour city and the stretch of road to the west toward Palmyra and Homs.⁴³ ISIS will also seek to control Haditha, Hit, and Ramadi in Anbar province to establish full control of the Euphrates river valley.⁴⁴ In order to complete its northern border, ISIS will likely move to take the stretch of Syrian-Turkish border from Azaz north of Aleppo to Tel Abyad, north of Raqqa, including Syrian Kurdish areas around Ayn al Arab.⁴⁵ As of July 27, 2014, ISIS attacks are underway in each of these three zones.

Recent attacks indicate that ISIS may push farther east into The Kurdish Defense Force's territory and take Hasaka and Qamishli,⁴⁶ meeting its northern Iraq control zone in Sinjar⁴⁷ or Rabiya, both currently under the control of the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga. ISIS will also likely continue to engage the ISF at the Baiji oil refinery and in Tikrit, in order to establish complete control of Iraq's Sunni heartland, connecting the Tigris and Euphrates boundaries along the highway American forces named Route Phoenix,⁴⁸ which stretches from Tikrit to Haditha north of Lake Thar Thar. Conditions favor the



The above map depicts the terrain within Iraq and Syria that ISIS is projected to control, as well as possible new attack zones and support zones.

enduring control of ISIS in this zone while other Sunni militants continue active or passive assistance.⁴⁹

ISIS likely also desires to control critical infrastructure to extract rents and generate tactical and political leverage. ISIS and other armed groups established control over the Fallujah dam in February 2014 and wielded this control in order to produce flooding and water shortages that affected civilian populations, demonstrated a lack of Iraqi state control, and also likely impeded the mobility of the ISF.⁵⁰ ISIS may expand this control over Iraq's water resources by seizing control of the Haditha dam, a near-term objective, but also potentially the Mosul dam, which sits northwest of the city. As of July 24, 2014, ISIS is also working to seize the Hamrin dam in northern Diyala.⁵¹ In Syria, ISIS reportedly already controls the Tabqa and Tishreen dams over the upper Euphrates in northern Syria, northwest of Raqqa.⁵²

ISIS has likely leveraged access to Syrian oil fields in Deir ez-Zour province for some time; though ISIS only established control of this terrain on July 5, 2014.⁵³ Likewise, in Iraq, ISIS may desire more than to clear the Sunni heartland of all ISF defenses, but also to control the Baiji oil refinery itself.⁵⁴ While ISIS has likely been profiting indirectly from the northern Iraq oil infrastructure for some time, ISIS would gain significant leverage over the Iraqi Kurds and the Iraqi central government if it were to develop control over critical oil infrastructure, such as the Baiji oil refinery, Kirkuk oil fields, and possibly Zarkho, the border down in Dohuk province where the Ceyhan pipeline passes out of Iraq and into Turkey.⁵⁵ With the exception of these limited and yet strategic positions, ISIS is not likely to encroach further into Iraqi Kurdistan as a primary military campaign objective.

ISIS will more likely capitalize upon the potential to form a recognized northeastern border with Iraqi Kurdistan that buffers the Islamic Caliphate from Iran, Turkey, and Russia. Iraqi Kurdish territory, including the ethnically mixed provincial capital of Kirkuk and its proximate oil fields, are now under the protection of the Kurdish Peshmerga.⁵⁶ Though ISIS could possibly outmatch the tactical capability of the Peshmerga in the north, ISIS is not likely, and has not to date, prioritized main attacks into Iraqi Kurdistan. ISIS has, however, attacked in ways that belie attempts to disrupt, neutralize, or fix Kurdish Peshmerga forces in order to gain greater freedom of operational maneuver in other parts of Iraq, such as Diyala.⁵⁷

Since ISIS pushed the ISF out of the northern portion of Iraq's Sunni heartland in early June 2014, delegitimizing the Iraqi state, the question has been raised as to whether Iraqi Kurds might seek independence from Iraq as a result of this crisis.⁵⁸ Significant portions of the Disputed Internal Boundaries that stretch across Ninewa, Kirkuk, and Diyala provinces are now guarded by the Kurdish Peshmerga, including Kirkuk city and the Kirkuk oil fields.⁵⁹ The absence of the ISF in these

areas has potentially opened the door for Kurdish autonomy; however, an independent Iraqi Kurdistan would reinforce the northern border of the Islamic Caliphate, enhancing its permanence and minimizing opportunities for a joint military effort involving the Peshmerga, the Iraqi Security Forces, and external allies to defeat the Islamic Caliphate as an entity that controls terrain. This scenario generates a critical opportunity that ISIS may seek to exploit.

ISIS also retains pockets of physical control in the western Baghdad Belts (the region around the Iraqi capital), Fallujah, and northern Diyala. The Baghdad Belts in the vicinity of Fallujah have emerged as a control zone for ISIS over the course of the last year, providing ISIS with an opportunity to pursue strategic objectives involving the defeat of the Iraqi Security Forces and the destruction of the capital. The northern Baghdad Belts between Dhuluiya, Balad, and Taji witnessed an increase in activity by gunmen, likely ISIS, in July 2014.⁶⁰ Likewise, ISIS likely has additional forces that are present and active in the southern Baghdad Belts, near Jurf al-Sakhar, Yusufiyah and Arab Jabour.⁶¹ These military positions allow ISIS to pursue several of its remaining military objectives in Iraq.

These pockets are connected to the core ISIS stronghold between Mosul and Raqqa by interior lines of communication and support zones, including the Baghdad Belts themselves. Access to interior lines of communication is a critical requirement for ISIS to redistribute material and human resources, and ISIS has demonstrated the ability to resource multiple fights at once. For example, ISIS was still actively engaged in clashes with the ISF around Suleiman Beg, Samarra, Ramadi, Baquba, and Baghdad at the time of the Mosul offensive.⁶² This allows ISIS to split the attention and reinforcements of its enemies, an assessed core strategy of ISIS. It also allows ISIS to pre-position multiple branch operations and maximize its opportunity to react in order to maintain the initiative. These advantages may allow ISIS to attack into Baghdad and other mixed provinces in order to defeat the Iraqi state. The extent to which ISIS will apply this strategy against the Syrian regime is not yet clear.

Since the fall of Mosul, the ISIS strategy in Iraq has become more evident. First, ISIS has likely considered how to manage the threat of Iranian involvement in Iraq. Iraq shares a hard border with Iran, and ISIS has likely considered how to advance without sacrificing the initiative. ISIS operational objectives for Baghdad are likely framed in this context. ISIS may cultivate conditions of ethno-sectarian war in Diyala, Baghdad, Samarra, and Babil in order to form an active border exclusion zone with Iran. If these mixed provinces break into war, then ISIS can anticipate that Iran will posture to protect the Shi'a heartland comprising the rest of Iraq to the south. Controlling the conditions of war in this zone will likely present a challenge for ISIS, as the Shi'a shrines in

Samarra and Baghdad are likely priority objectives of Iranian protection. ISIS likely desires to bring about war in this zone, but without Iranian escalation.

The Shi'a shrines in Samarra and Baghdad also present a challenge to the establishment of a clean southern boundary to the ISIS Caliphate. These are sites that Iran will want to protect as primary campaign objectives as it works with Shi'a militias and the Iraqi Security Forces.⁶³ The air movement of Iraqi volunteers and militia elements from Najaf to Daquq, the region just south of Kirkuk, signals that the Iranian elements commanding and controlling the military response to ISIS in Iraq have determined that they will defend Shi'a shrines farther north than Samarra.⁶⁴ ISIS is likely considering how to translate its strongholds between Samarra and Baghdad, and its military presence in northern Babil, into conditions that support the consolidation of the Islamic Caliphate rather than the direct engagement of a regional war against Iran at this time.

The ISIS military strategy is enhanced overall if ISIS is first able to destroy the Iraqi state, either by destroying its military or by denying the seat of government in Baghdad. ISIS is likely to project force either to neutralize or overrun ISF bases north of Baghdad as well as Baghdad International Airport to accomplish the first of these objectives. All three bases have witnessed attacks during Ramadan 2014, as of July 27, 2014.⁶⁵ ISIS also has the capacity to attack fixed sites within Baghdad that are well guarded by ground forces, and the newly forming Iraqi government is still vulnerable as a physical target. ISIS is more likely to proceed with these objectives first before setting conditions to defend against Iranian incursion or attacks by other regional actors.

Considering the threat that ISIS may pose to the Iraqi capital bears comparison to the relative threat in Syria. Baghdad, unlike Damascus, lies in the land between two rivers. Damascus, on the other hand, is highly militarized, with regime-held military strongholds atop mountain ranges surrounding the city, raising the question of whether ISIS will also seek to destroy the Syrian military.⁶⁶ ISIS will likely seek to neutralize Syrian regime forces by fixing them in a permanent defensive position or causing them to disperse such that they can no longer mass. It is unlikely that ISIS will seek to overcome Syrian regime strategic defenses. At this point in the Syrian civil war, breaking the Syrian state by attacking into the capital is no longer incumbent upon ISIS, because the civil war reached the capital two years ago.⁶⁷

It is likely that ISIS will expand its territory next into the occupied areas of northern Syria. ISIS may also apply pressure to Assad regime positions in a way that forces the Syrian regime into a permanent defense of a limited territorial stretch between Damascus and Latakia. Given the concept of border

exclusion zones in Iraq, it is possible that ISIS will also regard this Syrian rump state as a border exclusion zone, requiring only that Syrian regime forces not engage deep into the ISIS Caliphate stronghold. ISIS has already indicated the intent to buffer this zone by attacking regime positions in central Syria, seizing the gas fields at Sha'er, near Palmyra, on July 19, 2014.⁶⁸

Before its campaigns in Iraq and Syria conclude, ISIS will also need to set conditions for further territorial expansion. The projection of force and control into remote Anbar, in areas such as Rutba, Nukhaib, and the Jordanian/Saudi border region of Anbar, suggest that ISIS will also set conditions to move south, with Jordan a major target. ISIS will not likely sequence military expansion out of Iraq and Syria ahead of the destruction of the Iraqi state, but the ISIS military strategy in Iraq must be sufficient to set conditions for future campaigns. Conditions likely include the formation of a cadre of future expeditionary military leaders, as the recent *Dabiq* magazine suggested by drawing a parallel to the al-Qaeda formative experience in Afghanistan.⁶⁹

A CENTER OF GRAVITY ANALYSIS OF ISIS

The purpose of studying the political vision, grand strategy, and military strategy of ISIS is to allow the framing of a counter-strategy. A counter-strategy requires knowledge of the enemy's sources of power that allow him to act and factor continuously into his strategic calculus. The critical elements of strategic power possessed by ISIS are identifiable through analysis of its military strategy. The elements of strategic power are doctrinally expressed through a study of an enemy's Center of Gravity. Center of Gravity is a strategic construct introduced by Carl von Clausewitz to describe the primary source of an enemy's strength. The identification of enemy Centers of Gravity emerged into the military craft through the following passage of his master work, *On War*:

“Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.”⁷⁰

Center of Gravity studies have been expanded in the context of U.S. military planning doctrine to include Critical Capabilities, Critical Requirements, and Critical Vulnerabilities as additional expressions of Strategic Power with which to evaluate a military enemy. (See Table 1)

Critical Capabilities are essentially the enemy's means; Critical Requirements are his constraints; and Critical Vulnerabilities are his deficiencies. These concrete planning factors translate directly into an enemy's strategy, and they can be targeted directly to achieve linear battlefield effects. A Center of Gravity, on the other hand, requires a broader understanding of the behavior of the

Table 1: Elements of Strategic Power ⁷¹

CENTER OF GRAVITY	The source of power that provides [an enemy with] moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act.
CRITICAL CAPABILITIES	A means that is considered a crucial enabler for a center of gravity to function and is essential to the accomplishment of the specified or assumed objective(s).
CRITICAL REQUIREMENTS	An essential condition, resource, or means for a critical capability to be fully operational.
CRITICAL VULNERABILITIES	An aspect of a critical requirement which is deficient or vulnerable to direct or indirect attack that will create decisive or significant effects.

enemy system, and thus it requires a comprehensive assessment of the other elements of the enemy's strategic power. Targeting a Center of Gravity achieves nonlinear destructive effects against an enemy. This study will therefore identify the Critical Capabilities, Critical Requirements, and Critical Vulnerabilities of ISIS before providing an assessment of its Centers of Gravity, which may be targeted in order to achieve exponential effects upon ISIS. This study will also identify Critical Opportunities that ISIS may seek to exploit in order to identify the full range of opportunities available to the U.S. to design a strategy for ISIS's defeat.

Conducting a Center of Gravity analysis of ISIS provides the theoretical basis to design a counter-strategy. A political-military strategy to *destroy* ISIS depends upon an accurate estimate of its Critical Capabilities. (see Table 2) A political-military strategy to *disrupt* ISIS depends upon an estimate of its Critical Requirements, Critical Vulnerabilities, and Critical Opportunities. A strategy to *defeat* ISIS depends upon an estimate for its Centers of Gravity and grand strategy. This study is therefore a practical one, to extrapolate from the ISIS military strategy the necessary components that will allow the enemies of ISIS to form a counter-strategy.

CRITICAL CAPABILITIES

A Critical Capability is an essential means to accomplishing strategic objectives that is considered a crucial enabler for a center of gravity to function.⁷³ While the ISIS Centers of Gravity will be validated later in this study, it is important first to take inventory of the essential means displayed within the ISIS strategy thus far. ISIS demonstrates critical capabilities in the arenas of military campaign design, military force generation, political campaign design, and local governance.

The denial of one or more of these critical capabilities will *destroy* the synergy of ISIS military-political power.

Military Campaign Design

ISIS is able to design and execute military campaigns at the strategic and operational levels. ISIS is able to plan, adjust, consolidate, and initiate phased campaigns.⁷⁴ ISIS is able to designate main efforts and distribute manpower and materiel across fronts.⁷⁵ This critical capability is built upon a number of collective competencies, including command and control, hybridized warfare, and maneuver. ISIS has been able to leverage this capability to seize military and urban terrain in Iraq and Syria,⁷⁶ and to conduct offensives across multiple fronts sequentially,⁷⁷ setting the terms of battle across several fronts at once. ISIS has also overcome tactical failures with this operational and strategic resilience, most prominently the loss of urban terrain in Syria's Idlib and Aleppo provinces in January 2014.⁷⁸ The organization has also designed and leveraged its military successes to achieve grand strategic objectives, including the announcement of the Caliphate.

Military Force Generation

ISIS is able to grow its fighting force. ISIS is able to increase manpower through prison breaks, foreign fighter flows, and increasingly through local recruitment, based upon recent reports from Mosul. Local youth are reportedly joining ISIS,⁷⁹ and ISIS has reportedly constituted a police force in Mosul that may hold increased appeal because ISIS is able to pay salaries,⁸⁰ whereas the government of Iraq can no longer.⁸¹ By broadcasting a message of military victory, ISIS is able to

Table 2: Tactical Mission Tasks ⁷²

DEFEAT	A tactical mission task that occurs when an enemy force has temporarily or permanently lost the physical means or the will to fight.
DESTROY	A tactical mission task that physically renders an enemy force combat-ineffective until it is reconstituted.
DISRUPT	A tactical mission task in which a commander integrates direct and indirect fires, terrain, and obstacles to upset an enemy's formation or tempo, to interrupt his timetable, or cause his forces to commit prematurely or attack in a piecemeal fashion.

sustain and grow its notoriety and treasury, both of which translate to an increased tangible basis of recruitment. ISIS not only recruits on the basis of religious justification, but also through a promise of real and imminent success. This is an important distinction between ISIS and other global jihadist groups, such as al-Qaeda, and it suggests a path by which ISIS may gain influence at al-Qaeda's expense. ISIS recruits not only on the basis of religious justification, but also on the basis of its military might. The message of military victory and the promise of real control have been the primary drivers of support to ISIS, preserving the fundamental sequence of the ISIS grand strategy to establish physical control first.

Political Campaign Design

ISIS is also able to translate military victories into political success through an aggressive and pro-active information campaign. The ISIS social media strategy has been widely recognized as superior among professional organizations, with Twitter hashtag campaigns to capture the entire World Cup audience,⁸² for example, and an extensive English-language magazine series to describe post-war life within the Islamic Caliphate.⁸³ Through the combined activities of local media offices that distribute leaflets in Iraq and Syria as well as a worldwide digital information strategy including print, video, and social media, ISIS has been able to broadcast a political campaign that maximizes their argumentation, appeal, and reach. Inside Syria, the messaging campaign is also delivered through Dawa religious outreach gatherings,⁸⁴ and ISIS has represented itself as the champion of Iraq's Sunnis throughout the anti-government protest movement that preceded the current uprising.⁸⁵ This political campaign is strategic rather than opportunistic. The timing of the declaration of the Islamic Caliphate in conjunction with a carefully timed military campaign demonstrates the unison of the political and military designs.

Sustain Control of Large Urban Centers

ISIS has demonstrated over time the ability to sustain control of urban centers in Raqqa and Aleppo provinces in Syria. The methods employed by ISIS to establish and sustain this control include the establishment of a local religious police force, Shari'a law, religious schools, reconstruction projects, and food distribution.⁸⁶ ISIS has also begun to administer some of these functions in Iraq, most recently establishing a police force within Mosul.⁸⁷ Their methods are largely coercive, but recently ISIS has also implemented a phased urban control strategy that involves displacing the urban population in order to establish control by effectively selecting a population.⁸⁸ The Islamic Caliphate most recently demonstrated this in Deir ez-Zour, Syria, but reports after the initial fall of Mosul also indicate that civilians were allowed to evacuate the city.⁸⁹ ISIS social control within urban centers that now comprise the Islamic Caliphate is enhanced by the emigration of fighters, professionals, and families to settle, whom ISIS is actively recruiting.⁹⁰ The recruitment of an immigrant population diminishes the requirement for ISIS to control the indigenous population. ISIS control of urban centers is also based upon its ability to keep urban systems running, which is enhanced by the acquisition of a wide array of technical skills through immigration or coercion.

CRITICAL REQUIREMENTS

Critical Requirements describe the enemy's necessary conditions, resources, and means.⁹¹ In order to succeed in its military campaign in Iraq, ISIS requires continued military success, alliances, combat service support, and religious authority. The denial of one of these Critical Requirements will *disrupt* the ability of ISIS to proceed with its present political-military strategy.

Likelihood of Victory

ISIS depends upon continued military success. By linking the declaration of an Islamic Caliphate to military victories, and by describing control of terrain as a necessary precursor to establish political and religious authority, ISIS has exposed a dependency upon the condition of continued military success. ISIS must continue to achieve military victories in order to remain legitimate. ISIS must be able to defend the territory within the Islamic Caliphate, like a modern state, or it is vulnerable to counter-argumentation that its control is insufficient to support its political aims. ISIS must also continue to expand and to form buffer zones that compromise bordering state security, or modern states will mount armies and alliances to challenge the legitimacy of the Islamic Caliphate and its right to hold territory.

By declaring the Islamic Caliphate as a physical presence, ISIS has to develop statecraft and defend this terrain. This makes ISIS more brittle from a strategic perspective. In the meantime, it also reinforces social control, as civilians living within cities that ISIS now controls are discouraged from mounting a resistance movement. ISIS requires the bandwagoning effect of victory⁹² as well as its deterrent effect to sustain its military campaign and defend the Islamic Caliphate. A senior Ba'athist official in attendance at a meeting of Sunni tribal and Salafist leaders in Jordan on July 16, 2014 highlighted the passive alliance with ISIS that stems from its military victory: "Now the Islamic State is fighting and has scored victories and helped revolutionaries in achieving their goals ... we are almost in harmony with them in achieving our goals."⁹³

Alliances

In Iraq, ISIS is fighting alongside local allies that include Sunni insurgents and Ba'athists. ISIS has leveraged these alliances to overcome the ISF in Iraq and to establish a zone devoid of state security. ISIS will require the continued cooperation of these groups in order to consolidate control. It is unclear whether Sunni nationalists and tribal militias in Iraq will tolerate ISIS long term; or seek to wrest control from ISIS in the wake of its military advance.⁹⁴ Given the historical mobilization of Iraqi Sunni tribes in the Awakening (sahwa) movement against AQI, the ideological and nationalist goals of some groups may interfere with ISIS's long-term social control. ISIS has guarded against such outcomes through a preemptive assassination campaign to target Sahwa members and influential leaders who might encourage resistance.⁹⁵

But the role that former Baathist leadership might play in the unfolding war in Iraq is still in question. On July 13, 2014, Izzat al-Douri, former vice president to Saddam Hussein, congratulated ISIS on wresting control of Iraq's Sunni areas

from the Maliki government and condoned the campaign to liberate Baghdad.⁹⁶ With similar language, Iraqi Salafist clerics and prominent tribal leaders who met in Jordan on July 16, 2014 describe their cause not as one to resist ISIS, but one to overthrow the Shi'a government of Iraq permanently.⁹⁷ These events diminish the likelihood that Iraq's mobilized Sunni opposition will form a counter-ISIS resistance force. In Syria, ISIS does not have an ally in the Sunni opposition. Local alliances are therefore a critical requirement for ISIS only in the limited context of Iraq, and potentially only for a short time.

Combat Service Support

ISIS is transitioning from military to political control within a bounded physical space. Throughout this transition, ISIS is dependent upon the military institutions to sustain its offensive and defensive military effort. These institutions require combat support, such as intelligence, engineering, and signal; as well as combat service support, including logistics, supply, human resources, and finance. It is possible to examine what tactical and operational tasks ISIS is able to perform in terms of its military, government, development, and outreach functions, and understand what support functions ISIS requires in order to sustain its various efforts.

The operational and strategic depth of ISIS belies the depth of its supporting institutions. These critical requirements are not particularly vulnerable to disruption because of their depth. However, the operational presence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria requires interior and exterior lines of communication to facilitate the distribution of resources, manpower, information, and finance across the full expanse of its operational and support zones. These physical connections are vulnerable to disruption at several key points, particularly where ISIS has yet to complete its outer ring of Sunni heartland control. The most essential artery for internal communication within the ISIS area of operations in Iraq is a road that U.S. forces named Route Phoenix, which stretches across the Jazeera desert from Baiji to Haditha. Baiji is key terrain for ISIS not only because of the oil refinery, but also because it is the crossroads by which ISIS is able to transit across Iraq.

Religious Authority

ISIS requires religious authority in order to preserve the core nature of the Islamic Caliphate. Ideology is not a Center of Gravity of ISIS, nor a Critical Capability, because ISIS can proceed with the practical elements of its grand strategy even when its religious argumentation or acceptance is deficient. ISIS has the means to establish physical control of terrain and inflict coercive social control regardless of whether its actions

are perceived to be justified through religion. However, the manner in which ISIS has chosen to achieve social control is through religious indoctrination. ISIS cultivates its religious outreach through *Dawa* outreach, religious instruction, and a proactive strategic messaging campaign.⁹⁸

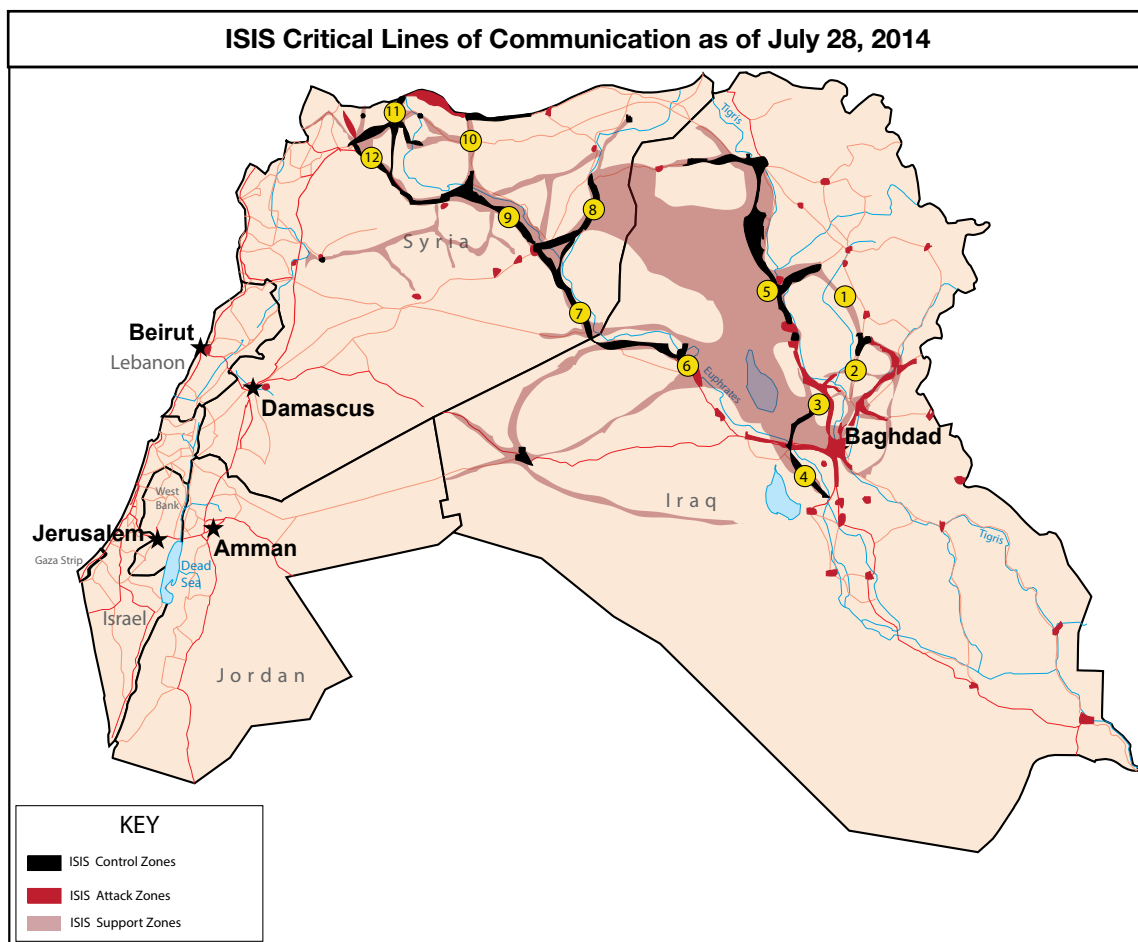
Without religion, ISIS is just another regime. ISIS requires religious authority also to enforce the conditions of the religious state that it means to construct and maintain. In Raqqa, ISIS endows its Hizba religious police force with a particular mandate to uphold these standards and buttress this social control. ISIS also requires religious authority in order to capture the global jihadist movement, which is a critical requirement for the Islamic Caliphate to connect to the Ummah in the wake of the “fitnah,” or discord, among ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and al-Qaeda Emir Ayman al-Zawahiri. ISIS cannot legitimize its religious state in terms of the Ummah without a claim to religious authority. In this way, religion plays a practical role in the facilitation of ISIS statecraft.

CRITICAL VULNERABILITIES

Critical Vulnerabilities describe the Critical Requirements of the enemy that are deficient or exposed, or the externalities that inherently weaken an enemy.⁹⁹ The Critical Vulnerabilities of ISIS derive from its established strength. The scope of its operations, the heterogeneity of its leadership, and the depth of its institutions also generate vulnerabilities. ISIS additionally contends with vulnerabilities that will befall its future goals if it is not able to rise to the level of global resonance that it seeks to establish. The exploitation of these Critical Vulnerabilities will *disrupt* the ability of ISIS to proceed with its present political-military strategy.

Scope

ISIS is vulnerable to over-extension, deriving from the Critical Requirement to support an extended military campaign across



The above map depicts the interior lines of communication that are essential to ISIS command and control and combat service support.

multiple fronts. ISIS is less vulnerable than its domestic adversaries, such as the Iraqi Security Forces, and this relative overmatch has allowed ISIS to launch simultaneous offensives on multiple fronts to divide opposing forces and limit their ability to concentrate a counter-offensive. However, ISIS is also vulnerable in its own arrayed position. ISIS has ground forces positioned from the Iranian border in northern Diyala to Rutba and eastern Homs province in Syria. The physical footprint of ISIS is extensive, and ISIS is vulnerable where it is not able to maintain robust internal lines of communication. Furthermore, as counter-offensives are launched against them, ISIS will incur geographic vulnerabilities to some military positions if it redistributes forces to reinforce troops in contact. Early reports as of July 19, 2014 indicate that ISIS has reinforced the fight against the ISF in Tikrit by drawing forces from Mosul.¹⁰⁰ Other groups such as JRTN (Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqah al-Naqshabandia) may exploit this vulnerability by seizing control of urban terrain left minimally guarded by ISIS. ISIS may in turn take steps to co-opt other groups and accelerate its force generation in order to minimize this vulnerability. The ISIS capacity to fund rapid expansion can both ameliorate and exacerbate this condition.

Leadership Fissures

ISIS has been able to reconstitute several generations of leadership that had been building strength and numbers in prisons. The re-gathering of leaders and fighters from former eras creates another force multiplier for ISIS that also generates a critical vulnerability. ISIS has robust military institutions and can deliver sophisticated military campaigns to synchronize effects across multiple fronts; but ISIS is also heterogeneous, with extreme disparities among the layer shared experiences of its membership; over such a large campaign, ISIS is vulnerable to leadership cleavages as a result. Nevertheless, ISIS has already demonstrated the successful combination of disparate styles of warfare, ranging from terrorism to guerilla warfare, combined arms attacks, and conventional maneuver. The ability to prosecute hybridized warfare is a demonstrated capability of ISIS that functionally overcomes its vulnerability to leadership cleavages. This ability to implement multiple styles provides ISIS with a range of tools and solutions that may defeat monolithic counter-strategies, especially to reestablish control over Mosul and Raqqa.

Alliance Deterioration

The time will likely come when Iraqi Sunni nationalists will desire to confront ISIS in battle. ISIS is ideological, ISIS is brutal, and people generally do not like them. The prospect of a Sunni counter-offensive against ISIS is still fresh, given the effective Syrian opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra push to drive ISIS from Idlib and Aleppo in January 2014. While

ISIS is consolidating strength, it is vulnerable to this kind of disruption in its rear area, especially between Raqqa and Mosul, where there are still populations that desire to resist. However, these forces are rapidly demonstrating the opposite behavior. The tribes in Deir ez-Zour province in Syria are surrendering under ISIS's terms because they see that ISIS has military overmatch. If local populations cannot mount an effective resistance to ISIS, then they likely will not attempt to do so. Their lack of capability to win in battle against ISIS may cause this deficiency in ISIS's ideological appeal never to actualize as a critical vulnerability, though there have been several reports in eastern Iraq of Sunni insurgents, likely JRTN, clashing with ISIS.¹⁰¹ Instead, active and passive alliances are likely to expand while ISIS consolidates its own strength further. ISIS is vulnerable to alliance deterioration, but potentially only for a short time while its control of new cities is still fresh.

Bureaucracy

The transition from a terrorist network to a military institution has likely imposed constraints upon ISIS. Developing institutions also means developing bureaucracy, including procedural normalization, process establishment, and repeatable workflows. These business practices are difficult to advance, and they increase the signature of the ISIS military and governance institutions and make them more visible to enemy forces. Bureaucracy also accelerates leadership cleavages. These vulnerabilities expand further as the ISIS military apparatus develops norms to relate to the political and religious institutions that exercise governance and social control within the Islamic Caliphate. The same practices and instruments that must bring ISIS together at a grand strategic level also increase its physical vulnerability to enemy targeting. ISIS is likely practiced in the preservation of operational security from the AQI fighting experience against coalition forces; however, once an organization becomes as large as ISIS today, it also becomes more visible, more fixed, and more rigid in its repeatable processes. Bureaucracy and convention lock ISIS into positional warfare, making ISIS vulnerable in a way that AQI never was.

Competing Religious Voices

ISIS must also compete within the Salafist constellation of vocal actors in order to legitimize the Islamic Caliphate on a religious plane. The recent rejection of the ISIS Caliphate by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, former religious guide to AQI emir Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, is one such source of religious vulnerability for ISIS.¹⁰² Other al-Qaeda affiliates such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have also spoken out against the ISIS Caliphate, referencing Maqdisi and calling on Islamic scholars to deliver a cohesive message.¹⁰³ The

longstanding conflict between Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS in Syria generated a rift and thereby a vulnerability for the entire global jihadist community. Although ISIS may gain ground relative to other groups because of its tangible victories, ISIS is a member of this community, and the ability to influence the broader movement is compromised by a lack of consensus among Islamic scholars and al-Qaeda leaders in ISIS's favor. ISIS may work to overcome this vulnerability by encouraging other al-Qaeda leaders to adopt its system, which ISIS can claim to produce tangible results. Without their approval, however, ISIS is vulnerable to internal competition.

Competing Regional Militaries

The performance of state security forces in Iraq and Syria against ISIS has called into question whether other state armies in the Middle East are capable to defend their sovereign territory. Jordan and Lebanon will likely face attacks by ISIS that will test their defense capabilities. The ISIS expressed endgame is to hold sacred sites inside Saudi Arabia additionally. It is important to estimate where ISIS may face military overmatch by other forces in order to estimate the ways in which its meticulously sequenced military strategy is vulnerable to preemption. The presence of formidable regional militaries, such as Iran, Turkey, and the GCC, is a strategic vulnerability of ISIS in the pursuit of a grand strategy that begins with military conquest. ISIS will need to defend its acquired territory from these states, should they choose to intervene against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. ISIS will also need to formulate a strategy for further expansion that compromises the military capabilities of these states, or holds them at bay in buffer zones that capitalize upon priorities other than border integrity that these states will seek to preserve with greater vigor.

CENTERS OF GRAVITY

“Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.”¹⁰⁴

Clausewitz implied a strategy for targeting an enemy's Center of Gravity with maximum force as a means to achieve decisive victory. Many scholars have since argued that Centers of Gravity need not be concrete, which complicates the formulation of asymmetric military counter-strategies to concentrate fire and destroy them. In the case of ISIS, there are multiple Centers of Gravity, a situation which creates both a challenge and an opportunity for the strategic counter-planner. The challenge is that political and military efforts cannot be maximally applied upon two Centers of Gravity at

once and still abide by the principle to concentrate one's own force to target an enemy Center of Gravity.

The opportunity emerges from the fundamental need for an enemy with two Centers of Gravity to maintain a synergy between these poles. If two gravitational poles stabilize the enemy macro-system within, and those poles fall out of perfect alignment, then a grand strategic vulnerability emerges. The vulnerability does not destroy the organization, but it causes cascading vulnerabilities to erupt. Accelerating this effect is a potential strategic objective of a counter-strategy driven by the Centers of Gravity of ISIS. ISIS has two capabilities-based Centers of Gravity; a Military capacity to destroy modern states; and a Political capacity to control an Islamic Caliphate. The ISIS political vision rests upon their combination. The core strength of ISIS is its ability to deliver war and state function. It may be possible to de-couple these Centers of Gravity as a means to compromise the integrity of the ISIS grand strategy.

The Military

The ISIS military is a classical Center of Gravity. It is an institution comprised of many layers of tactical, operational, and strategic capability, and it is expertly led. The ISIS military campaign belies the brilliance of its military leadership. The ISIS military strategy in Iraq and campaign cohesion have been more sophisticated and more successful than that of any other force with which they have come into violent contact. This strategic capability now also extends into Syria, evidenced most powerfully in the offensive to seize control of urban terrain and oil fields in Deir ez-Zour province. The warcraft and multi-front campaign cohesion of ISIS generate strength for the Islamic Caliphate, and relative superiority over the other military forces they have thus far faced in battle. The military itself, a function of many applied strengths, is a Center of Gravity. The military of the Islamic Caliphate has



The above image of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is taken from a video posted by ISIS on July 5, 2014 of his speech at a mosque in Mosul, appearing in public as Caliph Ibrahim.

set conditions in both Iraq and Syria in order to ensure that victories will continue to support political aims.

Political Control

ISIS derives strength from a second Center of Gravity, one that comprises the statecraft of the Islamic Caliphate. The Islamic Caliphate announced by ISIS is not only an idea; it is a religious polity that sits atop major cities and operates a framework to govern a religious urban society. The Islamic Caliphate is personified by Caliph Ibrahim, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. But the Islamic State created by ISIS is a political entity comprised of much more. The Islamic State is operational, with functional institutions, governance, laws, executors, and citizens.¹⁰⁵ It generates rather than draws strength from ISIS. The state produces a different kind of energy than does the ISIS military. The state promises life after war and right governance. The estimate of ISIS's capability to govern draws primarily from ISIS messaging about life in Aleppo and Raqqa, which is likely divorced from reality and thereby vulnerable to counter-messaging. Nevertheless, ISIS controls major cities, some of them now for several months. Its territory is contiguous. Populations that remain within are attending mosques. This state is not only a place for martyrs to come and die. ISIS is fashioning a new form of religious statecraft. The ISIS system for political control is a second center of gravity.

CRITICAL OPPORTUNITIES

Sectarian Civil War

ISIS has adapted its political and military strategy to shifting events in Iraq and Syria. Where conditions are not primed for its advance, ISIS has demonstrated the ability to adjust its strategy to accelerate or induce optimal conditions. This has proven true in Iraq, where ISIS targeted Shi'a civilians in Baghdad viciously for over a year¹⁰⁶ in order to accelerate a sectarian response by the Iraqi Security Forces, especially against the anti-government protest movement ignited against PM Maliki in December 2012.¹⁰⁷ The protest movement provided ISIS with more opportunities to exacerbate the sectarian divide in Iraq, which it exploited. Sectarian civil wars provide ISIS with unrivaled opportunity to pursue governance and control where neither a regime nor an opposition is willing to mass forces. The condition of sectarian or civil war in Syria and now Iraq is an exogenous advantage for ISIS, but one ISIS also targeted strategically. It is important to estimate what other Critical Opportunities may lend ISIS new advantage. ISIS is likely to prompt them if they do not occur naturally.

Kurdish Independence

An additional opportunity that ISIS may exploit is the prospect of an imminently independent Iraqi Kurdistan. An independent Kurdistan that pursues autonomy while the ISIS Caliphate remains is compromised in its opportunity to pursue a joint military strategy with the government of Iraq and external actors, such as the U.S., that are determined to keep Iraq unified. An independent Kurdistan would contravene this intent and complicate hypothetical military support by disrupting close cooperation between the U.S., the Iraqi federal government, and allies. The Kurdish Peshmerga may fight, but would be more likely to do so alone instead of in concert with partners. Furthermore, an independent Kurdistan would reinforce a mutual border with the Islamic Caliphate. ISIS may attack Kurdish forces or engage Kurdish interests in a way that accelerates the KRG's pursuit of independence in order to secure this condition.

A Syrian Rump State

Similarly, it is possible that ISIS could buttress its western flank against the Assad regime by attacking in a way that causes Assad to form a de facto border with ISIS. On July 17, 2014, ISIS attacked a gas field in eastern Homs province, seizing a facility that had been under regime control.¹⁰⁸ ISIS may have done this in order to shore up a buffer zone against the Syrian regime. Syrian regime investment of military resources along the ISIS front would stretch the regime's ability to apply force elsewhere, and may thereby expose more opportunities for ISIS to pursue strategic military campaign goals in Syria. Alternately, if the Assad regime were to negotiate an end to the Syrian war in order to confront ISIS, the battle plan would inherently involve the defense of the central corridor and Latakia rather than the whole of Syria. Political measures by the Assad regime will therefore have the same affect upon ISIS as an autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan. ISIS may attack the Assad regime in a way that causes them to shore up a core central defense.

A Fight Against America

ISIS is likely looking for ways to exploit the opportunity to galvanize support within the global jihadist community. ISIS may posture to capitalize upon U.S. military involvement in Iraq or Syria with a strategic message for other fighters to come fight the Americans in Iraq. ISIS has the ability to design political campaigns that convert military disadvantages into political strengths. ISIS may increase its international terrorism posture or cultivate relationships with future leaders of external jihadist cells by bringing them into Iraq and Syria for a time. With these most dangerous scenarios in mind, it is likely that ISIS would respond to U.S. active

military involvement in Iraq in a way that would maximize its leadership of a movement that is fundamentally anti-U.S. Absent this opportunity, ISIS may seek to accomplish this goal in other ways, namely through direct attacks against the west. ISIS will likely make this argument ultimately, whether or not the U.S. engages in Iraq or Syria at this time.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

America's national security interests require both the destruction of ISIS's military apparatus and the preservation of the boundaries of the modern states in the Middle East against the brazen advance of this global Jihadist group. ISIS presents a threat to all modern states in this way. It is therefore vital to find a path to *defeat* ISIS. Establishing limited objectives to disrupt, limit, or contain ISIS are not sufficient to address the present threat, which already overcomes state boundaries and controls critical infrastructure that are important to neighboring states. A strategy to defeat ISIS translates to a discussion about its Centers of Gravity, which can be approached one of three ways: to defeat the ISIS military; to deny ISIS political control; or to break the synergy of these two essential poles.

Destroy the ISIS Military Center of Gravity

The U.S. might consider ways to destroy the military Center of Gravity of ISIS. History has taught us, however, that the destruction of the ISIS military may not lead to the organization's overall defeat, which is consistent with the idea that ISIS possesses more than one Center of Gravity. The fighting force of AQI was destroyed once before, in 2008 after the Battle of Mosul. AQI reconstituted in 2011 despite this, as the organization maintained some leadership and fighting force at large. Nevertheless, there are ways to design a military counter-strategy in support of an overall campaign of effort to precipitate the defeat of ISIS that operationalize the assessment offered in this report. The observations that follow frame operational and strategic objectives that the U.S. might consider as it inventories available means to contend with the ISIS threat.

Target ISIS Military Capabilities

ISIS has a critical capability to design military campaigns that outmatch those of rival militaries in Iraq and Syria, but those military strategies can be overmatched by U.S. strategists, planners, and advisors. It is possible to design tactical and operational military campaigns to overturn the opportunity for ISIS to claim imminent military victory. It is possible to cause ISIS to begin to lose. Deflating its strategic messaging by proving its propaganda false and the organization vulnerable may achieve nonlinear effects to disrupt ISIS. The pursuit of limited military

objectives is, however, only a supporting effort. Destroying the ISIS military in Raqqa and Mosul is necessary to destroy the ISIS military overall. It is also likely to incur intensive collateral damage, and is therefore high risk to exacerbate a sectarian or civil war in Iraq. Nothing short of these military objectives will have more than a disruptive effect upon ISIS.

Target ISIS Critical Requirements

Targeting the combat service support of ISIS is relatively linear and low risk; however, because ISIS is extremely developed in this regard, it is not likely to achieve strategic disruptive effects without intensive investment. It is possible to target the interior and exterior LOCs (lines of communication) and fixed sites used by ISIS with intelligence-supported airstrikes. But this approach, designed to disrupt terrorist networks on the run, is at best also only a supporting effort. Breaking ISIS tactical alliances, on the other hand, may generate a guerilla-style threat within the rear area of the Islamic Caliphate that is more likely to disrupt ISIS strategically.¹⁰⁹ Encouraging such a resistance movement among the Sunnis in Iraq and Syria at this time would require political measures in parallel to minimize or curtail conditions that exacerbate further civil or sectarian war. It is also possible to designate tactical objectives that invalidate and compromise the territorial integrity of the Islamic Caliphate before it is able to form fully; by bolstering the defenses of the Baiji oil refinery and Ramadi, for example.

Target ISIS Critical Vulnerabilities

When the capabilities of external militaries are applied to the security situations of Iraq and Syria, ISIS is vulnerable to over-extension after all. It is possible to tax the scope of its military campaign, to pin it down on multiple fronts, and expose the maximum extent of its ability to re-distribute and reinforce. ISIS has strategic depth, but not infinite depth. It also relies upon robust and repeatable processes, which are vulnerable to heavy interdiction. It is possible to target the fixed sites and repeatable processes of ISIS. This is also a supporting effort to cause the ISIS military campaign to culminate, thus achieving strategic objectives to overcome the political advantages ISIS enjoyed because of successive military victories.

Prevent ISIS from Establishing Lasting Political Control

ISIS is too young to have a permanent capital that can be denied. But it does have political control with large urban centers like Mosul and Raqqa that can be denied. The most direct means to undermine the ISIS state would be to destroy the state institutions it seeks to build. However, these institutions fall within great cities, such as Mosul and Raqqa,

which ISIS already controls. Destroying ISIS state-building efforts in these areas may not be an acceptable strategic objective if it involves destroying the cities themselves, or harming the remaining population within. It may be possible to undermine ISIS's opportunity to capitalize upon a strategic messaging campaign that broadcasts state-building efforts to the outside world. But this is a supporting effort, rather than a main effort to prevent the permanent formation of the ISIS Caliphate.

It may be possible to exploit ISIS's political vulnerabilities, such as leadership fissures that manifest during state formation and general popular dissent with the brutality of ISIS rule. The greatest opportunity to erode ISIS state formation is to encourage the mobilization of a Sunni resistance movement. If ISIS cannot expel or control the population inside the Islamic Caliphate, then it cannot purport to have sound governance. This material threat to ISIS is reduced, however, if ISIS possesses military overmatch against every potential resistance force in the Sunni heartland of Iraq and Syria. In this way, military force may be essential to the development of political strategies to undermine ISIS's second center of gravity. It may be possible to emphasize the religious illegitimacy of ISIS, but this is likely the least feasible and less directly useful messaging objective. ISIS is able to assert religious authority because of its military and political capacity to control. These are the capacities that must be addressed if the ISIS Caliphate is to be overcome.

Deny ISIS Critical Opportunities

An important way to undermine the practical formation of the Islamic Caliphate is to deny necessary Critical Opportunities enumerated in this report. One of the primary policy opportunities for the U.S. to contend with ISIS indirectly is to buttress the region against a cascade of conditions in favor of ISIS. Denying the exogenous critical opportunities to ISIS is a way to limit its further advance. For example, mitigating the conditions of sectarian or civil war in Iraq and Syria would theoretically deny ISIS the freedom of action to confront governments and opposition movements that face off against each other.

In Syria, it is difficult to image a manner in which a Syrian outcome can be reached that does not favor ISIS. This opportunity may still exist in Iraq, but because a low level civil war in Iraq is already active, this is not a question of preventing a war, but stopping one that has already begun.

It is also necessary to support a Sunni force and a Kurdish force, if the U.S. is also to support the ISF, as a way for the military strategy to support the political strategy. An independent Kurdistan while ISIS exists endorses ISIS.

[Instead, a joint military campaign to counter-ISIS that involves the Peshmerga and supports Iraqi Kurdish political goals after the Islamic Caliphate is defeated and Iraq sovereignty is reinstated is both more likely to succeed and less vulnerable to ISIS political messaging. Otherwise, the Peshmerga will have to face an ISIS neighbor state on their own, knowing that their economy depends upon the same infrastructure that ISIS is inclined to pursue.

Break the Synergy between the ISIS Military and Political Centers of Gravity

Targeting only one ISIS Center of Gravity is possible, but not recommended. Instead, it is possible to de-couple the two ISIS centers of gravity and capitalize upon ways in which the military strategy and political strategy may diverge. It is possible to cause the elements of power that were brought into most careful alignment and synergy by ISIS to become disrupted and de-linked. It may also be possible to use counter-messaging, not to erode ISIS's religious legitimacy, but to cause the Islamic state and its methodology to look brittle, weak, and nonviable. More importantly, it is possible to cause the political and military masterminds within ISIS to feel differently about its present situations and next steps. This is an important opportunity to develop a counter-strategy against ISIS that will do more than disrupt or ineffectively target either the political or military centers of gravity of ISIS.

The key potential divergence among the perspectives of political and military leaders within ISIS that can be exploited is the timing of political milestone events. For example, ISIS declared the formation of the Islamic Caliphate immediately following key military victories, but also in the middle of an ongoing military campaign. A military organization might find problematic the development of political order while a war is still ongoing. A political organization might find problematic the variable nature of war that halts further political progress. It may be possible to develop a means by which to pull the military and political strategies of ISIS in different directions by bombarding them with challenges that exploit its core differences and nascent process-supported interaction.

CONCLUSION

ISIS is operating in both military and political spheres to achieve its objective to form an Islamic Caliphate. A counter-strategy to defeat ISIS has to be just as sophisticated. It is necessary to approach the subject of strategy formulation with a sound estimate for the basis of ISIS's strength, its endgame, as well as its strategies applied in Iraq and Syria

thus far. Without this understanding, it might be possible to miss what will actually happen if U.S. political and military means are misapplied to the current problem.

For example, it may be dangerous to U.S. interests in the Middle East, which include preventing Iranian expansion and further humanitarian disaster, to conduct airstrikes against ISIS positions in northern Iraq without knowledge for what broader strategy that effort will support. Airstrikes into the Sunni heartland of Iraq or Syria may exacerbate the sectarian conflict in the region by illustrating a passive or active alignment of the U.S. with Iran in order to bring firepower to bear against Sunnis. This can be mitigated by conducting tribal outreach and engagement within the Sunni heartland, and also developing a parallel strategy with Iraq's Kurdish population, but all of these component actions must be fashioned together as part of a comprehensive strategy that will neither injure the people of Iraq and Syria further, nor encourage Iranian or ISIS's expansion. The identification of means that the U.S. may apply is only a start; determining what national security objectives our strategy must support is the real requirement before us.

At the same time, it is gravely important to consider that a decision to take no action against the ISIS Caliphate will guarantee its permanent formation. If ISIS is allowed to remain, then Iraq and Syria as we know them will never recover. The prospect of a post-state actor that can destroy other states through military force and then abstain from the modern state system is a threat to all modern states, including the U.S. The prospect of an Islamic Caliphate that causes regional actors in the Middle East such as Iran to take up defensive positions that run contrary to U.S. interests is another consequence to avoid. It is also important to regard the sanctuary provided to the global jihadist community within an ISIS-controlled Caliphate, which seeks an endgame that requires the destruction of the West.

Denying ISIS these opportunities through political counter-strategies is an important policy goal. Defeating the ISIS military, however, requires that some ground force be able to overmatch ISIS's sources of power, to target its deficiencies, and to out-manuever ISIS in battle. Both strategies depend upon a unified effort among Iraq's Shi'a, Sunnis, and Kurds that overcomes ethno-sectarian divisions. It also requires a pragmatic end to the Syrian war. These counter-strategies cannot be meaningfully pursued in the context of a sectarian or civil war in either Iraq or Syria. The sequence of political and military strategies therefore require first to balance support to the Iraqi state, Iraq's disenfranchised and mobilized Sunnis, and Iraq's Kurds, and also to see U.S. stated objectives in Syria through to completion.

The scope of potential action that the U.S. could take to address the ISIS Caliphate in Iraq and Syria includes many

options that may very well constitute meaningful supporting efforts. But the reality of the present threat is that a main effort in Raqqa and Mosul is required to defeat ISIS. Military action will be required by a capable ground force to overcome ISIS in these cities, and political action is likely required to secure Iraq and Syria against their further exploitation by ISIS. The Islamic Caliphate will not be subdued if its military victories in Iraq and Syria continue. Rather, the military force of the Islamic Caliphate will expand to other countries, as emissaries to other militant groups in the region have likely already done. Underestimating the real capability of the military organization will lead instead to the ultimate success of the counter-state that is forming within Iraq and Syria under the banner of the Islamic Caliphate.

Unmitigated, the ISIS threat will grow outside of the scope of possible U.S. action. Other jihadist groups may emulate the ISIS methodology outside of the Middle East if it proves successful. Regional players in the Middle East may not be postured to eliminate the present threat. It is time to consider the ways in which the U.S. may apply political and military means to counter the ISIS threat in its current formation stage.

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