

The Rise and Fall of ISIS: from Evitability to Inevitability

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The Rise and Fall of ISIS: From Evitability to Inevitability

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Introduction

No other development over the past 15 years better epitomizes the clash between and the merger of, modernity and tradition than the rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham), also known as ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or Daesh.¹ Appearing seemingly out of nowhere over the course of 2013-14, the organization captured the attention of international audiences through widely broadcast acts of barbarity, followed by the proclamation of its own state and upending state borders in the process. A longtime observer of Middle Eastern affairs, Patrick Cockburn, wrote that “[t]he birth of the new state is the most radical change to the political geography of the Middle East since the Sykes-Picot Agreement was implemented in the aftermath of the First World War.”² The rise of ISIS has prompted many questions: where did it originate from? How has it been able to establish itself so quickly? Can it actually persist? Can it be defeated? The aim of this study is to understand the organization, its motivations, its inherent weaknesses, as well as its ability to endure. A broader aim is to set out how it could develop as it comes under ever more pressure by regional powers and, in the case of its defeat, how to prevent the arrival of the next ISIS.

This chapter is structured in three sections. In the first section, we look at the origins of ISIS and how and why it came about, centering on the question: what were the circumstances that led to its rise? In the second section, we look at how ISIS sustains itself, how it governs itself, where it derives support from and what its long-term strategy is. In the final section, we look at its inherent weaknesses with regard to how they may provide clues for defeating the organization and how the rise of a successor can be prevented. A key message of this chapter is that ISIS is a ‘child of its time’ and is not destined to persist. Its professed millenarian or eschatological bent is meant to cast the conflict between the Caliphate and the rest of the world as a cosmic battle, but in reality is largely of instrumental value. Also, while its rise could have been prevented, its fall looks all but inevitable, even if it remains unclear what will replace it.

The Origins of ISIS

To some observers, ISIS seemed to appear suddenly and out of nothing.³ Granted, while the organization did not emerge in a linear fashion, it is clear that ISIS is a distinct product of its time, geography and circumstances: it grew out of the convulsions of the war in Iraq (2003-2011), the Arab revolutions (2010-present) and the civil war in Syria (2011-present). More broadly speaking, ISIS is the outgrowth of broader global trends of Islamization that stress the tensions between religiosity and modernity, compounded by an increase in Islamic militancy.

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Understanding the rise of ISIS means needing to understand the historical context of the region. It is no accident that the movement’s ideology is based on seemingly obscure doctrines that find their

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution made by Nicola Houry for providing input and quotations from publications in Arabic.

1. Upon proclamation of their own ‘state’, the organization has referred itself as ‘Islamic State.’ Daesh is the Arabic acronymic equivalent of ISIL: “*Ad-Dawlat Islamiyat fi Iraq wa al-Sham*”.

2. Patrick Cockburn, “Isis Consolidates,” *London Review of Books* 36, no. 16 (August 21, 2014): 3–5. See also Jason Burke, *The New Threat* (London: Penguin, 2015), 91.

3. Anonymous, *The Mystery of Isis* (New York, New York: The New York Review of Books, 2015).

origins in the early days of Islam itself, whose contemporary resonance is the result of the last 200 years of coming to terms with the modern world. Since the time of the invasion of Napoleon in Egypt up to World War I, thinkers and rulers in the Middle East had sought to bring Islam in tune with the modern age. Rather than rejecting Western notions of progress, there had been a genuine belief that Islam could be preserved as a cornerstone of society even in an age of secularism. This thinking was called the Nahda, or Arab renaissance.⁴ However, the dealings of Western countries during and immediately following World War I proved to be a huge disappointment for Arab leaders, since promises of self-determination were never honored.⁵ In various ways, the reputation of Western countries still suffer from the consequences of this monumental betrayal of the Arab cause. Many Muslims concluded that the West and its attendant values could not be trusted and that the solution was to seek renewal in the re-assertion of Islamic norms to guide Arab societies.

This created the backdrop for decades of tugs-of-war between nominally secular and nationalist regimes and Islamist movements across the Middle East. Three developments had a major impact on this dynamic and contributed to the contemporary rise of Islamic militancy. The first was the oil boom in the 1970s, allowing once poor desert states to adopt ways of life that Islamists found reprehensible and further involving western countries in Middle Eastern affairs.⁶ Another key impetus came with the Iranian revolution in 1979, which showed that it was possible to found a state grounded in Islamic precepts.⁷ Another seminal event came ten years later with the Soviet occupation and subsequent withdrawal from Afghanistan, which became the birthplace of Islamic militancy.⁸

Following the attacks of 9/11, the American government decided to launch military campaigns against al-Qaeda, the presumed author of the attacks, in Afghanistan and Iraq. While al-Qaeda was not on the ground in Iraq at the time of the U.S. invasion in 2003, the ensuing years of chaos provided it with an ideal breeding ground to metastasize and to increase its sway in Iraq and beyond.⁹ The subsequent rise of ISIS has been precipitated by two fateful decisions on the part of the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA): the de-Baathification of Iraq’s government and dissolving the Iraqi army. These decisions sowed the seeds for Iraq’s sectarian conflicts (2006-07) that pitted Sunnis against the Shia. The CPA’s decision almost exclusively affected Iraq’s Sunni population. The emerging standoff between Sunnis and Shia clearly played into the hands of al-Qaeda in Iraq which later became Islamic State of Iraq, or ISI. After 2010, various Sunni tribes in Iraq also began to support al-Qaeda affiliated Islamic State in Iraq (ISI, predecessor of ISIS) due to “systematic discrimination, marginalization and a series of broken promises” on the part of the government in Baghdad.¹⁰

It cannot be said that Western powers were not aware of the dangers of escalating instability in Iraq and Syria. A 2012 Pentagon report foresaw the possible rise of an organization such as ISIS: “If the situation unravels (...) this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime.” And so, one observer concluded, “American intelligence saw ISIS coming

4. Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge University Press, 1962).

5. James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France and the Struggle That Shaped the Middle East* (Simon and Schuster, 2011); Robin Wright, “How the Curse of Sykes-Picot Still Haunts the Middle East,” April 30, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/how-the-curse-of-sykes-picot-still-haunts-the-middle-east>.

6. Burke, *The New Threat*.

7. Ben Smith, “ISIS and the Sectarian Conflict in the Middle East” (London: House of Commons, March 19, 2015).

8. Matthieu Rey and Loulouwa Al Rachid, *Les Racines de l’État Islamique*, interview by Marieke Louis, February 9, 2016, <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Les-racines-de-l-Etat-islamique.html>.

9. However there are claims that meetings have taken place between senior officers from both Saddam his forces and AQ. See “Section 3.5 Development of UK Strategy and Options, September to November 2002 – The Negotiation of Resolution 1441,” Chilcot Report, (n.d.), http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/248176/the-report-of-the-iraq-inquiry_section-35.pdf.

10. Burke, *The New Threat*, 74, 78.

and was not only relaxed about the prospect but, it appears, positively interested in it.¹¹ However, in spite of the possibility that Western powers were at least inadvertently involved in the creation of what eventually became ISIS, “there is no need to prove malign intent on the part of the Western powers.”¹²

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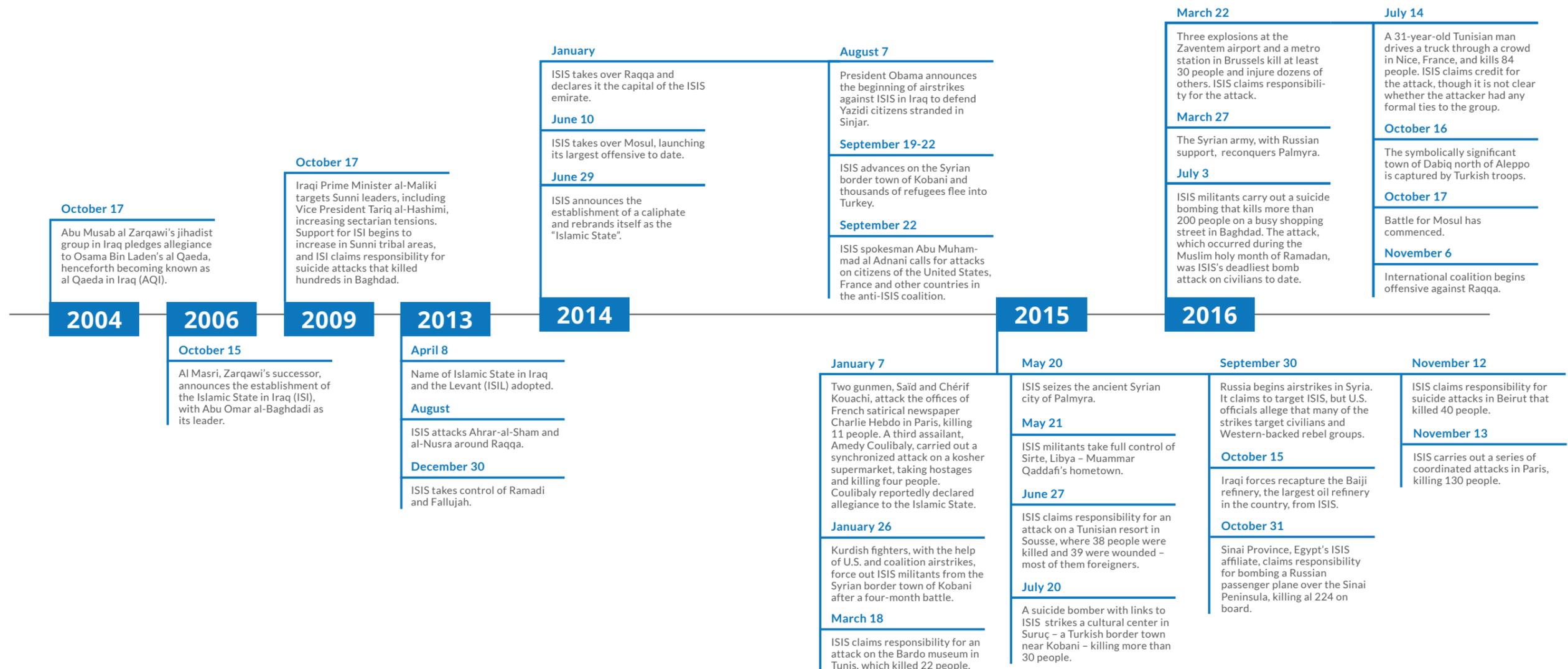
The revolutions that swept the Arab world in 2010 provided ISI an opportunity to spread into Syria where it could exploit a natural cleavage that existed between Syria’s Sunni majority and the Shia Alawite-led minorities that had ruled the country since the 1970s under the al-Assad family. The rise of ISIS in Syria was partly the result of a deliberate strategy by President Bashar al-Assad to sow division among his opponents. Al-Assad wanted to make sure that the incipient conflict in his country would be between himself and Islamic extremists. This would provide him with the best odds of survival and legitimacy.¹³ Another important factor in the rise of ISIS was support for Syrian rebels that ended up

11. Roberts Hugh, “The Hijackers,” *London Review of Books* 37, no. 14 (July 16, 2015): 5–10.
 12. Ibid.
 13. Christoph Reuter, “The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State,” *Spiegel Online*, April 18, 2015,

in the wrong hands. At the outset of the Syrian civil war, Western countries swiftly imposed sanctions on the al-Assad regime and together with allies in the Middle East (in particular Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar) helped create regional opposition. The perverse effects of some of the actions taken, such as the lifting of an oil embargo by the EU in April 2013, effectively led to Europe providing support to groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda.¹⁴

All of these developments opened up the way for Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS since April 2013, to consolidate his control over swathes of territory on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border. On June 29, 2014, he proclaimed the Islamic State as a worldwide ‘Caliphate’, reinstating an institution that had not formally existed since its abolishment by Turkey’s Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1924. The initial sweep of ISIS across the region was swift. On June 10, 2014, Mosul was taken hardly without a fight. Less than a year and a half later, The UN Security Council declared ISIS “a global and unprecedented threat to international peace and security.”¹⁵

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html>.
 14. Julian Borger and Mona Mahmood, “EU Decision to Lift Syrian Oil Sanctions Boosts Jihadist Groups,” *The Guardian*, May 19, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/19/eu-syria-oil-jihadist-al-qaeda>.
 15. The United Nations Security Council, “Security Council ‘Unequivocally’ Condemns ISIL Terrorist Attacks, Unanimously Adopting Text That Determines Extremist Group Poses ‘Unprecedented’ Threat | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases,” *United Nations*, November 20, 2015, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12132.doc.htm>.



How ISIS Seeks to “Remain and Expand”

“It is no coincidence”, one academic wrote, “that ISIS and its extreme jihadi message took root in a region that was experiencing socio-political upheavals arguably of a ‘one in a century’ kind.”¹⁶ At the same time, its survival strategy also contains inherent weaknesses if not the seeds of its own eventual demise.

ISIS’ entire strategy is built around a millenarian vision executed with an uncompromising and merciless ideological approach, aimed at the establishment of an enduring caliphate. The key to its expected success was initially grounded in a focus on the ‘near enemy’, but later evolved towards targeting the ‘far enemy’ as well. It is for obvious reasons that terrorist organizations generally refrain from controlling territory. Al-Baghdadi, however, believed that a caliphate “would be a magnet”¹⁷ and thus persisted in his quest to upend the existing state system in the region. The paradox of ISIS’ attempt to create a ‘state’ is that while it rejects the Westphalian order, it has adopted many of the trappings of Westphalian statehood.

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Interpretations and Uses of Islam

Due to its symbolic significance, the proclamation of the Caliphate and the establishment of a ‘state’ are highly significant. The revival of the office of the caliphate itself is far from uncontested in the Islamic world.¹⁸ Firstly, many Muslims reject the idea that someone can appoint themselves into the office. Secondly, al-Baghdadi’s lineage is also contested—his claim to descend from the Prophet Muhammad’s Quraysh tribe being seriously questioned.¹⁹

Also, while ISIS’ assertion to represent Islam is often challenged, it is clear that ISIS’ claims to be Islamic and to implement Sharia to the letter (in their view) serve their instrumental purposes very well. The narrow interpretation of Islam and Islamic law espoused by ISIS has a long genealogy. One important strand is Wahhabism, an 18th century fringe sect within Salafism founded by Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792), which explicitly stresses the need for Islam to be purified from any kind of religious innovation by returning back to the origin of Salafism – the first three generations of Muslims.²⁰ While there is no single ‘ISIS ideology’ as such, some of its first principles were laid down in its key manual called *The Management of Savagery*, written by Abu Bakr Naji. First issued in 2003, it argues that “acts of daring sacrificial violence—whether by individuals or small groups—can be used to undermine faith in the ability of governments in the West and the Middle East to provide security for their peoples and to polarize Muslim and non-Muslims (...).”²¹

Given the pedigree of ISIS’ extremist views, it is only logical to conclude that “[u]nderstanding [its

16. Gareth Stansfield, “Book Reviews: Explaining the Aims, Rise and Impact of the Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham,” *The Middle East Journal* 70, no. 1 (2016): 146–151.

17. Harald Doornbos and Jenan Moussa, “Present at the Creation,” *Foreign Policy*, August 16, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/16/present-at-the-creation/>. See also Ben Fishman, “Defining ISIS,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 58, no. 1 (January 19, 2016): 179–88.

18. Molly Jackson, “70,000 Indian Clerics Issue Fatwa against Terrorists,” *Christian Science Monitor: Global News Blog*, December 10, 2015, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2015/1210/70-000-Indian-clerics-issue-fatwa-against-terrorists>.

19. Burke, *The New Threat*, 86–87.

20. Alastair Crooke, *Resistance: The Essence of Islamic Revolution* (Pluto Press, 2009).

21. Scott Atran, “ISIS: The Durability of Chaos,” *The New York Review of Books*, July 16, 2016, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/07/16/nice-attack-isis-durability-of-chaos/>.

ideology] is crucial to defeating the group.”²² However, in practical terms, it is more important to know how its ideology is instrumentalized rather than to understand the substantive content. After all, as Middle East expert Lina Khatib wrote, “ideology is not the group’s primary purpose; it is a tool to acquire power and money. The group (...) continuously interprets sharia in ways that justify its actions.”²³ As so often when it comes to politics, what people do is more indicative of their intentions than what people say. ISIS is no different in this respect.

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Rule Through Conflict

ISIS was born out of chaos. And it is continuing chaos that provides it with the best chances to persist and expand. Its main goal is to expand its caliphate to all current Muslim countries in the world and fight and win the apocalyptic war against the West. Its grand strategy consists of a strategy within its core terrain; one for the regional power centers; one for the Muslim world and one for the non-Muslim world.²⁴ For these purposes ISIS stokes local conflicts hoping to turn them into a broader sectarian war, polarizes the world and breaks existing opposing alliances. The conditions on the ground in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen and some other states in which ISIS is operating are in a state of disorder, which enhances ISIS’s longevity, even if the group is losing ground in Syria and Iraq.²⁵

ISIS also combats ideological rivals, challenging the Muslim Brotherhood, fighting Al-Qaeda and undercutting the Taliban.²⁶ Part of this strategy is not to permit cooperation with groups that have a different agenda, but still to accept pledges of bay’a, even from tribal leaders who previously had opposed ISI in Iraq.²⁷ ISIS’ strategy in the non-Muslim world is first to polarize European communities and to create opportunities to implant itself in their core. Secondly, ISIS seeks to weaken both the West and Russia by forcing them to increase defensive measures. Finally, it seeks to encourage the return of nationalism in Western countries to foster discord and conflict among them.²⁸

Recruitment

Key to sustaining its strategy is the recruitment of soldiers. Economic motives are an important factor here, for instance through offering much higher salaries than other jihadist outfits.²⁹ ISIS also promises “access to women for young, single, economically marginalized men.”³⁰ Also, ISIS uses cult-like methods of indoctrination to attract foreign fighters to its territory and to keep them there by

22. Hassan Hassan, “The Sectarianism of the Islamic State: Ideological Roots and Political Context” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 13, 2016), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/06/13/sectarianism-of-islamic-state-ideological-roots-and-political-context/j1iy>.

23. Lina Khatib, “The Islamic State’s Strategy: Lasting and Expanding” (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 29, 2015), <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/06/29/islamic-state-s-strategy-lasting-and-expanding-pub-60511>.

24. Charles Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State” (Brookings Institution, January 12, 2014), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/profiling-the-islamic-state/>.

25. Jessica McFate Lewis et al., “ISIS Forecast: Ramadan 2016,” Middle East Security Report (Institute of War, May 2016), <http://www.rightsidenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/ISW-ISIS-RAMADAN-FORECAST-2016.pdf>.

26. Ibid.

27. James Fromson and Steven Simon, “ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 57, no. 3 (May 11, 2015): 7–56.

28. McFate Lewis et al., “ISIS Forecast: Ramadan 2016.”

29. Khatib, “The Islamic State’s Strategy: Lasting and Expanding.”

30. The United Nations Security Council, “Security Council ‘Unequivocally’ Condemns ISIL Terrorist Attacks, Unanimously Adopting Text That Determines Extremist Group Poses ‘Unprecedented’ Threat | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.”

separating them from their social networks and suppressing their individuality.³¹ While estimates about the total size of ISIS forces vary, “most agree that the core force is at least 30,000-strong, with 50,000-70,000 more split between local members and auxiliary and part-time forces.”³² The number of foreign fighters among this group was estimated to be 27,000 (December 2015).³³ Of these 27,000, the Hague-based International Centre for Counter Terrorism (ICCT) estimates that some 6000 hail from Europe (April 2015).³⁴ Of the 260 Dutch jihadists who went to Syria, some 180 are still there.³⁵

Expanding Through Affiliates

Part of ISIS' strategy is not just to last, but also to expand. The idea behind this is that in rejecting the international state system, the only logical alternative in the view of ISIS is to strive for establishing a global ummah, or community of Muslims. The way to do this, according to the Management of Savagery, is to create discord: “When savagery happens in several regions— (...) a spontaneous kind of polarization begins to happen among the people who live in the region of chaos.”³⁶ The only limits that could exist are thus not state borders, but the extent of the area Muslims inhabit—which could expand as the influence of Muslims increases, say in Europe. To date, the UN reported that ISIS managed to gain 34 affiliates, among them in Libya, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Algeria and Indonesia.³⁷ ISIS' drive to accept pledges of allegiance from elsewhere can be part of a strategy that could help to make the fall of strategic strongholds appear not as much of a catastrophe than they might otherwise do. The recent setbacks have also prompted rethinking within ISIS ranks: “In many ways IS is becoming more like a conventional, stateless, terrorist organization.”³⁸

Governance

ISIS has found that in creating a ‘state’, it still has to implement practical governance systems and structures. It was helped by the fact that a significant part of ISIS' leadership was made up of former Iraqi Baathist officials.³⁹ As a consequence, there is a strategy of sorts focused on winning the hearts and minds of the local population with the provision of social services and public goods including power and water services, law enforcement, health care, public control, employment, education

and tools to reach out to the public such as radio.⁴⁰ But there is also a system marked by violence and repression against its own people. This system is supported by a network of informants, which even mobilizes children to report their parents to the authorities. Concerning ISIS' legitimacy, the very violent landscape in which it operates that also includes even less palatable parties in the eyes of many Sunnis in effect makes it “the most legitimate player.”⁴¹

Finances

In its first report on the movement, the UN wrote that “ISIL is the world's wealthiest terrorist organization.”⁴² A very visible source of income for ISIS has come from lootings and kidnappings. The UN and partners “estimate that around 25 per cent of archaeological sites in the Syrian Arab Republic (including over 21 per cent in ISIL-controlled territories) have been affected by the looting.”⁴³ ISIS also earns money from “antiquities smuggled by criminal gangs who buy a ‘license’ to excavate and traffic from IS (sic) authorities.”⁴⁴ Estimated income from this activity is in the range of \$150-200 million a year.⁴⁵ On ransoms for hostages, UNAMI estimated that “payments by families of hostages, particularly from the Yazidi community (...) amounted to between \$35 million to \$45 million in 2014.”⁴⁶

Another key source of money is the illegal sale of oil. Estimates of how much ISIS earns as a result vary. UNAMI concluded “the income generated by ISIL from oil and oil products in 2015 to have been between \$400 million and \$500 million.”⁴⁷ An FT report said that in October 2015, “local traders and engineers put crude production in Isis-held territory at about 34,000-40,000 bpd. The oil is sold at the wellhead for between \$20 and \$45 a barrel, earning the militants an average of \$1.5m a day.”⁴⁸ It is significant that “[t]he Syrian regime has been a key economic partner for the group, which has been selling oil from its wells in Syria at discounted prices to the regime.”⁴⁹

While the focus of ISIS' finances is on the oil trade, its main source of income is actually taxation.⁵⁰ The UN reported on this that “[ISIS] taxes economic activity by extorting the estimated 8 million people living in territories under its control. It attempts to legitimize this system by calling the “tax” a “religious tax” or “zakat”. The tax amounts to at least 2.5 per cent of the capital earned from businesses, goods and agricultural products.”⁵¹ Also, for a time, ISIS took a slice of continuing salary and pension payments to Iraqi state officials who resided in ISIS-occupied territory.

Given the state-like sources of income of ISIS, attacks on ISIS-controlled infrastructure do have an impact on their revenue stream. As one analyst noted, “[i]n mid-2015, the Islamic State's overall

31. Florence Gaub, “The Cult of ISIS” (Brussels: EUISS, January 19, 2016), <https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/survival/sections/2016-5e13/survival--global-politics-and-strategy-february-march-2016-44d5/58-1-08-gaub-752b>.

32. Sam Jones and Erika Solomon, “Isis Inc: Jihadis Fund War Machine but Squeeze Citizens,” *The Financial Times*, December 15, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/2ef519a6-a23d-11e5-bc70-7ff6d4fd203a#axzz4HTeB63Jg>.

The United Nations Security Council, “Security Council ‘Unequivocally’ Condemns ISIL Terrorist Attacks, Unanimously Adopting Text That Determines Extremist Group Poses ‘Unprecedented’ Threat | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.”

34. Alex P. Schmid and Judith Tinnes, “Foreign (Terrorist) Fighters with IS: A European Perspective” (ICCT The Hague, December 2015), <https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighters-with-IS-A-European-Perspective-December2015.pdf>.

35. Eric Schmitt, “Caliphate in Peril, More ISIS Fighters May Take Mayhem to Europe,” *The New York Times*, September 17, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/18/us/politics/caliphate-in-peril-more-isis-fighters-may-take-mayhem-to-europe.html>.

36. Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery*, trans. William McCants, 2006, <https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf>.

37. The Economist, “Islamic Stateless?” *The Economist*, July 9, 2016, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21701721-jihadists-are-losing-their-caliphate-they-remain-deadl-islamic-stateless>. See United Nations, “Report of the Secretary - General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat,” January 29, 2016, http://www.un.org/en/sc/ct/docs/2016/N1602353_EN.pdf.

38. IHS, “Islamic State Caliphate Shrinks a Further 12 Percent in 2016, IHS Says,” *IHS Online Newsroom*, July 10, 2016, <http://news.ihs.com/press-release/aerospace-defense-security/islamic-state-caliphate-shrinks-further-12-percent-2016-ih>.

39. Smith, “ISIS and the Sectarian Conflict in the Middle East.” See also discussed in Fromson and Simon, “ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now.”

40. Faysal Itani, “We Must Treat ISIS Like a State to Defeat It,” *TIME*, August 14, 2014, <http://time.com/3111276/isis-terror-iraq-treat-it-like-a-state/>.

41. Fromson and Simon, “ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now.”

42. The United Nations, “Report of the Secretary - General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat.”

43. Ibid.

44. Burke, *The New Threat*, 95.

45. Based on a letter written by the Russian ambassador to the UN. See Louis Charbonneau, “Islamic State Nets Millions from Antiquities: Russia,” *Reuters*, April 6, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-antiquities-russia-idUSKCN0X32HK>.

46. The United Nations, “Report of the Secretary - General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat.”

47. Ibid.

48. Jones and Solomon, “Isis Inc: Jihadis Fund War Machine but Squeeze Citizens.”

49. Khatib, “The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding.”

50. Jones and Solomon, “Isis Inc: Jihadis Fund War Machine but Squeeze Citizens.”

51. The United Nations, “Report of the Secretary - General on the Threat Posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to International Peace and Security and the Range of United Nations Efforts in Support of Member States in Countering the Threat.”

monthly revenue was around \$80 million. As of March 2016, the Islamic State's monthly revenue dropped to \$56 million. The UN reported in June 2016 that "[f]or the first time since the declaration of its so-called 'caliphate' in June 2014, the ISIL core is under financial pressure. This was notably exemplified by the official announcement of ISIL, in late 2015, of a 50 per cent reduction in the salaries of fighters in Raqqa, Syrian Arab Republic."⁵²

Although the financial and human resources that ISIS relies on at home are critical to its survival, it is likely that without regional financial support, it could not have persisted in the way it has up to now. Although fiercely debated, the journalist Patrick Cockburn stated unequivocally that "[t]he foster parents of ISIS and the other Sunni jihadi movements in Iraq and Syria are Saudi Arabia, the Gulf monarchies and Turkey."⁵³ Still, one RAND scholar's assessment reflects the general belief that "Gulf-based finances have played little role in the recent rise of ISIS."⁵⁴

Although the financial and human resources that ISIS relies on at home are critical to its survival, it is likely that without regional financial support, it could not have persisted in the way it has up to now.

Popular Support

In spite of the widespread revulsion that the atrocities committed by ISIS have provoked and the ways it shackles its 'citizens', it has been able to garner significant public support in various corners of the world and found different ways to sustain the support of people living in ISIS-controlled territory. The principal means by which ISIS has managed to gain local support is by playing into the fears of the local Sunni population. In fact, "many Sunnis preferred ISIS rule to accommodation with the chauvinist Shia state-building project that (...) has systematically excluded Sunnis (...)." ⁵⁵ Furthermore, it has also benefited from the unspoken non-aggression pact with the Syrian government army: "The absence of front lines with the Islamic State gave the regime an excuse not to fight it (...). [This] lack of fighting also encouraged many Syrians to move to areas controlled by the Islamic State in the pursuit of security rather than ideology."⁵⁶

The principal means by which ISIS has managed to gain local support is by playing into the fears of the local Sunni population.

A similar strategy is applied in the non-Muslim world. Again, violence is used to sow division. As James Miller wrote, "[t]he formula is simple yet deadly effective: The more homegrown jihadists appear in France, Belgium and the U.K., the more their respective governments must monitor their Muslim communities. And the more they monitor them, the more it fuels resentment among them. And the more resentment that is fueled, the more jihadists are produced. It's the definition of a vicious circle."⁵⁷ In other words, ISIS-orchestrated or inspired attacks polarize Europeans who are driven by fear. This polarization creates further ground for recruitment.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, a recent

52. Ibid.

53. Cockburn, "Isis Consolidates."

54. Howard J. Shatz, "How ISIS Funds Its Reign of Terror," *New York Daily News*, September 8, 2014, <http://www.rand.org/blog/2014/09/how-isis-funds-its-reign-of-terror.html>.

55. Fromson and Simon, "ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now." See also Khatib, "The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding."

56. Khatib, "The Islamic State's Strategy: Lasting and Expanding."

57. James Miller, "This Week Under The Black Flag," *RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty*, April 15, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/a/islamic-state-under-black-flag/27677349.html>.

58. Jason Burke, "The Tyranny of Isis Terrorism Will Not Always Be with Us. But History Shows That a New Militant Threat Will Emerge," *The Guardian*, March 27, 2016, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/mar/27/terrorism-isis-brussels-al-qaida-ever-present-threat-what-next>. Harleen Gambhir, "ISIS's Campaign in Europe: March 2016" (Institute of War, March 25, 2016), <http://post.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-campaign-europe-march-2016>.

Pew survey showed that large majorities in countries such as Lebanon (98-100%), Israel (91-98%) and Palestine (79-92%) reject its divisive tactics.⁵⁹

Communication Strategy

Even if ISIS purports to aim at re-establishing a 7th century Caliphate, its means and modes of communication are in many respects very modern. With no objective reporting taking place from inside the self-styled caliphate,⁶⁰ propaganda is used for multiple purposes: to espouse its divisive and apocalyptic narrative; to recruit combatants and inhabitants for ISIS inside and outside of the 'state'; and for military and strategic reasons. The ideological bent of its media content strongly emphasizes the degree of humiliation that the Muslim world has suffered, for which revenge should and will be sought, as well as the hypocrisy of the West and the crimes it has committed. In general, however, ISIS' media strategy, in particular its use of gory videos, is mostly for local consumption. In areas where ISIS is already firmly in control, for example, they show how it succeeds in governance. In areas that are contested, they show graphic executions.⁶¹ The chief means for spreading its propaganda is through social media, in particular Facebook and Twitter. These are also used for recruitment purposes.⁶² ISIS also issues its own online magazine, previously called Dabiq and now christened Rumiya (Rome), which seeks to be a more sanitized version of the reality of living in ISIS-occupied territory while not compromising on ISIS' central message.⁶³

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Enduring Through Geopolitics

If regional chaos has allowed ISIS to emerge, it is geopolitics that has enabled the group to persist for so long. In essence, geopolitics reflect the biggest paradox of all, which is that while almost all parties involved in the conflict in Syria and Iraq are formally there to fight ISIS, in practice few have expended their resources towards attacking the largest terrorist actor in the region. This happens for a number of reasons. Firstly, rather than defeating ISIS, the powers involved are more preoccupied with safeguarding their own strategic interests, which for the most part are not threatened by ISIS—or so the calculations are made today. For instance, it can be said that although much weaker, the FSA and other Syrian rebel movements are considered a much more significant threat to the al-Assad regime than ISIS is. Secondly, some countries fear the actual consequences once ISIS is defeated. Thirdly, states are afraid of provoking ISIS attacks on their own soil.

For Russia, its chief reasons for only nominally attacking ISIS is because it is not in the interest of al-Assad. Iran finds itself in a perverse entanglement with ISIS in Iraq, where the presence of the latter has given Tehran a pretext to become militarily active and thus to be directly involved in Iraqi

59. Pew Research Center, "Views of ISIS by Religion, Ethnicity and Region," *Pew Research Center*, November 17, 2015, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/17/in-nations-with-significant-muslim-populations-much-disdain-for-isis-ft_15-11-17_isis/. The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "The Military Campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: Arab Public Opinion," *Insider Online*, accessed November 9, 2016, <http://www.insideronline.org/2014/11/the-military-campaign-against-the-islamic-state-in-iraq-and-the-levant-arab-public-opinion/>.

60. Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

61. Burke, *The New Threat*, 101.

62. IHS, "Syria and Iraq Insurgency" (IHS, June 2015), https://www.ihs.com/pdf/Syria-and-Iraq-Insurgency-Monitor-Extracts-June2015_233159110913052132.pdf.

63. The group also issues its magazine in other languages including Turkish, in which it is called "Konstantiniyye."

politics. The position of Turkey is mostly shaped by its domestic conflict with Kurdish forces, aimed at preventing the Kurds from gaining too much territory when driving out ISIS.⁶⁴ Saudi Arabia and other states in the Gulf also do not have overriding reasons to commit to defeating ISIS. In the context of a Shia-Sunni conflict, they are still more inclined to let ISIS linger if not to clandestinely support it if this means frustrating Iranian designs in the Levant and Mesopotamia.

This leaves the United States and its Western counterparts as the only countries that see ISIS as the principal threat to the long-term stability of the region. They are primarily motivated in taking on ISIS because of the danger that its territory might develop into a terrorist haven on the border of NATO territory and much closer to Europe and because defeating ISIS could prove to be a major setback for the popularity of its ideology worldwide. Even so, Western countries too are not sufficiently committed to fighting ISIS because there is little clarity about what might come next and because a defeat of ISIS might mean further strengthening the hand of Russia and Iran in the region.

The Inevitable Fall of ISIS

The most likely causes of the eventual demise of the caliphate will be the fact that the nation-state as an organizing principle will continue to prevail—and that, as a result, there will be no space for ISIS in Syria and Iraq—and because opportunistic behavior will lead to defections both inside and outside the caliphate. The number of foreign fighters moving to Syria has already significantly dwindled today, with only about 50 jihadists crossing the Turkish border down from a peak of 2,000 per month.⁶⁵ As a result, The ISIS state will at best remain a small lawless pocket in the way the Taliban persists in Pakistan, or remnants will revert back to being ‘classic’ jihadist terrorist groups and choose a different country from which to operate, possibly Libya or elsewhere in North Africa.

In terms of military strategy, “ISIS’s distinctive approach to insurgency [is not] an obvious advantage. Lawrence of Arabia advised that insurgents must be like a mist—everywhere and nowhere—never trying to hold ground or wasting lives in battles with regular armies.”⁶⁶ And it seems that the setbacks could lead to splits or fragmentation within ISIS.⁶⁷ In addition, ISIS needs a military leadership that is able to replace losses fast and educated people are needed in order to provide medical and technical services. Infighting between jihadists can also be a source of weakness for the jihadist movement in general. These problems also trickle into the caliphate’s governance. One is that the degree of violence has been such that “it cannot de-escalate without losing credibility.”⁶⁸ Also, given how loosely wedded the tribes are to ISIS and the extent to which their allegiance is a temporary marriage of convenience, it is likely that these tribes will break away from ISIS once “they feel there is more economic opportunity” as a result and the costs of sticking with ISIS outweighs severing ties.⁶⁹ Finally, in light of the experience of al-Qaeda, the strategy of expansion may prove that “affiliates may be more trouble than they are worth.”⁷⁰

64. Christopher Kozak, “Turkey Expands Campaign against ISIS and the PKK,” *Institute for the Study of War*, June 15, 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/background/turkey-expands-campaign-against-isis-and-pkk>.

65. Griffie Witte, Sudarsan Raghavan and James McAuley, “Flow of Foreign Fighters Plummet as Islamic State Loses Its Edge,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/flow-of-foreign-fighters-plummet-as-isis-loses-its-edge/2016/09/09/ed3e0dda-751b-11e6-9781-49e591781754_story.html.

66. Anonymous, *The Mystery of Isis*.

67. Perry Cammack, “The Conundrum of the Coming Islamic State Collapse,” *Carnegie Middle East Center*, August 1, 2016, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/64213?lang=en>.

68. Khatib, “The Islamic State’s Strategy: Lasting and Expanding.”

69. Fromson and Simon, “ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now.”

70. Ibid.

The American strategy towards ISIS is more focused on ‘degrading’ rather than ‘destroying’ the group. In practical terms, this means that ISIS is being contained—something which, incidentally, Iranian forces in Iraq and al-Assad in Syria are not unhappy about. An important side-effect of ‘mere containment’ is that it helps to break down the movement’s luster. Ultimately, however, it might be that only when all sides are exhausted that fighting might end. This could create room for “an agreement among major regional and international powers on a formula to curtail the fighting and rebuild some governance.”⁷¹ The protracted fighting over Aleppo, Mosul and Raqqa and the importance that is attached by outside powers to a specific outcome of this conflict show that at this time, it is not exhaustion but rather outright victory by one side or another that will decide the outcome of this conflict, and, most likely, determine the parameters for the future of ISIS.

The fall of ISIS could have serious ramifications for Europe and it is likely that the effects of the decline of ISIS are already with us. One, an organization finding itself in its last throes is more likely to lash out and to activate cells outside its own territory. Former ISIS spokesman al-Adnani made just such a call back in July 2016.⁷² Secondly, the fact that ISIS is prepared to adopt a ‘scorched earth policy’ at home has already been demonstrated and if it collapses it will want its enemies to take as many casualties as possible.⁷³ Thirdly, the demise of ISIS could prompt foreign and local jihadists to move elsewhere, for instance to Europe, albeit the numbers in this case would likely be small.⁷⁴ Even more than a security threat, returning and local jihadists could pose a socio-political threat if they manage to exploit societal tensions, researchers at the ICCT concluded.⁷⁵

The power and success of ISIS depend on its spellbinding quality. Breaking that spell is the key to defeating ISIS. A starting point would be to expose ISIS for what it is and to show that like any other polity, it is also inclined to make worldly compromises and to dishonor its own principles. What is more, “[i]f the caliphate can be rolled back and picked apart, the ideological edifice of apocalyptic anticipation that supports the ISIS project will be crushed.”⁷⁶ Another important aspect is to show that there is a real alternative and where possible to help create this. It also means supporting Syria and Iraq as countries rather than as mere artifacts in which people of different stripes cannot live together. In this respect, “[t]he power of nationalism, Iraqi and Syrian, is a dynamic that many works on ISIS and other jihadi movements in the region often now overlook, or consider to be a historical feature of countries (...) that it is now no longer relevant to today’s analyses.”⁷⁷ While discussion remains rife about the possible breakups of Iraq and Syria, continuing statehood is likely the most viable option, albeit that a strong degree of autonomy for certain regions along the lines of Iraqi Kurdistan are the price to be paid for these countries to persist. The creation of a multi-ethnic state along the lines of the Ottoman Empire is infeasible, still less that of a universal ummah.

71. David Ignatius, “How ISIS Spread in the Middle East,” *The Atlantic*, October 29, 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/how-isis-started-syria-iraq/412042/>.

72. Kalin Stephen and Ahmed Tolba, “As ‘Caliphate’ Shrinks, Islamic State Looks to Global Attacks,” *Reuters*, July 31, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-attacks-is-propaganda-idUSKCN10B0IP>.

73. Peter Schwartzstein, “The Islamic State’s Scorched-Earth Strategy | Foreign Policy,” April 6, 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/06/the-islamic-states-scorched-earth-strategy/>.

74. “Mosul Battle: EU ‘Should Prepare for Returning Jihadists,’” *BBC News*, October 18, 2016, sec. Middle East, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37689210>.

75. Edwin Bakker and Jeanine Roy de Zuijdewijn, “Jihadist Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Western Europe: A Low - Probability, High - Impact Threat,” ICCT Research Paper (ICCT The Hague, October 2015).

76. Fromson and Simon, “ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now.”

77. Stansfield, “Book Reviews: Explaining the Aims, Rise and Impact of the Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham.”

Conclusion

Given the specific conditions that brought ISIS into being, there are several lessons to learn about how it came about, how it managed to survive and how it might dissolve again. These include:

Origins

- » ISIS would not have arisen had the invasion of Iraq in 2003 not occurred, or, more precisely, if there had been a clear post-war strategy in place that would have kept the country together while avoiding sectarian strife.
- » The history of Western involvement in the region going back to the days of the fall of the Ottoman Empire provided ISIS with ammunition to paint itself as the savior of Islam.
- » Related to the previous point is that ISIS sought and received support by presenting itself as a sincere alternative espousing authentic Islamic views in the face of corrupt secular (!) governments, whilst blaming the West for having introduced this un-Islamic notion in the Muslim world.
- » Simmering sectarianism which erupted in Iraq and later in Syria directly contributed to the rise of multiple terrorist outfits including the organizations that would later become ISIS. Without such sectarianism, it is very unlikely ISIS would have emerged.
- » Specifically, the unwillingness of the Syrian government to directly take on ISIS also helped it to emerge and persist in Syria. In fact, there has been a degree of tacit collusion between the two sides.
- » Ideology has not been a primary driver for why local people chose to side with ISIS. Years of suppression and discrimination both in Syria and in Iraq led many Sunnis to decide that living under ISIS is better, in spite of the systemic violence that was used to impose its nihilist ideology.
- » The choice to occupy territory and to create a caliphate was deliberate and in fact part of an ideological framework. While Baghdadi was aware of the drawbacks of such a strategy, he persisted because it was seen as a religious obligation.

Endurance

- » ISIS has chiefly been able to persist because no country, whether in the region or outside, had a compelling interest to using all means to comprehensively root out the movement. And since ISIS did not occupy truly vital land or resources, it was able to remain where it was.
- » Even in taking on ISIS, regional and outside powers have been unable to agree on a single military policy to defeat the movement. In spite of its military strength, a concerted international effort will likely be able to break up the ISIS caliphate.
- » The role of support from the Gulf appears to have been exaggerated. Although it can be said that ISIS drew inspiration from ideologies that are popular in the Gulf region, there is little evidence that extensive financial support from that part of the world has been instrumental in keeping ISIS afloat.
- » Sheer financial resources and applying harsh justice are not enough to keep the caliphate together. It had to create a social contract on the basis of taxation. Even so, not even ISIS could

impose excessive taxation and had to compromise and be pragmatic at times.

- » The pledges to the caliphate can be seen as a sign of strength and legitimacy, but should also be viewed in the light of opportunistic behavior on the part of other terrorist organizations, Boko Haram being an example. Pledges can also be withdrawn easily.
- » Related to this is that the expansion of ISIS offshoots is not necessarily a sign of strength. At one point, ISIS' presence in Libya was seen as a fallback strategy in case the Caliphate in the Middle East would fold.
- » ISIS was able to build on the expertise of many Baathists in terms of organizing itself militarily and for governing the caliphate. Without this input, it is highly unlikely that ISIS as a geographical entity could have persisted.

The Future

- » The military defeat of the ISIS Caliphate looks to be very likely and could already occur in the coming months. This is not the same as defeating ISIS as a movement though, which could persist in many locations, including underground. Even less so would this mean the defeat of the ISIS ideology, which will continue to hold sway in many parts of the Middle East.
- » Apart from using military means, closing off economic and financial channels is also effective in cutting down ISIS. Only because a neighbor such as Turkey has permitted illegal oil shipments to be transported over its territory, or because the Syrian government has been complicit in allowing artifacts to be smuggled out has ISIS been able to maintain its economic lifelines.
- » If defeat comes about, it will be as much the result of the military effort made by the international and regional coalition as of the fact that the ranks can easily crumble because of opportunistic motivations. Jihadists are known for switching allegiance easily and there are several reported instances of discord within ISIS ranks when the organization came under pressure. Still, small pockets are likely to persist and could possibly re-emerge in a new guise at a later time.
- » Long-term eradication of movements such as ISIS and their ideology takes more than military action. It requires positive engagement with the region on the basis of trust, respect, commitment and credibility. The key here is to address and root out the sources for longstanding grievances and to give people a perspective for building up a prosperous future.
- » The state system will prove to be more resilient than previously considered. While in theory not compatible with how the Muslim community is supposed to co-exist, nationalism is now too entrenched for states to wither away, also in the Middle East. Also, only states have proven to be able to deliver to their citizens, making it highly unlikely for other types of commonwealths to successfully emerge.
- » The decline of ISIS could lead to an increase of attacks on European soil. To date however, the number of actual attacks has been minimal, although data on how many such attacks have been foiled is unknown. The gradual folding of ISIS could also lead to more jihadists returning to Europe, although the numbers are likely to be small.
- » In rebuilding Syria and Iraq, the creation of sustainable governance structures is a sine qua non. For these countries to persist, autonomy for various regions is the most viable option, but maintaining central government will be important to protect minority rights throughout these countries and for the sake of the larger geopolitical balance in the region.

Criteria to measure ISIS development	Territory size (Iraq & Syria)	Territory won/lost (Iraq & Syria)	Major towns won/lost (Iraq & Syria)	Outside provinces won/lost (actual control)		Income per month/financial resources (Iraq & Syria)	Number of fighters	Increase/decrease of number of pledges of affiliation	popular support for ISIS in Middle East
Januar 2014	2,010 km ² + (33)	2,010 km ² +	Raqqa (2013) Fallujah (Jan 2013)			Before summer '14, ISIS was present in oil smuggling (30); \$875 million in cash and assets before June (28)	7,000+? (14)	0	
Juli 2014	12,000 km ² - 35,000 km ² (3)	10,000 km ² - 33,000 km ²	Mosul, Tikrit, Tal Afar (June) +			Possibly \$420m raided from Mosul banks in June (26)(27), total of bank and military. Supplies raided in Mosul possibly added \$1.5bn in cash and assets (28). \$8m in monthly txes from businesses Mosul alone (31)	100,000 (11); 20,000-31,000 (13)	12 (16)	
Januar 2015	90,800 km ² (2)	55,8000 - 78,800 km ²	Ramadi - (Nov. 2014 - May 2105)	Islamic State in Ly- bia+: Derna, Oct '14, Sirte, Jan '15 (34)		Over the whole of 2014, \$500m to \$1bn in bank assets gained through banks. \$500m from oil revenue a year (29)	9,000-31,000 (8); 70,000 (9); 200,000 (10)	19 (17) (19)	
Juli 2015	82,940 km ² (4)	-7860 km ²	Tikrit (March 2015)	ISL-: Derna, July; Parts of Nangarhar, afghani- stan+, June (35)		\$80m total monthly revenue (24), other report says \$50m monthly oil revenue (32)	40,000 (12)	6 (15)	
Januar 2016	78,000 km ² (5)	-4940 km ²	Ramadi - (Nov. 2015 - Jan. 2106)			\$56 million USD (25)	20,000-25,000 (7)	2 (20)	0-5% (22)
Juli 2016	68,300 km ² (1)	-9700 km ²	Manbij - (May-Aug. 2016)	ISL-: Sirte, August			15,000-20,000 (6)	1 (18)	0-9% (21), 7% (23)

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