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KIMBERLY KAGAN, FREDERICK W. KAGAN, & JESSICA D. LEWIS

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 23

A STRATEGY TO DEFEAT THE ISLAMIC STATE



Cover: Fighters of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) stand guard at a checkpoint in the northern Iraq city of Mosul, June 11, 2014. Picture taken June 11, 2014. REUTERS/Stringer

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MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 23

A STRATEGY TO DEFEAT THE ISLAMIC STATE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A STRATEGY TO DEFEAT THE ISLAMIC STATE | K. KAGAN, F. KAGAN, & J. LEWIS | SEPTEMBER 2014

The Challenge:

- The Islamic State poses a grave danger to the United States and its allies in the Middle East and around the world due to its location, resources, the skill and determination of its leaders and fighters, and its demonstrated lethality compared to other al Qaeda-like groups.
- In Syria, the Assad regime has lost control of the majority of the state, and the regime's atrocities and sectarianism have fueled violent Islamists, particularly ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN).
- In Iraq, the government has lost control over large portions of territory that the Iraqi Security Forces and Kurdish Peshmerga are incapable of retaking without significant foreign support.
- The Sunni Arabs of Iraq and Syria are the decisive human terrain. Al-Qaeda and similar groups can only flourish in distressed Sunni communities. Any strategy to counter al-Qaeda requires working with these communities, as the U.S. and the Iraqi government did during the Awakening in 2007.
- Having neglected Iraq and Syria, the U.S. currently lacks the basic intelligence and contextual understanding to build a strategy. The U.S. must adopt an iterative approach that tests assumptions, enriches understanding, builds partnerships with willing Sunni Arabs, and sets conditions for more decisive operations.

Four Strategic Objectives for the Region:

- Defeat and destroy ISIS and JN; defeat or reconcile their locally-focused partners.
- Restore sovereign, legitimate states in Iraq and Syria so they can prevent the reconstitution of al-Qaeda-like groups reject Iranian political control and Iranian military forces on their territory.
- Prevent Iran from achieving regional hegemony to preserve U.S. allies and lessen regional sectarianism.
- Ensure the survival of sovereign states currently threatened, especially Jordan and Lebanon.

Proposed Political-Military Operations:

- An initial military movement-to-contact phase has the following goals:
 - Find and fix the enemy in order to
 - Prevent ISIS from renewing offensive operations to take the Euphrates River Valley from Haditha to Ramadi, the area south of Samarra along the Tigris River, the Bayji oil refinery, and Baghdad itself.
 - Force ISIS to culminate before taking Aleppo or the key opposition supply lines from Turkey.
 - Establish positions from which to launch subsequent operations.
 - Prevent genocide.
 - Set conditions for subsequent operations.
 - Disrupt the enemy, including its leadership.
 - Reconnoiter the human terrain to identify potential acceptable local partners and develop relationships with them.

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- Prevent the ISF from eroding further and understand its command and control, particularly with respect to external actors, including Iran.
- Politically, the U.S. must use its leverage to continue to shape the emerging Iraqi government to be as inclusive and non-sectarian as possible.
- The U.S. must also engage in developing an inclusive government-in-waiting in Syria, unifying the 'Alawite community with other minority groups that can work with moderate Sunni leaders.
- This phase will require as many as 25,000 ground troops in Iraq and Syria. Decisive efforts will belong to Special Forces and special mission units, numbering in the low thousands, in a dispersed footprint.
- Support of at least a U.S. Army Combat Aviation Brigade (about 3,300 soldiers) is needed. Two battalion-sized quick reaction forces (QRF) will need to be available at all times, one in Iraq and one in Syria. Two brigades, perhaps 7,000 soldiers in all, are needed to provide these QRFs. Additional forces will be required to secure temporary bases, provide MEDEVAC coverage, and support necessary enablers.
- Subsequent operational phases will depend on validating the assumption that the Sunni Arab communities in Iraq and Syria are willing and able to fight alongside the U.S. and our partners against ISIS.
- Though this strategy contains a high risk of failure and the near-certainty of U.S. troop casualties, the outcomes of ISIS retaining control of the territory it has seized, an escalated sectarian war, more foreign fighters, and the largest al-Qaeda safe haven it has ever known outweigh those risks.

PRÉCIS

ME SECURITY REPORT 23 | A STRATEGY TO DEFEAT THE ISLAMIC STATE | K. KAGAN, F. KAGAN, & J. LEWIS | SEPTEMBER 2014

The Islamic State poses a grave danger to the United States and its allies in the Middle East and around the world. Reports that it is not currently planning an attack against the American homeland are little comfort. Its location, the resources it controls, the skill and determination of its leaders and fighters, and its demonstrated lethality distinguish it from other al-Qaeda-like groups. Its ability to offer safe-haven and support to terrorists planning attacks against us is beyond any terrorist threat we have ever seen. The thousands of American and European citizens who are fighting alongside the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra in Iraq and Syria constitute an unprecedented threat to our security regardless of whether those groups intend to attack us. The Islamic State is a clear and present danger to the security of the United States. It must be defeated.

Developing a strategy to accomplish that goal is daunting. The situation today is so bad and the momentum is so much in the wrong direction that it is impossible to articulate a direct path to an acceptable endstate in Iraq and Syria. American neglect of the deteriorating situations in both countries has deprived us of the understanding and even basic ground intelligence needed to build a strategy. We must therefore pursue an iterative approach that tests basic assumptions, develops our understanding, builds partnerships with willing parties on the ground, especially the Sunni Arabs in Iraq who will be essential to set conditions for more decisive operations to follow.

The core challenge facing the U.S. in Iraq and Syria is the problem of enabling the Sunni Arab community stretching from Baghdad to Damascus and Turkey to Jordan to defeat al-Qaeda affiliates and splinters, while these extreme groups deliberately concentrate in Sunni majority areas. Persuading those communities to rejoin reformed states in Iraq and Syria after long seasons of internal strife will be daunting. But their participation in state security solutions will be essential to keep al-Qaeda from returning. Many of these populations, especially Syrians, may be losing confidence in such a post-war vision.

The problem in Syria is relatively easy to state, but extremely difficult to solve. The Assad regime has lost control of the majority of the territory of the Syrian state. It has violated international law on many occasions and lost its legitimacy as a member of the international community. Assad himself is the icon of atrocities, regime brutality, and sectarianism to Sunni populations in Syria and throughout the region. His actions have fueled the rise of violent Islamists, particularly ISIS and JN. U.S. strategy must ensure that none of these three actors control all or part of Syria while supporting the development of an alternative, inclusive Syrian state over time.

The Iraqi government has also lost control of large portions of its territory, particularly the majority Sunni provinces of Ninewa and Anbar, as well as portions of Salah ad-Din. ISIS now controls major cities including Mosul, Baiji, Tikrit, Hawija, Fallujah, Tal Afar, and Sinjar. It is consolidating its control with a degree of lethality against local opposition that precludes widespread Sunni popular mobilization against it. It retains forward bases within striking distance of Baghdad and continues to conduct spectacular attacks in Iraq's capital.

Both the Iraqi Security Forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga have suffered serious military reverses and are no longer capable of retaking the lost territory without significant foreign support. The ISF has managed to slow the ISIS advance only with the deployment of Iranian armed forces, Iraqi Shi'a militias, Lebanese Hezbollah, and a massive mobilization of Shi'a volunteers. The limited counter-offensives that these forces have undertaken at the periphery of the Islamic State have been possible only with the application of U.S. airpower in direct support. The Iraqi government has retained its legitimacy in the international community but lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the Sunni Arab population of Iraq. The formation of a new government under Haidar al-Abadi will not quickly regain the support of Iraq's Sunni Arabs. The Iraqi Security Forces as they are now constituted and augmented with Iranian elements will pose an enduring threat and political obstacle to the Sunni community.

The Sunni Arabs of Iraq and Syria are the decisive human terrain this conflict. Al-Qaeda and like-minded groups can only flourish in distressed Sunni communities. They attack every other religion and sect, but their bases must be in Sunni lands because their ideology is an extreme, exclusionary interpretation of Sunni Islam. Doing anything to al-Qaeda — defeating, disrupting, degrading, or destroying it — requires working with the Sunni communities within which it lives and operates. Those communities have repeatedly rejected its ideology and attempted to rise against it in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Egypt, and almost everywhere else it has appeared.

But al-Qaeda brings more than ideology to the fight. Its affiliates are extremely lethal and use brutality to maintain their positions among populations who reject their ideas. The Islamic State has been assassinating Sunni tribal leaders who allied with the U.S. and the Iraqi government during the Awakening in 2007 and pre-emptively killing those it fears might ally with us again. Sunni populations cannot expel al-Qaeda groups simply by rejecting their ideas. They need outside help to defeat these well-organized, well-armed, skilled, and determined zealots. They have shown that they can and will fight against al-Qaeda groups with that help, and that they either cannot or will not fight effectively without it.

The U.S. must therefore pursue four primary strategic objectives in the fight against ISIS:

1. Defeat and destroy ISIS and JN; defeat or reconcile their locally-focused violent Islamist partners.
2. Restore sovereign, legitimate states in Iraq and Syria so that they can secure their own territory in ways that are compatible with U.S. national security objectives. These states must be free of conditions that would allow al-Qaeda-like groups to reconstitute. They must also be free of Iranian military forces on their territory and able to reject Iranian political control while nevertheless interacting with their neighbor.
3. Prevent Iran from establishing regional hegemony in order to preserve U.S. allies and diminish regional sectarian polarization.
4. Ensure the survival of sovereign states, especially Jordan and Lebanon, which are most threatened today.

The first phase of our political-military operations must be a movement-to-contact with the following goals:

1. Find and fix the enemy in order to:
 - a. Prevent him from renewing offensive operations to take the Euphrates River Valley from Haditha to Ramadi, the area south of Samarra along the Tigris River, the Baiji oil refinery, and Baghdad itself;
 - b. Force the ISIS campaign in Syria to culminate before taking Aleppo or the essential supply lines to the opposition from Turkey;
 - c. Establish positions from which to launch subsequent operations;
 - d. Prevent genocide;
 - e. Set conditions for subsequent operations.
2. Disrupt the enemy system throughout its depth, including leadership targets as feasible. This task requires maintaining continuous pressure on the enemy to prevent him from reconstituting following losses or seeking other permissive environments in which to rebuild.
3. Reconnoiter the human terrain in order to identify potential acceptable local partners and establish relationships with them.
4. Prevent the ISF from eroding further and understand how the ISF is being commanded and controlled, particularly with respect to external actors such as Iran.

Success against ISIS requires more than effective military operations. Political accord in Baghdad and the emergence of meaningful inclusive politics in Syria are necessary but not sufficient conditions for securing U.S. vital national security interests in the region. The U.S. must use the expanding leverage increased military support will give us in Baghdad to continue to shape the emerging Iraqi government to be as inclusive and non-sectarian as possible. The U.S. and its allies must meanwhile engage directly and energetically with Sunni leaders in Iraq outside of Baghdad to determine who represents (or might represent) Sunnis willing to re-engage with the government in Baghdad.

The U.S. must also engage much more vigorously in efforts to develop an inclusive government-in-waiting in Syria. We must do more than trying to unify what is left of the moderate opposition. We must also reach out to the 'Alawite community and to Syria's other minority groups in search of potential leaders who could join forces with moderate Sunni leaders to oppose extremists on all sides.

The deployment of U.S. forces into Syria and Iraq is as important to these political efforts as it is to our military efforts. We must not fall again into the trap of relying on leaders in Baghdad, Damascus, Amman, or Turkey to inform us of the situation on the ground, still less to rally their people from afar. Populations under attack respect most the leaders who stay with them and fight. Those are the leaders we must seek out for the benefit of the political settlement as much as for their military capabilities.

PRÉCIS

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This phase of the strategy will require a significant commitment of U.S. forces — perhaps as many as 25,000 ground troops in all in Iraq and Syria — although in roles very different from those they played in Iraq between 2003 and 2011. The decisive effort will belong to teams of Special Forces and special mission units deployed in a dispersed footprint throughout the Sunni lands, as well as advising the Iraqi Security Forces and the moderate Syrian opposition. Those forces will likely number in the low thousands.

The dispersed footprint from which they will have to operate requires the support of at least a U.S. Army Combat Aviation Brigade (about 3,300 soldiers) to operate transport, reconnaissance, and attack helicopters. These special operators will be at high risk of locally-overwhelming enemy force, as well as attacks by ISIS operatives infiltrating the tribes and even the security forces among whom they will be living. They must have access to a large and responsive quick reaction force (QRF) that can get to threatened units rapidly and with dominating force. We estimate that two battalion-sized QRFs will need to be available at all times, one in Iraq and one in Syria. Sustaining the availability of two battalions requires the deployment of two brigades, perhaps 7,000 soldiers in all. Additional forces will be required to secure temporary bases, provide MEDEVAC coverage, and support necessary enablers. Flight times and the MEDEVAC requirements to get wounded soldiers to help within the “golden hour” dictate that the U.S. will have to establish temporary bases inside Iraq and Syria. Bases in Kurdistan, Turkey, and Jordan are simply too far away from the core ISIS safe-havens along the Euphrates.

This paper outlines only the first phase of the proposed strategy in any detail. Subsequent phases depend entirely on validating the assumption that the Sunni Arab communities in Iraq and Syria are both willing and able to fight alongside the U.S. and our partners against ISIS. The details of those phases will depend on which specific tribes and groups step forward and what their capabilities and limitations might be. They will also depend on the speed with which the ISF can be rebuilt and reformed into a non-sectarian and effective security force. The first phase itself will take months. Subsequent phases will take longer. Adopting this strategy entails signing up for a prolonged deployment of military forces, including ground forces.

Even then, this strategy suffers from the high risk of failure and the near-certainty that the U.S. will suffer casualties, including at the hands of supposedly friendly forces. American troops dispersed among the Sunni population are at risk of being kidnapped. The significant anti-aircraft capabilities of ISIS put American helicopters at risk. It may turn out that the Sunni Arabs cannot or will not fight with us, finally, and that the overall strategy proposed here is infeasible. In that case, it will be necessary to abandon this strategy and reconsider our options.

The U.S. should adopt this strategy despite these risks. The consequences of inaction or inadequate action are evident: ISIS will retain control of much of the territory it holds, sectarian war will escalate, more foreign fighters including Americans and Europeans will cycle through the battlefield and get both trained and further radicalized, and al-Qaeda will benefit from the largest and richest safe-haven it has ever known. It is worth accepting the risks of this strategy to avoid this outcome.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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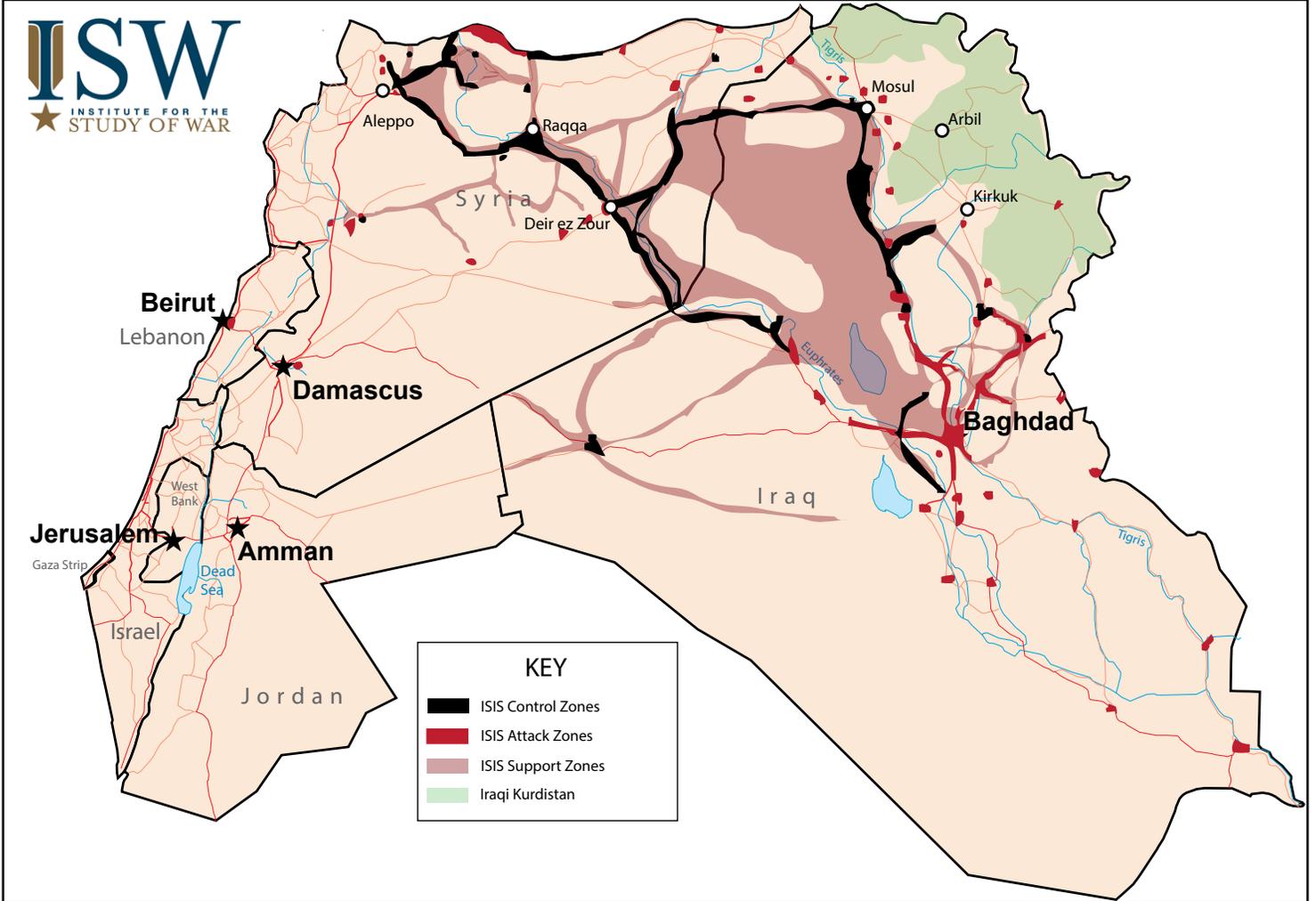
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A STRATEGY TO DEFEAT THE ISLAMIC STATE

By Kimberly Kagan, Frederick W. Kagan, & Jessica D. Lewis

President Barack Obama announced his strategy for dealing with the Islamic State on September 10, 2014. He has described the seriousness of the threat in terms ranging from moderate to extreme and has identified objectives ranging from containing the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to destroying it, or, in the words of Vice President Joe Biden, chasing it “to the gates of Hell.” Indeed, the situation demands a clear strategy pursuing explicit and coherent objectives.

The president did not offer such a strategy. President Barack Obama has instead announced a plan that consists of U.S. air support to Iraqi and Kurdish ground forces, a humanitarian mission, a train and assist mission to build the capacity of Iraqi and Kurdish security forces, and a counterterrorism mission. The President acknowledged that U.S. air strikes may extend into Syria. He invited Congress to authorize additional training and assistance to the Syrian opposition. He celebrated the regional and international partnerships that will join in the U.S.-led plan. This plan is largely a continuation of the failed counterterrorism strategy that the administration has pursued for years, and in which the threat of the Islamic State arose. The plan to lead other regional and indigenous forces in conducting an air-ground campaign to degrade and destroy ISIS in Iraq assumes conditions in the region that are no longer present. These conditions will likely cause the U.S. strategy to fail.

The situation is so bad and the momentum is so much in the wrong direction that it is impossible to articulate a clear path to the desired end state. The U.S. will have to execute an iterative approach in Iraq and Syria in which the first phases test critical hypotheses about the situation and the viability of possible solutions. Only then will it be possible to offer concrete options for next steps that can begin to accomplish core national security objectives. The United States cannot address Iraq first and Syria second, or conduct air attacks before using other military instruments. A strategy to degrade and destroy ISIS requires actions across Iraq and Syria that contend with the expansive threat of ISIS in the full context of two complex internal security situations.

The U.S. military has been conducting air strikes against limited targets in Iraq since August, facilitating the recapture of the Mosul Dam and the town of Amerli by Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Kurdish military known as the Peshmerga. But the Islamic State retains control of all of the major populated areas it has seized in Iraq and Syria, and it has been expanding its conquests in Syria during this period.

ISIS will soon position itself to fight for Aleppo, the Syrian equivalent of Mosul. Airstrikes in support of Iraqi security forces may halt the further expansion of ISIS in Iraq, but they will have no effect upon this condition, and they will not destroy ISIS.

As conditions are set for lasting security solutions in Iraq and Syria, the campaign to degrade ISIS and to force its urban offensive in both countries to culminate must run in parallel. The Iraqi and Kurdish security forces are not sufficiently trained or equipped to retake Mosul, with or without U.S. air support. The same may be true of the Syrian opposition with respect to Syria’s northern cities under ISIS control, while the opposition is still locked in the fight against Assad. The U.S. cannot destroy ISIS from the air while ISIS controls major cities without formal Iraqi security forces and Peshmerga on the ground. But these forces will not regain legitimacy across Iraq and Syria without working with Iraq’s Sunni tribes.

Only military formations that cross sectarian lines will be able to challenge ISIS. This is an exceptional battlefield condition that cannot be assumed in either Iraq or Syria. Furthermore, the involvement of regional actors such as Iran, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia in the Syrian war has only increased the sectarian nature of the conflict over the last two years; their involvement in Iraq at this point may have the same effect. The U.S. strategy as articulated by President Obama will require that existing conditions reverse and cohere in a way that favors the coalition and not ISIS. These conditions will not occur naturally nor will they be properly driven by merely providing advice and assistance to the Iraqi Security Forces now infiltrated by Shi’a militias that the Sunni reject. Rather, these conditions must be set as part of a phased strategy.

The most important variable in this entire fight is the will and ability of the Sunni Arab community in Iraq and Syrians living in eastern Syria to reject the Islamic State, fight with U.S. and other allied support against it, and then join renewed and reformed Iraqi and Syrian states. Airstrikes alone — which

may be perceived as U.S. support to Iranian-backed Shi'a governments trying to oppress the Sunni Arabs — will not allow the U.S. to evaluate this variable and may well reduce the willingness of Sunni Arabs to join with us and, more importantly, to rejoin Iraq and Syria. Developing a strategy that has a chance of success requires identifying the center of gravity of the overarching regional problem — the struggle within the Sunni Arab community itself amidst the collapse of state structures in the Middle East.

SITUATION

Syria

Problem Statement: The Assad regime has lost control of the majority of the territory of the Syrian state. It has violated international law on many occasions and lost its legitimacy as a member of the international community. Assad himself is the icon of atrocities, regime brutality, and sectarianism to Sunni populations in Syria and throughout the region. His actions have fueled the rise of violent Islamists, particularly the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN). U.S. strategy must ensure that none of these three actors control all or part of Syria while helping the development of an alternative, inclusive Syrian state over time.

ISIS must be defeated in Syria, and Assad must be removed from power. But a strategy that delivers Syria into the hands of Jabhat al-Nusra would be disastrous for the U.S. and its regional allies. JN is a loyal al-Qaeda affiliate and would establish an al-Qaeda state in Syria that would support the global jihadi movement. Any successful strategy for dealing with ISIS in Syria must also separate JN from the bulk of the opposition, marginalize it, and ultimately defeat it as well, while setting conditions for an inclusive post-Assad government that can prevent any al-Qaeda affiliate from re-establishing itself in Syria. This recovery of the opposition requires the removal of Assad as a necessary pre-condition for ending the Syrian war.

ISIS operates within the complex dynamics in Iraq and Syria, where security has collapsed over the last three years. The Syrian conflict began as a peaceful revolt against Bashar al-Assad's autocratic rule, escalated to armed conflict when Assad used force against protesters in Dera'a,¹ and became a full-scale civil war in July 2012 when the Syrian regime lost control of large swaths of territory to insurgents.² The regime rebounded in 2013 with the help of Iran, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iraqi Shi'a militias, which provided manpower and equipment upon which it became dependent.³ The regime sought to eliminate civilian support to the opposition using mass casualty attacks including airstrikes, barrel bombs, deliberate starvation campaigns, and chemical weapons,

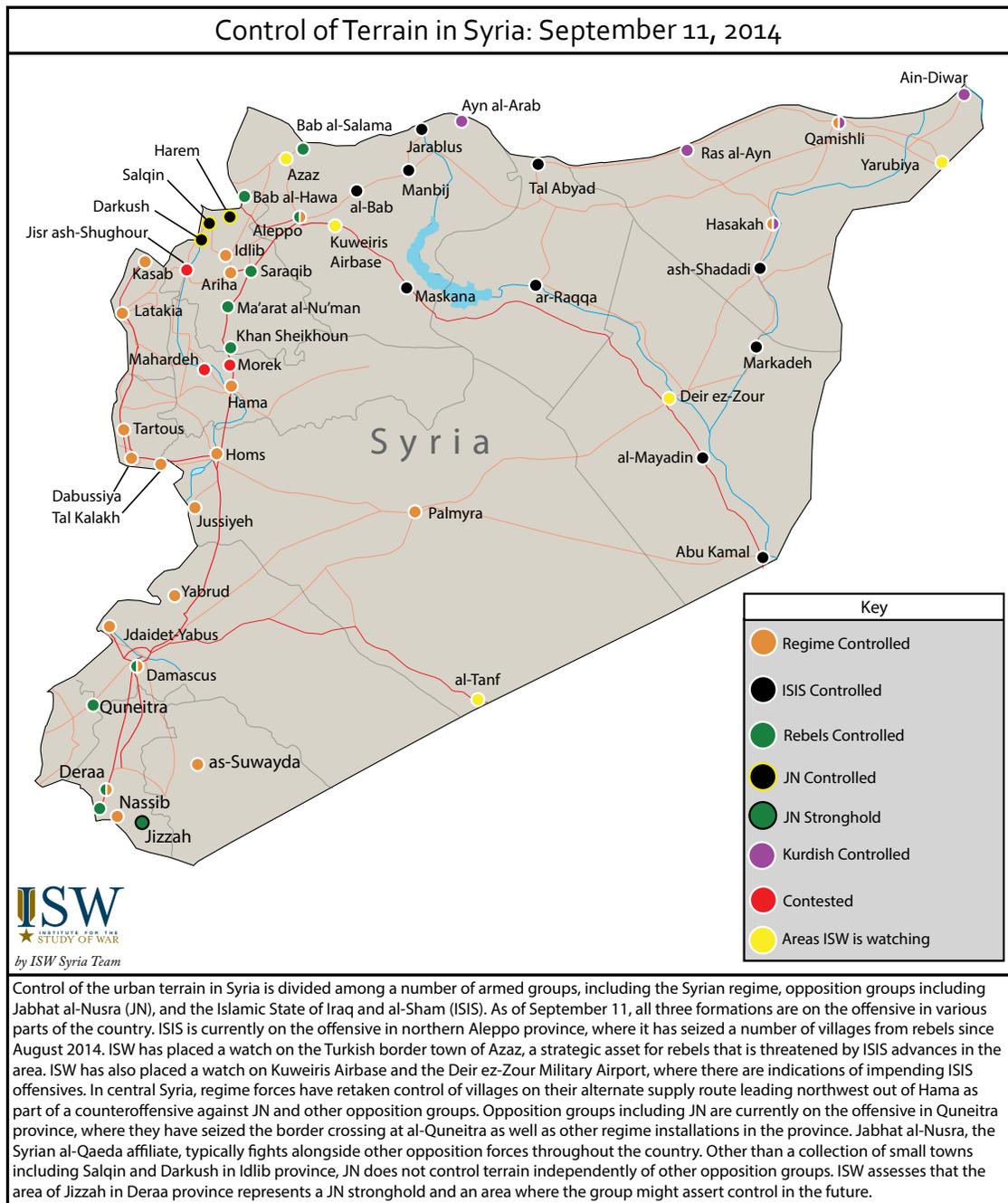
creating an immense humanitarian crisis.⁴ But the regime has not been able to destroy the opposition or regain control of Aleppo or the territory in the east that it had lost.

The armed groups comprising the Syrian opposition have yet to form strategic military structures to direct operations that combine forces against the regime on multiple fronts. But there are still opposition forces with operational capability that continue to mount offensives against the regime and adapt to changes in the character of the conflict. The opposition is currently undertaking offensives in Idlib, Hama, Damascus, and Dera'a provinces.⁵ It is also defending terrain in Aleppo province against the encroachment of ISIS.⁶ Where ISIS presents a serious threat to the opposition in the north, the Syrian opposition writ large may have gained a relative strategic advantage after ISIS began to attack regime bases.⁷ Now the regime as well as the opposition is challenged to fight against multiple enemies. Both sides have been depleted over nearly three years of fighting, increasing the strategic implications of individual battlefield losses at this point in the war, although a continued influx of foreign fighters and support mitigates these losses for the violent jihadist groups.

The moderate elements of the opposition have been especially degraded because they are fighting against both the regime and ISIS. They have also received far less international support than either of their opponents. JN has penetrated the opposition thoroughly and interwoven itself with opposition forces across the theater. JN has close operational ties with other Salafist-jihadist groups such as Ahrar al-Sham (HASI), although many other opposition groups also cooperate with Jabhat al-Nusra in battle without necessarily being aligned with JN. This includes an array of groups ranging from members of the Islamic Front to groups falling under the umbrella of the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA).⁸

Jabhat al-Nusra's fighting prowess keeps it central to opposition efforts in the southern Deraa and Quneitra fronts as well as the Hama and Idlib fronts. It is also influential in the fight for Damascus. Jabhat al-Nusra is quietly cultivating influence within rebel governance and shaping the opposition where it can, although it appears that most opposition groups are cooperating with JN opportunistically rather than ideologically.

Assad's atrocities and the humanitarian crisis they have caused favor Jabhat al-Nusra and harm the prospects for forming an inclusive and stable government. The death toll as of April 2014 approached 200,000 according to the United Nations.⁹ The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that more than 3 million Syrian refugees have left the country, with another 6.4 million internally displaced.¹⁰ This massive population movement has likely destroyed traditional social structures in many parts of Syria, creating conditions propitious for radicals to recruit and terrorize.



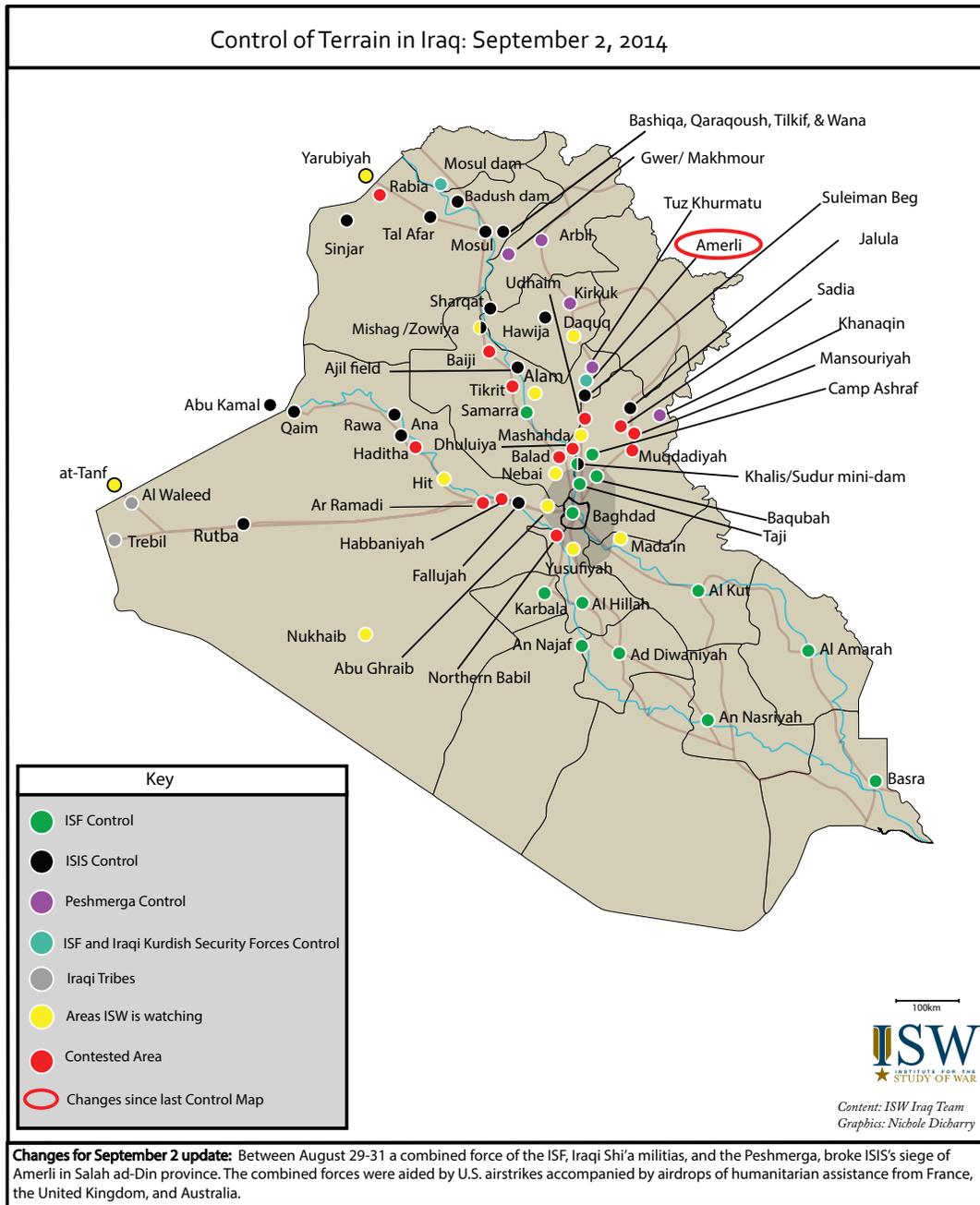
This atomization of Syrian society gravely compromises the opposition's ability to defend against ISIS in Aleppo or Idlib provinces, let alone to lead an insurgency against ISIS in Syrian cities under ISIS control, particularly while the opposition is still locked in open war against Assad.

The fall of Mosul on June 10, 2014 led to the rapid redeployment of Iraqi Shi'a militias that had been fighting in support of the Syrian regime back to Iraq.¹¹ Hezbollah forces remained in Syria, and Assad likely still receives significant support from Iran and Russia. But the Syrian regime is

attempting to adapt to these challenges and the overall effect remains unclear.

Iraq

Problem Statement: The Government of Iraq has lost control of majority-Sunni provinces including most of Ninewa and Anbar as well as portions of Salah-ad-Din. ISIS now controls major cities including Mosul, Baiji, Tikrit, Hawijah, Fallujah, Tal Afar, and Sinjar. It is consolidating its control with a degree of lethality against local opposition that precludes



widespread Sunni popular mobilization against it. It retains forward bases within striking distance of Baghdad and continues to conduct spectacular attacks within Iraq's capital.

Both the Iraqi Security Forces and the Peshmerga have suffered serious military reverses and are no longer capable of retaking the lost territory without significant foreign support. The ISF has managed to slow the ISIS advance only with the deployment of Iranian armed forces, Iraqi Shi'a militias, Lebanese Hezbollah, and a massive mobilization of Shi'a volunteers. The limited counter-offensives that these forces

have undertaken at the periphery of the Islamic State have been possible only with the application of U.S. airpower in direct support. The Iraqi government has retained its legitimacy in the international community but lost its legitimacy in the eyes of the Sunni Arab population of Iraq. The formation of a new government under Haider al-Abadi will not quickly regain the support of Iraq's Sunni Arabs.

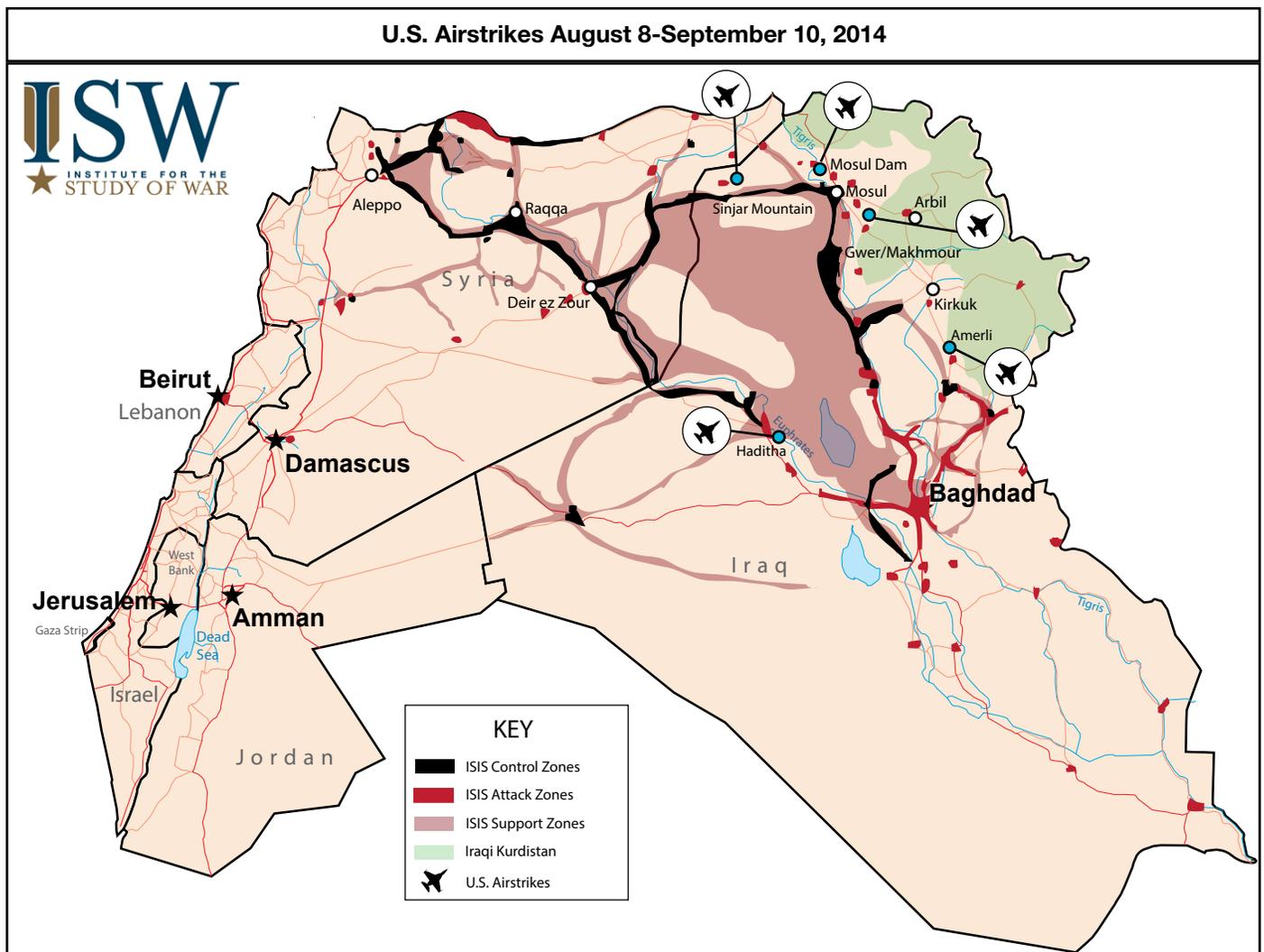
The situation in Iraq began deteriorating dramatically as the last U.S. troops were leaving at the end of 2011. Former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki systematically alienated Iraq's

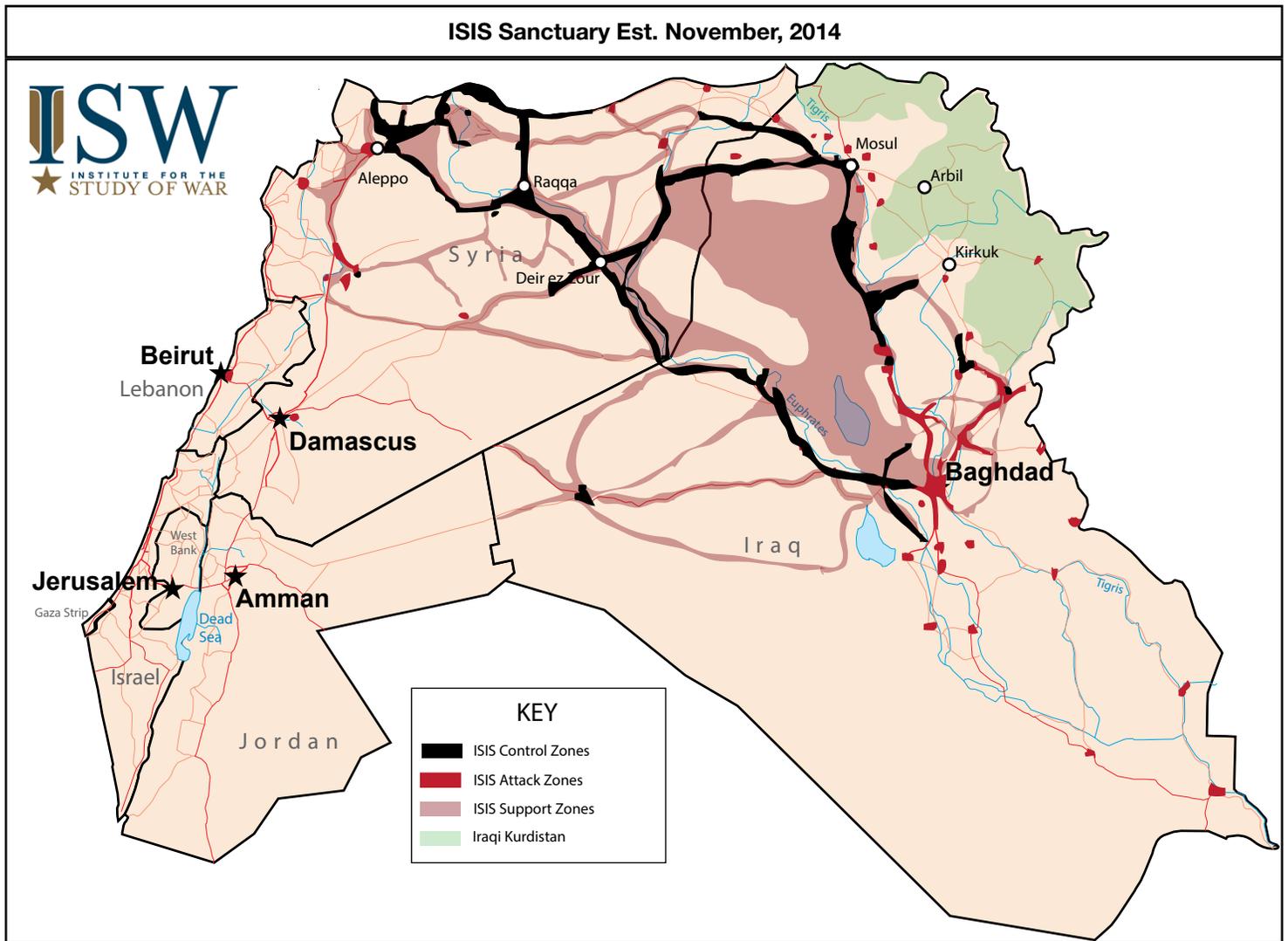
Sunni Arabs, finally sparking a massive non-violent protest movement across Iraq’s northern and western provinces in December 2012. He threatened to form a new government largely excluding Sunni politicians while ISIS’s predecessor organization, AQI, accelerated attacks against civilians. Violent confrontation ensued between the ISF and protesters in Hawijah on April 23, 2013.¹² As AQI rebranded itself as ISIS in April 2013, increasing attacks further and breaking former members out of Iraq’s prisons, the ISF campaign to target ISIS increasingly alienated Iraq’s Sunni Arabs. Exacerbating this divide, Shi’a militias integrated into the Iraqi Security Forces to fight ISIS in Anbar by April 2014.¹³ These underlying conditions undermine U.S. plans to support the ISF and the formation of local National Guard units that will ultimately work together to retake and defend Iraq’s cities.

ISIS took advantage of these conditions, steadily escalating Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) attacks against civilians to demonstrate the inefficacy of

Maliki’s forces. It focused attacks on Shi’a civilians in Baghdad in February 2013 and continued to target the same neighborhoods incessantly until 2014. Meanwhile, ISIS targeted prisons to reconstitute its former leadership and expanded its operations into Syria. ISIS then attacked the ISF and Peshmerga, preparing the battlefield in Iraq for its main attack in Mosul. The ISF, hollowed out by the effects of a Shi’a sectarian and Maliki-loyalist command structure and general mismanagement, failed to withstand the ISIS assault upon Mosul, relinquishing Kirkuk and other cities along the Kurdish boundaries to the Peshmerga. The Iraqi Army’s ignominious retreat from Mosul tarnished its reputation badly. Neither the ISF nor the Peshmerga have forces capable of retaking Mosul at this time.

ISIS is not the only armed insurgency seeking to challenge Iraq’s security forces in the wake of Maliki’s aggression against Iraqi Sunnis. A number of new anti-government groups have formed, including the Fallujah Military Council, which cooperates with ISIS, as well as the General Military Council





of Iraqi Revolutionaries, which cooperates with Jaysh Rijal al-Tariqa al-Naqshabandia (JRTN), a Ba'athist organization with presence in Mosul.¹⁴ Other groups include old enemies of the Iraqi state, such as Ansar al-Islam, a separate Salafist group based in northern Iraq. A small number of non-ISIS al-Qaeda groups are also operating in Iraq. Many of these groups do not share the ISIS ideology or vision for Iraq's future, but none have the military capacity to match ISIS. Most of them are also declared anti-government groups that rejected cooperation with the Maliki government. It is too soon to tell if the formation of a new, post-Maliki government can develop into a unified legitimate government that can placate the grievances of Iraq's Sunnis. There are, however, Iraqi tribal forces that are still willing to work with the Iraqi government and even Shi'a militias to fight ISIS in such locations as Haditha in western Anbar province.¹⁵

ISIS

The situation in the Middle East fundamentally changed when ISIS seized control of Mosul on June 10, 2014. ISIS had been operating in large areas across Iraq and Syria, but ISIS now controls major cities. ISIS has declared those cities parts of its Caliphate, a post-state vision for exclusionary ideological governance typified by ethnic and sectarian cleansing. ISIS commands a military force, but it is also attempting to govern its cities by recruiting technical experts, exerting social control, and extinguishing resistance. The measures ISIS uses to establish political control, including both coercion and the provision of services, will make this grip hard to break. ISIS continues to plan and execute military campaigns in Iraq and Syria against the remnants of state security forces in both countries which depend heavily on Iranian support.

The U.S. began to intervene in Iraq's war against ISIS on August 7, 2014. Initially, the U.S. conducted limited airstrikes to protect U.S. assets engaged in humanitarian relief missions on Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq and later in Amerli, in eastern Salah ad-Din. The airstrikes also disrupted ISIS in towns near the Kurdish capital of Arbil, which hosts a U.S. diplomatic mission. Since that time, airstrikes have expanded to include close air support to Kurdish and Iraqi ground forces as they retook the Mosul Dam from ISIS. Airstrikes in support of ground offensives to clear the environs of Haditha in Anbar province have also been reported as of September 7, 2014.

The ISIS response to U.S. airstrikes has so far included retributive murders of American hostages and declarations of intent to attack America and U.S. interests. ISIS has, however, continued operations elsewhere in Iraq, most notably VBIED attacks in central Baghdad and Samarra. ISIS has also continued to drive in Syria towards Azaz, the border crossing north of Aleppo, and appears positioned soon to seize Deir ez-Zour airport and Kuweiris airbase from the regime. If ISIS succeeds in taking these objectives, the opposition in Aleppo will lose its major cross-border line of communication into Turkey. Consequently, the opposition will experience significant resource constraints which may push them further into the arms of Jabhat al-Nusra and isolate them from future U.S. military support. The Syrian regime will lose two critical outposts, but more importantly ISIS will gain the military equipment and added capability from those bases to the detriment of every opposing force. In light of this continued urban offensive, the overall ISIS response to U.S. airstrikes has been simply to continue military operations, adapting to new battlefield conditions in Iraq in order to consolidate and harden existing gains.

The military strength of ISIS and its continued victory may cause its success to resonate, causing some of its would-be



This image, from a justpaste.it file posted to Twitter on June 24, 2014 by ISIS, shows ISIS fighters parading American-made Iraqi Army artillery pieces, armored personnel carriers, and other equipment captured during the fall of Mosul.

adversaries in Iraq and Syria to acquiesce and separate military groups to align. This is the main driver of ISIS internal growth. It is also the basis of the greatest threat that ISIS poses outside of Iraq and Syria. Whether ISIS commands terrorist attacks against the West imminently, violent jihadist elements worldwide have taken notice of the success of ISIS. Isolated splinter groups in Yemen and South Asia have declared their support to ISIS, although the overwhelming majority of al-Qaeda leaders and groups remain loyal to Ayman al-Zawahiri. Groups that emulate or seek to compete with ISIS will likely be motivated to demonstrate their ability to control separate territory or conduct spectacular attacks — or both. The success of ISIS thereby significantly increases the threat of international terrorism.¹⁶

THE DANGERS OF STATE COLLAPSE

The threat to American interests goes beyond ISIS and even al-Qaeda in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi and Syrian states have largely collapsed. They are not legitimate while they cannot assert the integrity of their borders and while they cannot regain physical control of their cities. Numerous major armed groups hold large areas of Iraq and Syria. At least four separate groups — the Iraqi and Syrian governments, the Islamic State, and the Kurdish Regional Government — are currently governing independently of one another.

The permanent destruction of the Iraqi and Syrian states, a principal objective of the Islamic State, would be a grave blow to the international order and American interests. The Islamic State and regional events are bringing enormous pressure on Lebanon and Jordan, which may well collapse under the weight. Al-Qaeda franchises in the Sahel and North Africa — particularly Libya, Algeria, Nigeria, Mali, and Niger — are eroding state borders and structures in that region (the Libyan state has, in fact, collapsed). Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has established a safe-haven in eastern Yemen and, together with the al-Houthi uprising, is threatening the continued existence of the Yemeni state as well.

Al-Qaeda has long sought to destroy borders in the Muslim world as part of its effort to create a universal caliphate, which might be reason enough to see danger in the collapse of so many states. American and Western strategy, however, is so intimately connected with the persistence of the states system that the collapse of that system would unhinge our efforts entirely. President Obama rightly says that the U.S. must work through local partners to defeat al-Qaeda and set conditions to prevent its return. But al-Qaeda and regional war are destroying or threatening the local partners with which we need to work. U.S. strategy cannot focus only on attacking the Islamic State. It must also work to re-establish functional and legitimate states that will be able to ensure that al-Qaeda does not return.



This image, posted to ISIS's Salah al-Din District Twitter page on the 11th of July, shows ISIS fighters in technicals (improvised armed vehicles) and an Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle moving towards the town of al-'Alam, north of Tikrit. ISIS took this area in late June.

THE SUNNI ARAB CENTER OF GRAVITY

Al-Qaeda and like-minded groups such as ISIS can only flourish in distressed Sunni communities. They attack every other religion and sect, but their bases must be in Sunni lands because their ideology is an extreme, exclusionary interpretation of Sunni Islam. Doing anything to al-Qaeda — defeating, disrupting, degrading, destroying, anything else — requires working with the overwhelming majority of the Sunni communities within which it lives and operates. Those communities have shown their distaste for the ideology and the groups that espouse it, rising up against them in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Egypt, and almost everywhere else they have appeared, except Pakistan.

But al-Qaeda brings more than ideology to the table. Its affiliates are extremely lethal and use brutality to maintain their positions among populations who reject their ideas. The Islamic State has been assassinating Sunni tribal leaders who allied with the U.S. and the Iraqi government during the Awakening in 2007 and pre-emptively killing those it fears might ally with us again. It has also been cleansing the areas of Syria it controls of potential Sunni opponents in an attempt to nip any reprise of the Awakening in the bud. Sunni populations cannot expel al-Qaeda groups simply because they reject their ideas. They need outside help to defeat these well-organized, well-armed, skilled, and determined zealots. They have already shown that they can and will fight against al-Qaeda groups with that help, and that they either cannot or will not fight effectively without it.

The core challenge facing the U.S. in Iraq and Syria, therefore, is the problem of enabling the Sunni Arab community stretching from Baghdad to Damascus and Turkey to Jordan to defeat al-Qaeda affiliates and splinter groups and

persuading that community to rejoin reformed states in Iraq and Syria whose security forces can thereafter provide the help it needs to keep al-Qaeda from returning.

Meeting this challenge requires centering operations within the Sunni Arab community rather than strengthening Shi'a and Kurdish forces that are alien and threatening to that community. A strategy of basing in Kurdistan and Shi'a Iraq and providing air support to Kurdish troops and ISF forces intermingled with Shi'a militias and Iranian advisers may achieve some initial successes, but will ultimately fail. The prospect of Kurdish domination over Ninewa Province, including Mosul, and of the permanent Kurdish seizure of Kirkuk, could well spark an ethnic Arab-Kurdish war. ISIS has been working actively to stoke those ethnic tensions in order to provoke precisely such a conflict, which would allow it to embed itself more deeply among an embattled Arab populace. Merely strengthening Iraqi Security Forces that are rightly seen as Shi'a dominated and militia-infiltrated may also achieve short-term gains, but at the cost of setting conditions for an even larger Sunni Arab mobilization against perceived Shi'a domination that would create new opportunities for ISIS or a successor group to establish itself.

The Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria are the only local partners who can be decisive in the fight against ISIS and JN. Our strategy must focus on making direct contact with them, coordinating our efforts with them, building their strength against ISIS, and finding out the terms on which they would be willing to reintegrate into reformed states in Iraq and Syria. They are the pivot of the entire effort and must be at the heart of every phase of our strategy.

REGIONAL INVOLVEMENT

The U.S. should have many allies in the fight against ISIS and al-Qaeda. Australia, Canada, and Great Britain have already



An undated image posted by ISIS's Salah al-Din District Twitter page on the 10th of June, displaying a captured Iraqi HMMWV. The caption reads, "Why did you leave your vehicles?"



This undated image, posted by ISIS on their Salah al-Din District Twitter page on 9th June, shows ISIS fighters preparing for the attack on Samarra in early June. The attack on Samarra on the 5th of June predates the capture of Mosul.

shown their willingness to participate in the effort, while Germany and others have already provided assistance to the Kurds. Arab states most directly threatened by ISIS could well make meaningful contributions, including troops and other direct military support, as Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee Buck McKeon has noted.¹⁷ Turkey should also be enlisted in an effort that would secure its borders and mitigate the humanitarian crisis produced by Syrian refugees in its borders.

This coalition will not come together, however, without strong American leadership, resources, and commitment to the struggle. The U.S. military has critical capabilities — apart from airpower and precision munitions — that no other state or collection of states can match. The U.S. will have to provide command-and-control elements; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets; intelligence analytical support; communications support; and intra-theater mobility, particularly helicopters. Arab state and NATO partners can provide some Special Forces troops, but their capabilities are limited by the generally small sizes of their militaries and their need to retain the ability to defend their own borders. The U.S. need not and should not enter this struggle alone, but neither can we lay back and expect our allies to be able to make it happen.

A STRATEGY TO DEFEAT ISIS

The balance of this report outlines a best-case military concept of operations for defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria consistent with other core U.S. objectives, including setting conditions to defeat JN and re-establishing state structures. It pursues an iterative approach whose first phase tests the critical hypothesis that the best-case scenario is feasible. This concept is not a complete military plan, a comprehensive political-military strategy, or a detailed examination of the political, diplomatic, and regional environment.

The Islamic State within U.S. Grand Strategy

Defeating ISIS must form part of a coherent U.S. policy to defeat al-Qaeda, including its affiliates and major splinter groups. It is essential to protecting the U.S. homeland against threats that are likely to arise if ISIS is allowed to retain the territory and military forces it has already amassed. The Islamic State seeks to overthrow not only international boundaries but also the international order. The U.S. has benefited more from that international order since 1945 than any other state and so has the largest stake in defending it. U.S. grand strategy must also work to reduce the prospect of sectarian regional war, an underlying vulnerability to the Middle East region. Other adversaries with hegemonic ambitions such as Iran can benefit from this polarization at the expense of U.S. allies and regional stability. U.S. grand strategy must counteract this polarization and buttress states against expansionist threats writ large. A strategy to counter ISIS must help the U.S. achieve these multiple grand strategic objectives.

Strategic Objectives in the Campaign against the Islamic State

The U.S. must therefore pursue the following strategic objectives while fighting ISIS:

1. Defeat and destroy ISIS and JN; defeat or reconcile their locally-focused violent Islamist partners.
2. Restore sovereign, legitimate states in Iraq and Syria so that they can secure their own territory in ways that are compatible with U.S. national security objectives. These states must be free of conditions that would allow al-Qaeda-like groups to reconstitute. They must also be free of Iranian military forces on their territory and able to reject Iranian political control while nevertheless interacting with their neighbor.
3. Prevent Iran from establishing regional hegemony in order to preserve U.S. allies and diminish sectarian polarization.
4. Ensure the survival of sovereign states, especially Jordan and Lebanon, which are most threatened.

A Military Campaign Plan against the Islamic State

The strategic objectives of defeating ISIS and restoring states in the Middle East require directly challenging the ISIS military campaign plan. ISIS is pursuing the following campaign objectives within Iraq and Syria:

1. Establish control of urban terrain in the Sunni heartland of Iraq and Syria, forming the territory of the Islamic Caliphate

2. Control critical infrastructure that increases the wealth and international leverage of the Islamic Caliphate
3. Create a war zone in Iraqi Kurdistan and ethno-sectarian mixed provinces in central Iraq, including Baghdad, in which to engage enemies away from the Caliphate
4. Destroy the offensive capability of the Iraqi Security Forces and the Syrian regime
5. Destroy Iraq by denying the capital as a seat of government and a defensible Shi'a city, and ensuring that a secular government in Syria does not recover legitimacy
6. Extend the Caliphate into areas of northern and central Syria currently occupied by the Syrian opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra and neutralize resistance to ISIS

A Framework for Defeating ISIS

The term “defeat” means to break the enemy’s will or deprive him of the capability to continue to fight. ISIS is unlikely to lose the will to fight because it is an ideological enemy. Defeating ISIS therefore requires rendering it incapable of fighting. Even that objective may be insufficient, however, because ISIS has been temporarily deprived of the capability to fight before. Military operations may need to aim instead to “destroy” ISIS, meaning to eliminate ISIS military capability such that ISIS would need to rebuild it almost from scratch in order to resume the fight. The U.S. and Iraq defeated ISIS in 2007-2008, but left enough residual force, leadership, and safe-haven, particularly in Syria and Ninewa Province to allow ISIS to reconstitute relatively quickly after U.S. forces left Iraq. U.S. strategy today must operate both in Syria and Iraq to eliminate all ISIS safe havens, destroy its leadership, and disaggregate any remaining fighters.

Military action that only disrupts ISIS and contests it along the periphery of its control zone will fail to achieve core U.S. national security objectives. A strategy to defeat ISIS must instead operate against the organization’s two centers of gravity: a) a classical military center of gravity based on key terrain and military forces and b) the political capacity to govern within controlled territory. Driving ISIS from major urban centers in Iraq and Syria is essential to attack both centers of gravity. Current U.S. strategy, by contrast, is operating almost exclusively outside of urban centers and offers no obvious path to retake the cities.

An Iterative Approach

The ISIS maneuver campaign in Iraq that started in June has culminated short of its objectives. A combination of Iraqi forces, volunteers, Iranian and Hezbollah support, and, recently, U.S. air power has stopped ISIS from continuing to advance in the mid-Euphrates and mid-Tigris River

Valleys, north and east of Mosul, and toward Baghdad. ISIS retains the ability to launch new offensive operations in Iraq, however, and is consolidating its control over the areas it has conquered. The ISIS campaign against Deir-ez-Zour in Syria began in March 2014 and has accomplished all but one of its major military objectives so far. ISIS launched a new campaign against the Syrian regime in July, attacking bases in central Syria, northeastern Hasaka Province, and Raqqa Province. This campaign is continuing with the momentum still in the hands of ISIS.

In these dire circumstances, the next step we take cannot have accomplishing the desired end state as its goal. We will have to execute an iterative approach. Framing an iterative approach with identified decision points is the antidote to “mission-creep,” which is what happens when the U.S. takes military action without any strategy or one that presumes the necessary pre-conditions exist for strategic success. The answer is not to wait for conditions to set themselves, however. Reversing the battlefield dynamics so that they no longer favor ISIS is the necessary first step of any strategy.

The entire military campaign to defeat or destroy ISIS may not be discernable from the outset. Neither is it possible to identify up front exactly what resources will be required either in kind or in number. U.S. strategy must begin with a “movement to contact,” an operation to gain more understanding of the situation and shape it in preparation for subsequent efforts.

THE CRITICAL HYPOTHESIS

The best-case scenario involves U.S. and allied forces, supported by temporary bases inside Iraq and Syria, enabling local tribal forces to expel ISIS from key terrain and then cooperating with the Iraqi government and security forces to retake urban areas and hold cleared terrain. U.S. and allied forces could also enable an emerging Syrian moderate opposition to overthrow Assad and defeat both JN and ISIS in a considerably longer time-frame. The feasibility of this scenario rests on the availability of willing and capable local partners in the Sunni communities in both countries. The existence of such potential partners and their sufficiency to the tasks are unproven hypotheses. If these hypotheses are false, then this course of action is invalid. It is not possible to validate or invalidate these hypotheses without directly engaging on the ground.

Even if the hypothesis is validated, the best-case scenario may still be unattainable in Syria. The U.S. may have willing and capable partners there who are nevertheless unable to accomplish the enormous tasks required of them on their own or even with considerable assistance. The validation or invalidation of the key hypothesis is the first major decision-point at which the U.S. can choose whether to continue the

effort or to pursue a different approach. Other decision-points will follow offering similar choices as our understanding of the situation evolves and the situation itself changes.

PHASE I: MOVEMENT TO CONTACT

The operation begins with a movement to contact that has as its objectives:

- I. Find and fix the enemy in order to:
 - Prevent the enemy from renewing offensive operations to take the Euphrates from Haditha to Ramadi, the area south of Samarra, Baghdad, and the Baiji Refinery;
 - Force the ISIS campaign in Syria to culminate before taking Aleppo or the supply lines from Turkey;
 - Establish positions from which to launch subsequent operations;
 - Prevent genocide;
 - Set conditions for subsequent operations

2. Disrupt the enemy system throughout its depth, including leadership targets as feasible. This requires continual pressure to prevent the organization from reconstituting, and preventing it from seeking other permissive environments in which to do so.

3. Reconnoiter the human terrain in order to identify potential acceptable local partners and establish relationships with them

4. Prevent ISF from eroding further and understanding how ISF command-and-control is being conducted, particularly with respect to external actors such as Iran

Disruption might target the Critical Requirements and Critical Vulnerabilities of ISIS for greatest effect throughout its depth. The vulnerabilities and requirements identified by ISW may be found in the table below. Much of this disruption may feasibly be accomplished by air-delivered munitions, but the intelligence required to identify targets and to minimize collateral damage will require a U.S. ground component. A ground force would also be required to execute follow-on phases aimed at destroying the ISIS military and regaining control of urban centers currently controlled by ISIS. Destroying the ISIS military will also require depriving it

| TABLE 1: ISIS ELEMENTS OF STRATEGIC POWER | |
|---|---|
| CENTERS OF GRAVITY | A CLASSICAL MILITARY CENTER OF GRAVITY BASED UPON TERRAIN AND MILITARY FORCES |
| | A POLITICAL CAPACITY TO FUNCTION AS A STATE WITHIN CONTROLLED TERRITORY |
| CRITICAL CAPABILITIES | MILITARY CAMPAIGN DESIGN |
| | MILITARY FORCE GENERATION |
| | POLITICAL CAMPAIGN DESIGN |
| | SUSTAINED CONTROL OF LARGE URBAN CETERS |
| CRITICAL REQUIREMENTS | LIKELIHOOD OF VICTORY |
| | ALLIANCES |
| | COMBAT SERVICE SUPPORT |
| | RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY |
| CRITICAL VULNERABILITIES | SCOPE (REQUIREMENT TO CONTROL CONTIGUOUS AND POPULATED TERRAIN) |
| | LEADERSHIP FISSURES |
| | ALLIANCE DETERIORATION |
| | BUREAUCRACY |
| | COMPETING RELIGIOUS VOICES |
| | COMPETING REGIONAL MILITARIES |

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SOURCE: ISW, "THE ISLAMIC STATE: A COUNTER-STRATEGY FOR A COUNTER STATE" BY JESSICA LEWIS, JULY 2014

of its critical capabilities, also found in the table below. The goal of Phase I is to disrupt ISIS sufficiently to prevent it from retaking the initiative and launching either currently-planned operations or offensives adapted to our efforts. Another goal should be to validate the intelligence estimate of the enemy and of the attitudes of the civilian populations before proceeding with further phases.

Key Questions that Must Be Answered in Phase I:

What is the Sunni tribal proclivity to peel off from and fight against ISIS and JN? The most important campaign assumptions to validate are: that sufficient Sunni tribal elements are willing to fight with us against ISIS and JN; that those elements have sufficient manpower and strength to succeed; and that they will be willing to form part of a re-created unitary Iraq or Syria.

Is the human terrain fundamentally different from our campaign assumptions? The vast movement of internally-displaced persons and the deliberate targeting of individuals and populations by ISIS and by Shi'a militias and the Assad regime may have fundamentally altered the tribes' ability to mobilize and control populations and key terrain.

Can we work with indigenous security forces? Or are they too ineffective or too badly compromised by the integration of militias and Iranian forces?

Can a combination of tribal forces and security forces retake urban centers?

Can we work with a moderate opposition? Is there one? Can it be made strong enough to succeed?

Is our estimate of the enemy correct?

Is the operation feasible at the proposed level of commitment? What would the higher level of commitment look like if the assumptions prove invalid? What would the off-ramp look like in that case?

What are the risks of continuing the campaign? What are the risks of abandoning it?

SUBSEQUENT PHASES (NOTIONAL)

Assuming the critical hypotheses have been validated we can sketch what the next phases might look like in outline. But this sketch is only notional and will likely require significant alteration in light of changes in the situation and in our understanding of it during the first phase of the operation. The aim of Phase II would likely be to disrupt the contiguity of the enemy's control of physical and human terrain in order to set conditions for disaggregating enemy systems and deny the enemy freedom of movement. Phase III would likely

be the counter-offensive to retake key terrain in a series of sequential operations. It would probably be broken into two major parts. The first would focus on retaking key terrain near urban centers to set conditions for retaking the urban centers, which would be the aim of the second part.

It is extremely unlikely that tribal forces will be able to take urban centers back from ISIS or serve as the "hold" force even in rural areas. Our ability even to conduct Phase III will therefore depend heavily on our success in earlier phases re-building effective security forces in Iraq and developing forces in Syria capable of doing the job. A major priority for U.S. trainers and advisers will be knitting the local and tribal forces into the formal state security forces. But those local forces cannot be subject to the command and control of Shi'a militia elements that they do not trust.

POLITICAL EFFORTS

Success against ISIS requires more than effective military operations. Political accord in Baghdad and the emergence of meaningful inclusive politics in Syria are necessary but not sufficient conditions for securing U.S. vital national security interests in the region. The U.S. must use the expanding leverage increased military support will give it in Baghdad to continue to shape the emerging Iraqi government to be as inclusive and non-sectarian as possible. Well-known sectarian actors and Iranian agents such as Hadi al-Amiri (Badr Corps commander), Qais al-Khazali (Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq leader), and Qassim al-Araji (Badr Corps deputy) cannot have leading positions in the security ministries or security services if there is to be any hope of persuading Iraq's Sunni Arabs that they are safe in the hands of the new government. Reported U.S. pressure to keep Hadi al-Amiri from getting a ministry was an important step. Continued pressure must be exerted to keep him and others like him from getting ministerial posts or otherwise obtaining de jure control over Iraq's security services. If such individuals are given inappropriate portfolios, the U.S. should continue to exert leverage — including refusing to work with forces over which they have been given command or influence — to secure their removal.

The U.S. and its partners must meanwhile engage energetically with Sunni leaders in Iraq to determine who does (or might be able to) represent Sunnis willing to re-engage with the government in Baghdad. The dramatic changes in Iraq's Sunni provinces has badly undercut the ability of current Sunni political leaders such as Osama Nujaifi (former speaker of parliament) and Rafia al-Issawi (former minister of finance) to speak for the populations of their home areas (Ninewa and Anbar in particular). The ability of well-known tribal leaders such as Sheikh Abu Risha and Sheikh Ali Hatem Suleiman to represent their tribes at this point is equally unclear.¹⁹ The U.S. should not assume that elected leaders

or sheikhs have lost their credibility and simply go around them, but neither can we assume that speaking with them is equivalent to speaking with their people. Getting U.S. personnel on the ground in Anbar, Ninewa, and Salah ad-Din Provinces is just as central to this political effort as it is to the military effort against ISIS. It does not matter whether we think a given individual represents part of Iraq's Sunni population (and no individual can represent all of it). It only matters what the Sunni themselves think about it. Our first task is to find that out.

The U.S. must also engage much more vigorously in efforts to develop an inclusive government-in-waiting in Syria than it has hitherto. Bringing what is left of the moderate opposition together is only a start, albeit an essential next step. The U.S. and its international partners, including U.N. envoy Steffan de Mistura, must also reach out to the 'Alawite community and to Syria's other minority groups in search of potential leaders who could join forces with moderate Sunni leaders to oppose extremists on all sides. Again, we must avoid the trap of assuming that groups we have recognized necessarily represent the populations that matter. Our experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and many other places over the past decade should have taught us not to rely on the advice, still less the leadership, of expatriates or leaders based outside of the countries in conflict. At the end of the day, populations look first to those leaders who stay and fight with them, and those leaders are best able to persuade people to follow them. We must find and engage those leaders.

Regional states will play a critical role in these efforts. The U.S. should exert all possible pressure on states that are currently supporting extremists in Syria either to reorient that support to moderate forces or simply to cut it off. If prominent supporters of extremists such as Qatar refuse to change their behavior, the U.S. should act in concert with international partners to interdict that support and consider sanctioning the offenders. More quiet diplomacy with Turkey should work to persuade Ankara to reorient its support. Since Turkey has likely been supporting extremists primarily as a hedging strategy in response to U.S. and international passivity, it is quite possible that a change in U.S. strategy would greatly facilitate a change in Turkish policy.

The U.S. must also re-examine its policies in Jordan and Lebanon. Both are under extreme pressure from the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Hezbollah's deployment of thousands of troops to Syria — the first major external military expedition in its four-decade history — initially strained its support in Lebanon. The expansion of sectarian conflict and the increase in Sunni extremist operations and attacks in Lebanon, however, have rallied support around Hezbollah once again. Strengthening the Lebanese government and armed forces independent of Hezbollah — to the limited extent to which that is possible — could threaten the organization's control

sufficiently to distract it from Syria somewhat. It might even weaken Hezbollah's position in Lebanon more fundamentally, although that prospect remains dim.

The odds of helping a moderate opposition defeat Assad, however, increase materially if Hezbollah were forced to withdraw some of its support from the Syrian regime. The chances of Lebanon surviving the current conflict intact would improve dramatically if it ceased to be a major base for a principal combatant in the fight. The U.S. should work with regional and global partners to explore what can be done to change this condition.

Helping Jordan survive is relatively more straightforward. Jordan continues to need financial and material support to handle the massive influx of refugees from Syria and, now, Iraq. The U.S. should aggressively lead the charge to ensure that necessary aid is both promised and delivered. It should in addition work closely with the Jordanian military to strengthen its ability to secure itself against extremist attacks and also to project force in support of our common objectives in Iraq and Syria.

RISKS OF ACTION

The risks inherent in the actions proposed in this paper are very high and difficult to mitigate. The battlefield will be very confusing, for one thing. ISIS uses captured ISF equipment and has tricked ISF units into allowing hostile forces to approach close enough to attack. Iranian military personnel move about out of uniform, making identification of them very difficult. Their presence poses a number of threats, but particularly the likelihood that they will gain access to any classified U.S. information or systems given to the Iraqis. Iranians could also conduct or encourage green-on-blue attacks against U.S. forces in order to drive the U.S. back out of Iraq.

U.S. forces must not coordinate with Iranians on the ground in Iraq, even at the tactical level. Doing so legitimizes the presence of Iranian troops in Iraq, a principle to which the U.S. cannot accede. It would also effectively require a level of intelligence-sharing and mutual confidence that would place U.S. troops too much at the mercy of the IRGC. Lack of coordination with Iranian assets, however, can lead to accidental exchanges of fire between U.S. and Iranian troops. Such exchanges could in turn lead to escalating conflict with Iran.

The best mitigation strategy for these risks is to make clear to the Iraqis that any given unit can have only one set of advisers at a time — either Americans (and our partners) or Iranians. Since American forces bring a great deal more capability that the Iraqis desperately need, it should be possible to win most of those arguments. Covert Iranian operatives will no doubt

remain intermingled with ostensibly “clean” Iraqi forces, but those operatives are unlikely to reveal themselves by attacking Americans or directing Iraqi military operations in ways that could lead to fratricide.

Iran is not the only opponent that has infiltrated the ISF, however. ISIS has done so and has also infiltrated some tribes. JN is thoroughly interwoven with the Syrian opposition. U.S. and allied forces will face a considerable risk of “insider” attacks by those infiltrators. Their presence will also significantly increase the risks that U.S. and Iraqi operations and individual operatives will be compromised. Our experience in Afghanistan has shown the difficulty of handling this insider threat even in a mature theater. It will be impossible to mitigate it fully in Iraq or Syria.

Even apart from this insider threat, the dispersed footprint of U.S. troops required by this plan and the immaturity of the theater support infrastructure exposes US soldiers to a high risk of capture and kidnapping. Individual U.S. teams are likely to find themselves threatened by overwhelming enemy force at times. Casualties, hostages, and beheading videos are extremely likely. These risks must be mitigated through the deployment of robust helicopter support and quick response forces. Such forces will greatly increase the total “boots-on-the-ground” requirement, which many will find distasteful. It is essential to keep in mind, however, that withholding those forces and capabilities in order to keep the U.S. troop presence inside Iraq and Syria below some arbitrary number enormously increases the risk to the small number of Americans who would be actually operating with indigenous forces.

Yet another source of risk flows from the very absence of a significant U.S. military presence in Iraq or Syria over the past five years. Building a theater intelligence picture almost from scratch and largely through remote means significantly increases the likelihood of major errors in that picture. Recognition of this fact is one of the drivers behind the recommendation to deploy U.S. forces and significant enablers into Iraq and Syria. The initial actions of those forces, however, will be based largely on this possibly-erroneous information, which will likely lead to casualties and mistakes that could have operationally-significant consequences. Agility and flexibility are the best ways to mitigate this risk. But the U.S. must have sufficient resources — troops, enablers, civilian support, intelligence support, and so on — to be able to recognize mistakes or unforeseen dangers quickly and respond to them without calling back to Washington for help that will take too long to arrive.

A US intervention could drive JN and ISIS to bury the hatchet and join forces. It could also spur attacks from other al-Qaeda affiliates. This risk is outweighed by the much greater risk of inaction, which would allow ISIS and JN to build up their forces independently and offers no assurance that they will

not ultimately recombine in any event. The ongoing jihadi competition caused in part by the ISIS-al Qaeda rivalry, moreover, has already increased the likelihood of attempts by other al-Qaeda affiliates to attack the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests abroad. The additional spur such efforts might receive from an American intervention in Syria and Iraq would be more than balanced by depriving two of the most lethal affiliates — JN and ISIS — of large territorial sanctuaries.

Some US support will end up inadvertently in the hands of ISIS, JN, and other malign groups. This is not a risk, it is a certainty. Fear of this eventuality has held up the provision of significant American aid to the opposition in Syria all along. It is time to recognize the failure of that approach to achieve its actual aim, namely the dramatic expansion of the lethality of those groups. Various technological means are available to limit the risk that high-end air-defense or anti-tank systems delivered to opposition forces could be turned against the U.S. or its allies. The region is sufficiently awash with weapons ranging from AK-47s to heavy machine guns, mines, and even artillery, that American equipment of that variety will not add meaningfully to the capabilities of groups already receiving enormous international support. The policy of withholding support to moderate groups for fear of arming extremists has, in fact, resulted only in depriving the moderates of the wherewithal to fight the extremists.

Iran may perceive intervention as a re-invasion to position U.S. forces to attack Iran in the event of the failure of nuclear negotiations and may respond with regional attacks. The geographic focus of U.S. efforts may provide Tehran some reassurance, since they will be focused in northern and western Iraq away from the Iranian border. But the U.S. should also consider supplying its Gulf allies with additional defensive capabilities to deter any such Iranian response or render it ineffective if deterrence fails.

FORCES REQUIRED

It is impossible to identify precisely the forces that will be required for all of Phase I, let alone for subsequent phases, before operations have commenced. The activities recommended in this paper will likely require the deployment of not more than 25,000 ground forces supported by numerous air and naval assets. The bulk of those forces will likely be comprised of various kinds of units supporting a much more limited number of Special Forces and other assets deployed in small groups with tribes, opposition forces, and Iraqi Security Forces. This plan does not envisage U.S. combat units conducting unilateral operations (apart from targeted attacks against individual enemy leaders and small groups) or leading clearing operations. It requires some combat units in the support and quick reaction force (QRF) roles described above.

In particular, it will likely require the deployment of a Combat Aviation Brigade (roughly 3,300 soldiers) with a mix of transport, reconnaissance, and attack helicopters. The QRF will likely need to be about the size of two battalions (one in Iraq and one in Syria). Keeping two battalions on QRF-alert all the time requires a total of six battalions (or two brigades) deployed — around 7,000 soldiers in all. Additional forces will be required to secure any temporary bases established in Iraq or Syria and to provide logistical support. We will not attempt to enumerate the Special Forces or other special mission units required at the tip of the spear of this operation, but they will certainly need to number in the thousands.

The U.S. must be prepared to establish and maintain temporary bases inside of Iraq and Syria. Bases in Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan, and Turkey are probably sufficient to support operations in southern Syria, along the northern Syrian border, and in Ninewa Province. But Anbar, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zour Provinces are too far from those bases to rely on them for MEDEVAC or QRF coverage. The flight times are too long to ensure that injured U.S. soldiers can receive medical attention in a timely fashion or that quick reaction forces could get to endangered units rapidly. It would be irresponsible, moreover, to attempt to fly helicopters such distances over enemy-controlled terrain without having places for them to land on the other side in emergencies or to refuel.

In contrast with the U.S. footprint in Iraq before 2011 and in Afghanistan today, any such bases should be in remote locations that are easy to defend rather than close to population centers. They are not meant to support patrols or engagement with local populations, and they should be located in positions that are as easy as possible to defend without fear of civilian casualties. The U.S. Army and Marine Corps can establish such positions — either temporary forward operating bases (FOBs) or Forward Aerial Refueling Points (FARPs) — rapidly. It may be appropriate or necessary to move them around periodically, either for reasons of security or to support what is likely to be a dynamically-changing posture of operational forces.

ISIS is a serious enemy with significant skill as light infantry, mine-emplacement, and anti-aircraft fire. U.S. forces must expect that numerous soldiers will be killed and wounded, vehicles deployed or locally acquired will be destroyed in some numbers, and some helicopters will be shot down or crash through mechanical failure.

ENEMY RESPONSES TO DIFFERENT U.S. COURSES OF ACTION

U.S. Course of Action 1: Limited disruption. The current ISIS battle plan will absorb limited and peripheral disruption

in the war zone that falls outside the core areas of the Caliphate. Such attacks may cause ISIS to try to accelerate attainment of some operational objectives, such as control of Haditha, Deir ez-Zour airfield, and Azaz on the Turkish border. Alternatively, it might cause ISIS to adopt a more defensive posture, at least at the outset, temporarily halting such operations while observing the evolution of U.S. operations. Limited disruption operations may also give ISIS time to adjust its military campaign and posture to harden itself against further injury and strengthen its strategic defenses of major cities. In any event, this scenario will likely see ISIS continue to attack into its intended war zone methodically, particularly in Kirkuk and Baghdad, to keep the fight outside of its main defensive ring.

U.S. Course of Action 2: Disruption in depth. If U.S. operations disrupt ISIS operations more deeply, particularly in eastern Syria or around Baiji and the Thar Thar regions of Iraq, then ISIS is likely to redirect its efforts to new attack zones. The new attack areas may not directly support the ISIS campaign to consolidate the Caliphate, but may serve rather divert our resources or those of our allies or to distract us from pursuing our campaign objectives. Such attack zones include: Kirkuk city, Arbil, Samarra, and Baghdad. This reaction is more likely to occur in Iraq than in Syria.

U.S. Course of Action 3: Targeting key leadership. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the fourth leader of the organization now calling itself the Islamic State. The U.S. killed his three predecessors — Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. This organization is resilient and accustomed to replacing even widespread leadership losses. It is difficult to imagine a decapitating attack severely degrading ISIS, let alone defeating or destroying it. Even if the U.S. managed to kill the cadre of military campaign designers and decision makers who are responsible for the ISIS military campaign, however, the likely result would merely be to diminish the conventional military offensive capability of ISIS. ISIS could well revert then to a well-equipped and widespread insurgency across Iraq and Syria that can still fare well against other ground forces. The strategic defenses of ISIS in major urban centers are not likely to collapse even following successful decapitation operations. ISIS is likely to respond to such a strategy with increased decentralized attacks on ISF and Syrian regime targets to disrupt their abilities to take advantage of damage to ISIS, distract them, and regain necessary resources.

U.S. Course of Action 4: Path to ISIS Destruction. Should U.S. efforts move toward achieving the defeat or destruction of ISIS, ISIS may attempt to respond with a “Black Swan” attack similar to the February 2006 destruction of the Imam al-Askari Mosque in Samarra. The rebuilt Samarra Mosque is a target, as are shrines in Baghdad, Karbala, and Najaf. Protection of this terrain against ISIS and the degradation of

ISIS capabilities in close proximity will be necessary to protect against this eventuality. It will also likely launch attacks on U.S. interests and targets, a risk that we have identified below.

ISIS Defeat. A strategy to defeat ISIS must wrest control of major urban centers from ISIS. If the strategy does not provide for clearing Mosul, Tikrit, and Fallujah in Iraq; and Raqqa, al-Bab, and Manbij in Syria, then it is not a strategy to defeat ISIS.

STRATEGIC BLUNDERS TO AVOID

U.S. policy risks committing a number of strategic mistakes that could seriously jeopardize American security interests and the prospects for halting the expansion of ISIS.

Do Nothing. This mistake will allow the Islamic State to persist, expand, and consolidate.

Disrupt ISIS. A strategy that only disrupts without defeating or destroying ISIS is the recipe for perpetual U.S. military operations in Iraq and Syria. It has no endstate and offers no prospect for a successful outcome.

Cooperate with Assad. Assad is the principal symbol of brutal 'Alawite sectarianism, fuels support for extremist Sunni groups, including JN and ISIS, and is ineffective against ISIS. Cooperation with him will not only fail, but will persuade Sunni Arabs that the U.S. is against them, foreclosing the possibility of allying with them in future against ISIS.

Cooperate with Iran at any level. Iran is the principal regional symbol of sectarianism, preferentially supports extremist Shi'a groups, and is integrating national security forces into an international structure that includes its own forces and terrorist groups. Working with Iran will have the same effect on Sunni perception as working with Assad. It may also drive our Gulf Arab allies away in the belief that the U.S. has made a permanent shift of alliances in the Middle East. Iran's leaders and military commanders, finally, have consistently and loudly repudiated any notion of cooperating with the U.S. in Iraq.

Acquiesce in the destruction of Iraq and Syria as unitary states. All borders in the Muslim world are artificial and colonial impositions; accepting the premise that they can be redrawn through violence legitimizes such warfare throughout Africa and the Middle East. Hyper-localized security forces cannot operate effectively against ISIS. It will require the resources of Iraqi and Syrian states to prevent the return of conditions that would be propitious for the re-emergence of other al-Qaeda-linked groups in the future.

Strengthen JN. This is the likeliest outcome of a strategy that focuses solely on ISIS, and it would be a disaster. JN

is a loyal al-Qaeda affiliate, deeply integrated into the global movement, and likely capable of controlling terrain in the absence of ISIS. Any strategy for dealing with ISIS must also address Jabhat al-Nusra.

Support an independent Kurdistan. An independent Kurdistan would ensure the destruction of a unitary Iraq, which is the grand strategic objective of ISIS. It will also exacerbate the destabilization of the region, involving not only Iraq and Syria, but also Turkey and Iran. Furthermore, given the internal dynamics among Iraqi Kurds, it is a fallacy to presume that conditions are set for a unitary Kurdistan to form. Kurdish forces will remain unable to clear northern Iraq or eastern Syrian of ISIS, moreover, and will be hard-pressed merely to defend their own borders.

CONCLUSION

A strategy that does not describe how Iraq will win Mosul back and how a legitimate government will regain control of Syria's northern cities is not a strategy to defeat or destroy ISIS. ISIS can control those areas now in part because the populations violently oppose the Assad regime and the government in Baghdad. The formation of a new government in Iraq does not solve this problem by itself. It may superficially bandage sectarian wounds, but it may also exacerbate them, particularly if the leaders of sectarian militias receive security portfolios. There is no meaningful political discourse in Syria at the moment. And even if political accords were reached in Damascus and Baghdad, ISIS retains the ability to control subject populations through brutal terror. There is no purely political solution to these problems.

President Obama severely mischaracterized ISIS as a pure and simple terrorist group. It is not. It is a partially-successful insurgency that now controls and governs terrain. Its successes perpetuate the narrative of victory that cows fearful populations into tolerating it and energizes global jihadis. A strategy to defeat and destroy ISIS must defeat its conventional capabilities and then its insurgent capabilities if there is any hope of depriving it finally of its terrorist capacity.

A strategy that focuses only on ISIS, moreover, ignores the threat posed by the other terrorist group with safe haven in Syria. Jabhat al-Nusra, the official al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, stands to gain support from the Syrian moderate opposition and others as a coalition forms to fight ISIS unless a major component of the strategy targets JN as well. A future in which Jabhat al-Nusra controls part of Syria is just as dangerous as one in which ISIS controls the area. The two groups share the same ultimate vision and differ only in their methodology for achieving it.

The Sunni population is a key to resisting ISIS and al-Qaeda more broadly, but does not have the combat power

or organization to resist the terrorist army. Moderate populations may resist if assisted, but we must test that assumption before we hinge a strategy on it. The expanding influence of Jabhat al-Nusra over the Syrian opposition makes it necessary to test the assumption that a moderate opposition in Syria that can still form an effective fighting force to counter ISIS. Likewise we cannot assume that Sunni tribes and populations behind the ISIS control line in Iraq will be willing and able to contribute to a counter-offensive against ISIS in the Sunni heartland of Iraq and Syria

The threat from ISIS is already very real. Whether the group itself is planning attacks against the U.S. at this moment, at least a thousand American and European citizens are cycling through the fight and returning to their home countries.²⁰ The longer the conflict is allowed to continue, the higher the likelihood that some of those fighters will turn their attention against their home countries. This threat will increase as ISIS gains the freedom to consolidate, train, and plan its next moves outside Iraq and Syria. It will increase from other al-Qaeda groups while all attention remains on ISIS. Terrorist armies, rather than cellular groups, have already emerged elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa. They will embolden other violent non-state actors and criminal organizations to challenge weak state security across the Middle East and North Africa. This is both the most dangerous and the most likely scenario while a clear path to ISIS defeat is not yet clear.

The strategy to defeat and destroy ISIS must instead be determined, deliberate, and phased, allowing for iterative decisions that adjust the plan in response to the actual realities on the ground. The U.S. is not positioned to estimate these ground conditions accurately without more direct engagement of the Sunni populations in Iraq and Syria. Developing this accurate intelligence picture, which should be accomplished in conjunction with military action to disrupt ISIS and end its current offensive, means that the first phase of the U.S. strategy should be a movement to contact. The operational risks of this phase outweigh the strategic risks of decided to destroy ISIS and then engaging insufficiently.

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