Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS

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ABSTRACT: The so-called Islamic State has emerged as a major force in the struggle for the future of Syria and Iraq with a worldview that is deeply at odds with that of the United States and its allies. In this struggle, US military and intelligence personnel must analyze the nature of this organization continuously, seeking ways to overcome its strengths and exploit its weaknesses. A discussion of such strengths and weaknesses is provided here while acknowledging constant adjustment is necessary as the Islamic State evolves.

The organization calling itself the Islamic State (IS; also widely known by the older names of ISIL or ISIS, and the Arabic acronym *Da'ish*) has emerged as a major force in the struggle for the future of Syria and Iraq.[1] IS's rise to world attention resulted from its capture of large areas of both countries since early 2014. The organization became especially prominent following its June 2014 lightning-swift military advance over northern Iraq, where it encountered an abysmally low level of government resistance.[2] This catastrophe prompted an international re-examination of Iraq's corrupt and sectarian government and the need to overcome the deeply polarizing legacy of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. The Iraqi Parliament was also shaken by the military disaster, and came under international and domestic pressure to find new leadership. Parliament correspondingly removed Maliki from his position as prime minister, and appointed him to a largely ceremonial post as one of Iraq's vice presidents.[3] The United States also intensified military assistance to both the Iraqi government and Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government and began a program of ongoing tactical airstrikes to contain and help roll back the IS advance in Iraq. Additionally, 1,600 US service members were sent to Iraq to serve as military advisors, intelligence analysts, and other needed specialists.[4] Later, a US-led coalition bombed targets in Syria.

Although IS forces did not face a serious challenge from the Iraqi military in the June offensive, the organization has fought a variety of

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1 The older names of ISIL and ISIS refer to the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria. The Arabic word sham is translated in English as Syria and more literally as Greater Syria or the Levant. Da'ish is an Arabic acronym that sounds like the vernacular Syrian verb for to trample upon. Unsurprisingly IS members do not like to be referred to as *Da'ish.*

2 International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Jihadi Jack-in-the-box*, Policy Briefing Number 38 (Brussels, Belgium: ICG, 2014), 3.

3 Associated Press, "Iraqi parliament approves new partial Cabinet," *Jordan Times,* September 8, 2014.

4 Craig Whitlock, "Dempsey raises possibility of involving U.S. combat troops in fight against the Islamic State," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2014, A-1.

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more determined adversaries throughout its existence. IS military forces have performed well in confrontations with Iraqi Kurds, Iraq's Iranian-trained Shi'ite militias, Syrian government forces, the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front, and other Syrian rebels. Eventually, it emerged as the dominant resistance group in Syria after demonstrating willingness to inflict and accept significant casualties in combat with a variety of opponents including the relatively well-armed Assad government forces. IS military victories in both Syria and Iraq have allowed the organization to seize a combined area of Syria and Iraq equivalent to the size of Jordan, containing about 6 million people.[5]

The emergence of the IS threat and its role in both Syria and Iraq has presented new challenges for the United States, Iraq, and their allies. An ongoing and evolving understanding of IS strengths and weaknesses is therefore necessary to meet American and Iraqi goals of containing, degrading, and ultimately destroying this organization as well as working with allies to develop a comprehensive strategy to meet these goals. Iraqi policy-makers, US intelligence analysts, military advisors to the Iraqis, and others will need to be especially attentive to IS to find military, political, economic, and information campaign vulnerabilities capable of being be exploited and enemy strengths to guard against and neutralize.

The Rise of the "Islamic State"

The original predecessor of IS was *Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad,* which was formed in the terrorist training camps of western Afghanistan and relocated to Iraq in 2003. This organization rose to prominence waging war against US military forces in Iraq under fugitive Jordanian terrorist, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. In October 2004, Zarqawi swore allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, after which the organization was consistently referred to as al-Qaeda in Iraq.[6] As al-Qaeda's emir in Iraq, Zarqawi paid limited attention to bin Laden's guidance, often irritating the al-Qaeda leader and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. In contrast to the two al-Qaeda leaders, Zarqawi did not curb his brutality against Shi'ite civilians in an effort to improve al-Qaeda's image with Muslims worldwide. Instead, he blatantly attacked Iraq's Shi'ite citizens and institutions.[7] In a captured letter he called the Shi'ites, "the insurmountable obstacle, the prowling serpent, the crafty, evil scorpion, the enemy lying in wait and biting poison."[8] From outside Iraq, Zawahiri sought to refocus Zarqawi solely on killing US forces and their Iraq allies, but was unable to do so.[9] Zarqawi was later killed in a US airstrike on June 7, 2006, but the anti-Shi'ite nature of his organization never changed.

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5   "Two Arab countries fall apart; The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria," *Economist*, June 14, 2004, 41.

6   The literal name of al-Qaeda in Iraq is "al-Qaeda jihad organization in the Land of the Two Rivers." Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornel University Press, 2006), 144.

7   Hashim, 192.

8   "Letter Signed by Zarqawi, Seized in Iraq in 2004," in Jean-Charles Brisard, *Zarqawi: The New Face of Al-Qaeda* (New York: Other Press, 2005), 235.

9   Nelly Lahoud and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, "The War of Jihadists Against Jihadists in Syria," *West Point Counterterrorism Center Sentinel* 7, no. 3 (March 2014): 2.

In January 2006, al-Qaeda in Iraq changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) after merging with several smaller groups.[10] About this time, the United States and Iraq implemented new anti-insurgency measures, including the establishment of US-funded anti-al-Qaeda militias known as the *Sahwa* or "Awakening" Groups, which were especially prominent in Sunni areas. As the *Sahwa* gained momentum, ISI suffered a number of serious setbacks in combat with US and *Sahwa* troops and was marginalized in Iraq by 2011.[11] The organization saved itself from extinction by fleeing to Syria, which had been engulfed in civil war since April 2011. ISI reconstituted itself in Syria after recruiting a number of foreign fighters and re-emerged in Iraq by 2013 after Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki, had defunded and disbanded the Sunni militias.[12] By then, Maliki had sidelined Iraq's Sunni political leadership and consolidated an Iraqi special relationship with Iran.[13]

In addition to its activities in Iraq, ISI emerged as an important fighting force in Syria in 2013, two years after the civil war began. At this point, ISI changed its name to Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in order to reflect its interests in both Iraq and Syria. Some of Syria's armed Islamist opposition initially welcomed ISIL support, but its extraordinary brutality and struggle to dominate the opposition soon produced a substantial backlash among other anti-government groups. ISIL leadership publicly claimed to have established authority over, and correspondingly absorbed, the large and powerful al-Nusra Front, al-Qaeda's major affiliate already fighting in Syria. Al-Nusra leaders responded they had not been consulted on a merger and would not submit to ISIL authority.[14] While the ideology of ISIL and the al-Nusra Front are close, these groups are not the natural allies they might initially appear to be. The al-Nusra Front and its leadership are dominated by Syrian fighters who view their first priority as the defeat of the Assad regime. ISIL (later IS) has a stronger Iraqi and international leadership, and is more oriented to a global agenda than its rival.[15]

In the struggle between the two jihadi organizations, the al-Qaeda leadership, by then under Zawahiri, came down squarely on the side of al-Nusra Front and ordered ISIL to confine its military activities to Iraq stating, "the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant will be abolished."[16] Predictably, for anyone but Zawahiri, ISIL refused to accept this judgment.[17] In January 2014, serious infighting was provoked by ISIL against the al-Nusra Front in Syria's Raqqa, Idlib, and Aleppo provinces with significant losses on both sides.[18] On February 2, 2014, the problems

10   Ezzeldeen Khalil, "Partners to Foes: al-Qaeda-ISIL Split Worsens Civil Conflict in Syria," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, May 29, 2014.

11   On the development of these groups see Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), especially chapter 5.

12   Anthony H. Cordesman and Sam Khazai, *Iraq in Crisis* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 96-114.

13   International Crisis Group, *Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State* (Brussels, Belgium: August 14, 2013), 15-23.

14   Lahoud and al-'Ubaydi, 2.

15   Liz Sly, "Al-Qaeda Disavows Ties to Hard-line Iraqi-Syrian Affiliate Fighting Assad," *Washington Post*, February 3, 2014, A-7.

16   "Al-Qaeda Leader Scraps Syria, Iraq Branch Merger," *Daily Star* (Beirut), June 19, 2013.

17   "ISIS Slams Zawahiri, Refuses to Quit Syria," *Daily Star*, May 13, 2014.

18   Diaa Hadid, "Radical Syria Rebel Pleads for Infighting to Stop," *Daily Star*, January 7, 2014.

between al-Qaeda and ISIL reached a crisis point when Zawahiri released a statement disassociating his organization from ISIL, thus expelling the organization from al-Qaeda.[19] Despite this affront, ISIL expanded its power by seizing territory already under the control of the al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups.[20] In late June 2014, the usually reliable Syrian Observatory for Human Rights stated it had documented up to 7,000 deaths in rebel infighting chiefly between ISIL and the al-Nusra front and its allies.[21] This casualty estimate also included a number of civilians who were killed in the crossfire.

In Iraq, ISIL's initial effort to capture territory was directed at the Sunni cities of Ramadi and Fallujah. The organization established fairly solid control of Fallujah, but maintained only a limited presence in Ramadi. [22] As noted earlier, ISIL then electrified the world with its northern offensive, which gave the organization its greatest victory. All four Iraqi army divisions stationed in the north collapsed instantly when faced with the ISIL assaults, and ISIL seized Iraq's second largest city, Mosul.[23] The militants then claimed to be planning to seize Baghdad, though this threat was never considered credible. At the time, ISIL had only 3,000-5,000 fighters in Iraq (with about the same number of allied Sunni forces), and Baghdad is a city of over 7 million people, the majority of whom are hostile Shi'ites with their own militias.[24] Following the rout of Iraqi security forces, ISIL declared an Islamic Caliphate in the area it controlled, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the ISIL leader since April 2010, was declared "caliph" and the "leader of Muslims everywhere."[25] To underscore this claim, ISIL changed its name to the Islamic State (IS), reflecting its enhanced ambitions beyond the Levant and Iraq. This statement asserted that IS was now the only legitimate authority in the Muslim world and its authority superseded and replaced the leadership of each Muslim country. This assertion also challenged al-Qaeda leadership of the jihadi movement.

Strengths

The central component of IS success is its ability to tap into Sunni Arab fears and resentment of Shi'ite leadership in Iraq and Alawite leadership in Syria.[26] Identity politics in Syria have dominated the country since its establishment after World War I and especially since the first Assad regime came to power in 1970.[27] Sectarian identity politics has been the dominant factor in Iraqi society since 2003, after gaining

19   Sly, A-7.

20   Tim Arango and Kareem Fahim, "Rebels' Fast Strike in Iraq was Years in the Making," *New York Times*, June 15, 2014, A-1.

21   Associated Press, "Sunni Jihadi Group Expels Rivals from Syrian City," *Washington Post*, July 14, 2014. Note that the Syrian Observatory has a network of activists throughout the country.

22   Michael Knights, "The ISIL's Stand in the Ramdi-Falluja Corridor," *West Point Counter Terrorism Center Sentinel* 7, no. 5 (May 2014): 8.

23   Farnaz Fassihi; A. Ali Tamer, El-Ghobashy, "Iraq Scrambles to Defend Baghdad---Iraq Says Forces Hoin Battle against Advancing Sunni Insurgents Threatening Capital, Holy Cities," *Wall Street Journal*, June 13, 2014, A-1.

24   Anthony H. Cordesman, "Key Factors Shaping the President's Islamic State Speech," *Burke Chair Paper*, September 9, 2014. 1-3.

25   AFP, "Jihadists Fighting in Syria, Iraq Declare 'Caliphate,'" *Jordan Times*, June 29, 2014.

26   Alawites are a minority sect of Islam, usually identified with Shi'ite Islam.

27   See Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), especially chapter 9.

salience from 1991 to 2003 during the era of sanctions.[28] Sunni Iraqis often viewed post-Saddam policies such as de-Ba'athification and disbanding the Iraqi Army as a mechanism to break Sunni political power in Iraq and reduce Sunni Arabs to second class citizens. Many Iraqi Sunnis referred to de-Ba'athification as "de-Sunnization," viewing the entire effort as a form of revenge and a effort to bar them from power indefinitely.[29]

US military and civilian leaders quickly came to view de-Ba'athification as a mistake due to its broad scope, but Iraq's Shi'ite-led government continued to embrace it after assuming power. While the US government created the de-Ba'athification program, it could not end or modify it by this time, and it was often used by Shi'ites within the government as an instrument to dominate Sunni Arabs.[30] In 2008, the Justice and Accountability Law replaced the original de-Ba'athification law, but was also used to repress Iraqi Sunnis.[31] Shi'ite Iraqis, for their part, were infuriated by an unrelenting series of car bombs and suicide attacks directed against Shi'ite religious sites and pilgrims.[32] The polarization created by this situation created an ideal opening for IS that will not be rolled back easily.

IS also has strong financial reserves and may be entirely self-financing at this point.[33] This financial independence is the result of an ongoing strategy to reduce or eliminate dependence on private foreign donors, who may face government crackdowns on efforts to transfer funds. To achieve financial self-sufficiency, IS has focused on seizing loot from conquered areas, imposing taxes within its areas of control and influence, and smuggling oil from facilities it controls in Syria and Iraq. Oil smuggling is especially lucrative, but IS may be able to sustain itself even if this revenue stream is disrupted.[34] US and allied efforts to crack down on IS smuggling, in some cases bombing oil assets, are useful but should not be regarded as a panacea.[35]

IS military operations benefit from the expertise of their officials who previously served as officers or technicians with the old Iraqi Army disbanded in 2003.[36] These individuals have a strong sense of grievance against both the United States and the Iraqi government, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (later ISIL then IS) allowed some of them to join that organization after they "repented" their former involvement with Saddam Hussein's secular Ba'athist regime and pledged loyalty (*bay'à*) to IS.[37]

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28 Fanar Haddad, S*ectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 89-116.

29 Hashim, 192-193.

30 W. Andrew Terrill, *Lessons of the Iraqi De-Ba'athificaiton Program for Iraq's Future and the Arab Revolutions* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), 56-60.

31 Terrill, 48-50.

32 Haddad, 184.

33 Tim Arango and Eric Schmitt, "US Actions in Iraq Fueled Rise of a Rebel," *New York Times*, August 11, 2014, A-1.

34 Steven Mufson, "Islamic State Draws on Oil Assets for Funds Fuel," *Washington Post*, September 16, 2014., A-12.

35 Helene Cooper and Anne Barnard, "Warplanes Blast Militant's Refineries in Syria, Targeting a Source of Cash," *New York Times*, September 26, 2014, A-1.

36 Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, "Trained in Army, ISIS Leaders Use Their Expertise," *New York Times*, August 28, 2014, A-1.

37 Michael Knights, "ISIL's Political-Military Power in Iraq," *West Point Counter Terrorism Center Sentinel* 7, no. 8 (August 2014): 3.

IS also has the tremendous advantage of being able to move back and forth between Syria and Iraq. If defeated in Iraq, the organization can potentially re-group in Syria and attack into Iraq at a later time, unless defeated or contained in Syria. Comprehensively defeating IS in Syria will be significantly more difficult for the US-led coalition due to the lack of a strong partner on the ground.

Another advantage for IS is that it is relatively well-armed and equipped. In the aftermath of its victory in northern Iraq, the organization seized massive amounts of modern Iraqi military equipment, acquired by the Baghdad government from the United States. While an exact inventory is not available, 4 infantry divisions and supporting troops fled the battle in June 2014, leaving behind almost all of their weapons, equipment, and supplies including artillery, tanks, and a variety of other military vehicles. It is unclear how long IS will be able to use and maintain American tanks, although it is possible IS ex-regime soldiers (or those trained by them) will be able to keep some of them in use. In Syria, IS has captured large stocks of weapons and equipment from Assad government forces, including older Russian T-55 tanks.[38] IS forces may also have been able to seize advanced Man Portable Air Defense systems (MANPADs) from one of the major Syrian bases that it has overrun.[39] Prior to these seizures, IS used weapons from the previous insurgency in Iraq and weapons supplied directly or purchased with funds from supporters throughout the region.

IS also had considerable opportunity to expand and strengthen itself during its initial time in Syria. The Assad regime allowed IS to develop its military strength in Syria with a *de facto* truce seemingly in effect in 2013 and into 2014.[40] At this time, Assad's priority was to attack more moderate and respectable opposition forces and the al-Nusra Front in the belief that the West would never allow IS to come to power. Assad appeared to hope the West would be forced to acquiesce, or even support, the continuation of his regime. The Syrian regime also chose not to attack IS, while it was attacking other rebel forces to seize territory they controlled, with heavy casualties on all sides. The militants responded to this restraint by avoiding conflict with the Syrian military, instead consolidating their hold over territory previously controlled by other opposition militias. This expedient approach dramatically ended in summer 2014, when IS attacked government forces in an effort to seize territory and military infrastructure controlled by the regime.[41] By this time, IS was a formidable fighting force. In August, its forces captured the Tabaqa airfield in northern Syria in a serious setback for the Assad regime, involving large-scale casualties on both sides. This air force complex served as a basing facility for a number of ground forces as well as several squadrons of combat aircraft.[42]

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38 Michael R Gordon and Helene Cooper, "U.S. General Says Raid Syria is Key to Halting ISIS," *New York Times*, August 22, 2014.

39 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, "Islamic State Might Have Taken Advanced MANPADS from Syrian Airfield," *Washington Post*, August 25, 2014, A-1.

40 David Blair, "Why Syrian Leader Secretly Stoked the Crisis," *Daily Telegraph*, August 23, 2014, 6.

41 "The Next War against Global Jihadism; Confronting the Islamic State," *Economist*, September 13, 2014, 53.

42 Ryan Lucas, "Jihadis Capture Major Syrian Air Base in Northeast," *Daily Star*, August 24, 2014.

IS also has strong recruiting advantages conferred by its spectacular military successes against the Iraqi army and its ability to seize and retain significant territory and declare a caliphate. IS began the lightning offensive in northern Iraq with an estimated total deployed strength of 3,000 to 5,000 fighters, now expanded to perhaps over 30,000, although only about a third are fully trained.[43] To some extent this expansion is due to IS absorbing smaller radical groups in the area it now controls and because it has the resources to pay new recruits, many of whom are destitute and have few options.[44] Perhaps more importantly, this expansion is also a result of IS propaganda successes in trumpeting victories in Syria and Iraq through its own elaborate and professional media.[45]

Finally, IS benefits from the mistakes and abuses of its enemies, particularly the Iraqi government's long history of anti-Sunni discrimination and brutality. While many Sunni Iraqis are appalled by IS brutality, they are also deeply afraid of Shi'ite militias fighting as auxiliaries with the Iraqi Army. The most important of these militias are Iranian-trained and receive ongoing funding from Tehran through its al-Quds Force.[46] During the Iraq war of 2003-2011, these militias established a reputation for torturing and killing Sunni Muslims as part of the continuing violence. Numerous witnesses claimed that Shi'ite militias are responsible for a number of recent crimes including torture, rape, and summary executions of Sunni Arabs in military operations against IS.[47] In the grim zero-sum mentality of many Iraqi Sunnis, IS may be the only protection they have from the Shi'ite militias. Sunni villagers also fear what they view as an Iranian-backed Iraqi military, which they see as little better than the hostile militias.

Vulnerabilities

In addition to its strengths, IS has a number of strategic disadvantages. IS personnel are exclusively radical Sunni Muslims, and the IS leadership seeks the religious and cultural destruction of Shi'ite Muslims. IS fighters are known to murder and enslave Shi'ites simply for being Shi'ites.[48] Beyond this savagery, IS has also announced plans to destroy all major Shi'ite shrines in the territory it captures. The organization has already made good on these threats in Mosul after it seized control.[49] IS leaders have further stated their intentions to destroy the shrines of Iraq's leading Shi'ite holy cities of Karbala and Najaf. They refer to Karbala as "the filth-ridden city" and Najaf as "the city of polytheism."[50] Many Shi'ites would die to protect these cities, and the

43   Eric Schmitt and Michael R. Gordon, "The Iraqi Army was Crumbling Long Before its Collapse, U.S. Officials Say," *New York Times,* June 12, 2014, A-1.

44   Ceylan Yeginsu, "From Turkey, ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits," *New York Times*, September 16, 2014, A-1.

45   Shane Scott and Ben Hubbard, "ISIS Displaying a Deft Command of Varied Media," *New York Times*, August 31, 2014, A-1.

46   "Unsavoury Allies: The War against Jihadists," *Economist*, September 6, 2014.

47   Kareem Fahim, Ahmed Azam and Kirk Semple, "Sunnis in Iraq often See Their Government as the Bigger Threat," *New York Times*, September 11, 2014, A-1.

48   Abigail Hauslohner, "With the Rise of Islamic State, Iraq is Splintering along Religious and Ethnic Lines," *Washington Post*, September 30, 2014, A-1.

49   Loveday Morris, "Razing of Mosul's Shrines Sparks First Signs of Resistance against Islamic State," *Washington Post*, July 30, 2014; A-8; Tim Arango "Tears and Anger, as Militants Destroy Iraq City's Relics," *New York Times*, July 30, 2014.

50   Thomas Erdbrink, "As Sunni Militants Threaten its Allies in Baghdad, Iran Weighs Options," *New York Times*, June 13, 2014, A-10.

IS approach of treating them and their religious values with contempt ensures irreconcilable friction with Shi'ites, who are the majority of the Iraqi population. IS barbarity has also made enemies of smaller ethnic groups and non-Sunni religious sects in Syria and Iraq including Kurds, Yazidis, Alawites, Christians, and others.[51]

IS brutality may have been a short-term advantage for the victory in the north where it terrorized unmotivated government troops who fled without fighting, but this strategy has long term problems. Shi'ite Iraqis and other non-Sunni Arab groups are now more strongly motivated to fight since IS has proven that there is no place for them or their religion in any future Iraq under their control. IS brutality, terrifying to undisciplined troops, may be motivation for more professional troops to seek to destroy them in order to protect their families and communities. The unfortunate consequence of this situation may be a further hardening of sectarianism on all sides, making political reconciliation among Iraq's communities more difficult.

The durability of the IS alliance with other Iraqi Sunni groups, including former Ba'athists and some tribal leaders, is also subject to uncertainty.[52] This is an unnatural coalition held together more or less exclusively by fear and hatred directed at the Baghdad government, Iraq's Shi'ite militias, and Iran. The ex-Ba'athists often belong to the "Men of the Army of the Naqshbandia Order" (often known by its Arabic initials, JRTN) and are the largest group of anti-government insurgents after IS itself.[53] This group has been completely comfortable with secularism in the past and may not be a lasting IS ally. Additionally, tribal leaders have every reason to be wary of IS, and they are not interested in ceding authority to this group.[54] IS has maintained limited cooperation with some tribes, upheld through intimidation and by providing them with opportunity to loot property left behind by fleeing Kurds and Shi'ites, but strong distrust remains.[55] In particular, tribal notables are concerned IS wishes to assume authority over them, and replace tribal law with Shariah law. Such an action could nullify traditional tribal authority.

IS also has a number of tactical and operational shortcomings. As US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey has stated, "they're stretched right now—stretched to control what they've gained and stretched across their logistics [and] lines of communications."[56] Additionally, the IS decision to kill the majority of its prisoners of war, usually after humiliating and perhaps torturing them, has practical military shortcomings beyond its moral obscenity.[57] While these actions have helped to panic and defeat enemies in the

51   Agence France-Presse, "Syrian Jihadists Lay Down Rules for Christians," *Jordan Times*, February 26, 2014; "Plight of Iraqi Minorities Worsens with Forced Conversions and Killings," *New York Times*, August 17, 2014, A-14.

52   "Douri Surfaces to 'Liberate' Iraq," *Arab News* (Saudi Arabia), July 14, 2014.

53   Eric Schmitt; Alissa J. Rubin, "U.S. and Iraqis Try to Fragment Extremist Group," *New York Times*, July 13, 2014, A-1.

54   For an outstanding work on Iraqi tribalism see Norman Cigar, *Al-Qaida, the Tribes, and the Government: Lessons and Prospects for Iraq's Unstable Triangle* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2011) especially chapter 4.

55   Knights, 5.

56   Schmitt and Rubin, A-1.

57   Associated Press, "Islamic State Group Kills Captured Syrian Soldiers," *Washington Post*, August 28, 2014, A-1.

past, Iraqi, Syrian, and Kurdish soldiers can only be encouraged to fight to the death rather than surrender to an enemy that will mistreat, and ultimately kill them. Moreover, many IS recruits appear to have come from the lowest rungs of their societies with little education and perhaps only limited literacy in Arabic.[58] Such individuals can show courage in battle, but it is unclear if they can adapt to rapidly changing battlefield conditions if their leaders are killed or incapacitated.

IS grandly claims to be a universal movement with Baghdadi, the leader of all Muslims, but this assertion is hardly credible. While the IS message has been effective among some discontented Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, it is unclear if it will have strong resonance in other countries. In all other Arab states, except Lebanon, Sunni Muslims comprise either all or most of the political leadership. Even Lebanon is quite different from Syria and Iraq since it maintains a number of democratic institutions and engages in power sharing among Christians, Shi'ite Muslims, Sunni Muslims and other groups. Moreover, many Sunni Arabs are also angered and offended by IS tactics of beheadings, crucifixion and the enslavement of women. Correspondingly, IS has created and alarmed an large number of enemies including the United States, the Sunni-led Arab states, Europe, al-Qaeda, Iran, and other countries and groups. While many of these states and organizations will not cooperate with each other, they will all behave as adversaries of IS.

Undermining Strengths & Exploiting Weaknesses

The United States, Iraq, and their allies seek either to destroy IS or marginalize the organization so it is no longer a serious threat. They also hope to eliminate conditions under which IS successor organizations might be reborn from a series of defeats. All of this can only be done with a comprehensive and evolving understanding of IS strengths and weakness. At the present time, the most important advantage that IS maintains is Sunni Arab hostility to the Baghdad government, which must be significantly diminished in order to undermine the roots of IS appeal. This will not be an easy problem to overcome, but it is achievable provided that the Iraqi government behaves responsibly and US military forces in that country are able to help rebuild the Iraqi military while airstrikes and other actions buy time. US Army, and possibly Marine Corps, trainers must also plan to continue supporting Kurdish forces in Iraq and possibly work with Sunni local defense forces assigned to operate in Sunni areas. US and Iraqi intelligence analysts will have to carefully consider any information indicating anti-IS activities among the tribes and evaluate which tribes appear most reliably anti-IS.

Iraqi leadership, not the United States, will be the most important coalition entity in any strategy to undercut IS ability to mobilize Sunni resentment against the Iraqi government. The ability to do so is currently the greatest IS strength in Iraq. On the political level, this situation requires the current and all future Iraqi governments must find ways to reassure Sunnis they will not be victimized because of their sect by Shi'ite officials operating with impunity. Sunni regions must receive greater autonomy, including local self-defense. There must also be a reasonable level of Sunni representation in national institutions in Baghdad

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58 Yeginsu, A-1

with no use of security forces to harass Sunni political leaders. In a clear sign of progress, Prime Minister al-Abadi is supporting critically important plans to establish Sunni national guard units to provide security in the north and delegate more authority and funding to provincial governors.[59] One hopeful factor is that, at the very minimum, Shi'ite leaders now know what can happen when the Sunnis are marginalized, which may be the best incentive for becoming more inclusive. Nevertheless, more needs to be done, and many Sunnis remain unconvinced of the government's lasting good will.

There must also be a strong ongoing US effort to understand IS military capabilities in order to wage war on it in both Iraq and Syria. As noted, its most spectacular victory was against a terrorized Iraqi military that was unwilling to fight, and is therefore an inconclusive test of its fighting prowess against competent enemies in conventional battles. Yet, while there is a danger of overestimating IS, there is also a real danger in underestimating it by dismissing its easy victories against weak opponents without considering its other military encounters. As noted earlier, IS has done especially well in fighting serious enemies in Syria. Establishing an accurate picture of IS military effectiveness will therefore be a difficult tightrope for US military and intelligence officials to walk, but it must be done.

In moving forward on this task, military intelligence analysts from the US Army and other services will need to work closely with national level intelligence agencies on IS order of battle issues and establishing the nature of IS communication nodes. Such actions will help to provide information critical to the tactical successes that are needed to buy time for Iraqi government reform.

Careful attention must also be given to the military support activities of regional powers that may seek to destroy IS but will also pursue their own agenda in Iraq and Syria. In this regard, Iran probably has little or no constructive role to play in rebuilding Iraq, although it is vehemently opposed to IS. Iran has supported extremely troublesome Iraqi leaders and also seeks an endgame in Syria which leaves the Assad regime in power. These are policies that Sunni Arab states will never accept, and any US cooperation with Iran in Iraq will correspondingly increase Arab suspicions of Washington. Tehran is a Shi'ite political and religious powerhouse that is gravely distrusted by Sunni Arabs throughout the region. It will never be viewed as anything other than a Shi'ite ally and advocate by the leadership of Sunni states and Sunni Iraqis.

Finally, there is the question of IS capabilities in Syria. While IS has a number of exploitable weaknesses in Iraq, Syria presents a more challenging set of problems. Since the majority of IS forces are in Syria, the US Administration's decision to lead a coalition of Arab countries conducting air strikes seems reasonable as a way of diminishing the organization's overall strength, although the endgame remains difficult to predict. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is an uncertain but possibly very weak reed on which to depend to roll back IS, even with additional training and support the United States and its allies now plan to provide.

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59   Fahim, Azam, and Semple. A-1.

The US Army must nevertheless treat any future training support role for FSA members as important since a powerful FSA force may provide moderate Syrians with some bargaining strength for a future political settlement should one appear possible and acceptable. A near optimal solution would be for a strong FSA to contribute to an eventual settlement that excludes the Islamic State and the Nusra Front while compelling Syrian President Assad and his immediate entourage to leave the country. Training the FSA also re-assures US Sunni Arab allies such as Jordan and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries that the United States is not seeking to wage war on the IS in a way that accepts the Assad regime as the only alternative to IS extremism. Still, such a settlement is a very long term possibility. In the medium term, the result of US policy in Syria will probably look more like containing rather than defeating IS. Real inclusiveness in Iraq will therefore have to become a permanent feature of Iraqi politics since IS may be hovering over the border for some time.