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Why Does the Islamic State Endure and Expand?

by Omar Ashour

ABSTRACT

The rise of IS as the most dominant, and resourceful jihadist organisation is puzzling. Militarily, the organisation's strength and power ratios pale beside its state-foes. This paper seeks to understand the sources of strength of IS and why it has not been defeated so far by much stronger international and regional powers, represented primarily by the US-led coalition and the Russian-Iranian axis supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The paper is divided into five sections. Given the nature of IS, it first reviews some of the comparative literature on why insurgencies win or survive stronger forces. The second and third parts are dedicated to review the strategy(ies) of the campaign against IS, as well as the military capacity of the organisation. The fourth part focuses on the IS current strategy against the West, especially in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. And the final part of the paper outlines concluding observations relevant to long-term counter-strategies against IS and like-minded organisations.

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Introduction

On 29 June 2014, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) spokesman Taha Subhi Falaha (Abu Muhammad al-Adnani) announced the restoration of the "caliphate" under the leadership of Ibrahim Awwad al-Badri al-Samarra'iyy (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). Adnani declared the group would henceforth be known as the Islamic State (IS) and Baghdadi as Caliph Ibrahim. This announcement came just weeks after ISIS seized Iraq's second city of Mosul on 10 June 2014. ISIS was also expanding in Eastern and Central Syria and consolidating its hold over the areas surrounding the Northern city of Raqqa, the organisation's capital. Currently, IS controls territory stretching from parts of Aleppo Governorate in Syria to parts of Salah al-Din Governorate in Iraq, over 400 miles away. This area includes major parts of the Anbar, Nineveh, Kirkuk, Diyala and Salah al-Din Provinces in Iraq and also major parts of al-Raqqa, al-Hasaka, Deir al-Zor, Aleppo, Homs, as well as rural Damascus Provinces in Syria. IS also controls parts of al-Hajjar al-Aswad district in the suburbs of Damascus and major parts of the Yarmuk Refugee Camp near Damascus. Overall, the organisation has control over territory occupied by an estimated ten million people in Iraq and Syria, and has nominal control over areas elsewhere, including parts of Central Libya (Sirte), North-Eastern Nigeria, Eastern Afghanistan (Nangarhar), Egypt (North-East Sinai) and elsewhere.

The rise of IS as the most dominant and resourceful jihadist organisation is puzzling. Militarily, the organisation's strength and power ratios pale beside its state foes. IS is estimated to have somewhere between 20,000 and 31,000 fighters. Considering the Iraqi armed and security forces alone, this translates to at least an 8:1 power ratio. And this discounts the Iraqi forces' allies, including Shiite militias, Sunni "Awakenings" tribal militias, Kurdish Peshmerga forces and a sixty-plus state coalition, as well as over 44,000 air sorties striking its locations since September

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2014.[1] On 10 June 2014 the Mosul garrison of 30,000 Iraqi Security Forces fell to an IS attacking force that was estimated to be between 800 and 1,500 fighters. The two Mosul-based Iraqi divisions outnumbered the attackers by at least twenty to one. Compared to the Taliban regime, which fell after a two-month campaign of US-led strikes, the organisation is much more resilient. Ideologically, it is not only at war with many Muslim-majority states and societies, but also with many Islamist, and even Jihadist, organisations including al-Qaida. Indeed, it fundamentally challenges al-Qaida's place as the recognised leader of transnational Jihadism. Geographically, many of the large areas that IS control are not rugged, but flat. The population under IS control has also rebelled more than once in both Syria and Iraq, suggesting that significant opposition exists.

This paper seeks to understand the sources of the strength of IS and why it has not been defeated thus far by much stronger international and regional powers, represented primarily by the US-led coalition and the Russian-Iranian axis supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The paper is divided into five sections. Given the nature of IS – a combination of an insurgency led by highly skilled and experienced individuals and a dedicated and organised proto-governmental structure with both conventional military and terrorism capacities – it will be useful first to review some of the comparative literature on why insurgencies win or survive stronger forces. The second and third parts are dedicated to review the strategies of the campaign against IS, as well as the military capacity of the organisation. The fourth part focuses on IS's current strategy against the West, especially in the aftermath of the Paris attacks. The final part of the paper outlines concluding observations relevant to long-term counter-strategies against IS and like-minded organisations.

1. Why weaker insurgents survive or beat stronger incumbents

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, there has been a steady rise in insurgents' capacities. Some scholars have shown a significant rise in the victories of insurgents over stronger incumbents or in the inability of incumbents to defeat much weaker insurgents.[2] This is a change in historical patterns. Lyall and Wilson

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[1] Lolita C. Baldor, "Stealthy Jets Ensures Other War-Fighter Aircrafts Survive", in *Associated Press*, 21 July 2015, http://apne.ws/1JdZWVg.

[2] Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict", in *World Politics*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (January 1975), p. 175-200; Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars. A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict", in *International Security*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Summer 2001), p. 93-128; Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars", in *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Winter 2009), p. 67-106, http://www.jasonlyall.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Rage_Final.pdf; Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, Santa Monica, Rand Corporation, 2010, http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG965.html; Seth G. Jones and Patrick B. Johnston, "The Future of Insurgency", in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2013), p. 1-25; Sebastian Schutte, "Geography, Outcome, and Casualties. A Unified Model of Insurgency", in *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 59, No. 6 (September 2015), p. 1101-1128.

showed that in 286 insurgencies between 1800 and 2005, the incumbents were only victorious in 25 percent of them between 1976 and 2005.[3] This is compared to 90 percent incumbent victories between 1826 and 1850. Connable and Libicki produced a similar finding while studying 89 insurgencies. In 28 cases (31 percent), the incumbent forces won and in 26 cases (29 percent), the insurgent forces won. The outcome was mixed in 19 cases (21 percent).[4]

The literature provides a wide range of explanations as to why weaker insurgents beat or survived stronger state forces. These explanations focus on geography, population, external support, military tactics and military strategy. Mao highlighted the centrality of population loyalty for a successful insurgent by stating that an insurgent "must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea."[5] The *U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* concludes that insurgencies represent a "contest for the loyalty" of a mostly uncommitted general public that could side with either the status quo or non-status quo, and that success requires persuading this uncommitted public to side with the status quo by "winning their hearts and minds."[6] Some scholars show that the brutality of incumbents against local populations affects their loyalty, and therefore helps the insurgents in terms of recruitment, resources and legitimacy.[7] General Stanley McChrystal, the former commander of US forces in Afghanistan, refers to this effect as the "insurgent math:" for every innocent local the incumbents' forces kill, they create ten new insurgents.[8] Kilcullen earlier coined the term "accidental guerrilla,"[9] a reference to the consequences of indiscriminate repression that lead elements of the local population to be drawn into fighting the incumbents, without being a priori enemies of them.

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[3] Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage against the Machines", cit.

[4] The armed conflict is still ongoing in the remaining 16 cases. Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, cit., p. 5.

[5] Mao Tse-tung, "On Protracted War", in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. II, Peking, Foreign Languages Press, (1938) 1967, p. 113-194.

[6] See David H. Petraeus, James F. Amos and John A. Nagl, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 79-136.

[7] Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency. The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam*, New York, Praeger, 1966; T. David Mason and Dale A. Krane, "The Political Economy of Death Squads: Toward a Theory of the Impact of State-sanctioned Terror", in *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (June 1989), p. 175-198; Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003; Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006; Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, "Ethnic Cleavages and Irregular War: Iraq and Vietnam", in *Politics and Society*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (June 2007), p. 183-223, http://stathis.research.yale.edu/documents/KK.PS.pdf; Luke N. Condra and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Who Takes the Blame? The Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage", in *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (January 2012), p. 167-187; Alex Braithwaite and Shane D. Johnson, "Space-Time Modeling of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq", in *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (March 2012), p. 31-48.

[8] Bob Dreyfuss, "How the War in Afghanistan Fuelled the Taliban", in *The Nation*, 23 September 2013, http://www.thenation.com/article/how-us-war-afghanistan-fueled-taliban-insurgency.

[9] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla. Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Geography-centric explanations have also been proffered by the literature. Fearon and Laitin stressed that rough terrain is one of four critical variables supportive of an insurgency.[10] Mao argued that guerrilla warfare is most feasible when employed in large countries where the incumbents' forces tend to overstretch their lines of supply.[11] Macaulay and Guevara explained how tiny numbers of armed revolutionaries in Cuba manipulated the topography to outmanoeuvre much stronger forces and gradually move from the easternmost province of the island towards the capital in the west.[12] Galula was more deterministic when it came to geographical explanations. In his seminal work *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, he stresses that "the role of geography […] may be overriding in a revolutionary war. If the insurgent, with his initial weakness, cannot get any help from geography, he may well be condemned to failure before he starts."[13] Boulding introduced the concept of the "loss of strength gradient" (LSG) to geographical explanations.[14] Briefly, it means that the further the fight is from the centre, and the deeper it is into the periphery, the more likely it is that the incumbent's forces will lose strength. Schutte builds on and modifies the concept to argue that it is accuracy, not necessarily strength, which gets lost as a function of distance. He introduces the "loss of accuracy gradient" (LAG): incumbents' long-range attacks are more indiscriminate and less accurate (in killing insurgents) than short-range ones. Hence, civilian alienation becomes a function of distance, as a result of inaccuracy and indiscriminate killings.[15]

Other scholars highlighted the importance of foreign support. In their study of eighty-nine insurgencies, Connable and Libicki argued that insurgencies that "benefitted from state sponsorship statistically won at a 2:1 ratio out of decided cases [victory is clear for one side]." Once foreign assistance stopped, the success ratio for the insurgent side fell to 1:4.[16] This is relevant only to clear-cut victories, not to mixed cases or enduring insurgencies.

Finally, scholars explained that insurgent victory was based on either their military tactics and/or their military strategy. In terms of tactics, Lyall and Wilson argue that modern combat machinery has undermined incumbents' ability to win

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[10] The other three variables are political instability, large population, and poverty. James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War", in *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (February 2003), p. 75-90.

[11] Mao Tse-tung, "On Protracted War", cit., p. 7.

[12] Neill Macaulay, "The Cuban Rebel Army: A Numerical Survey", in *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (May 1978), p. 284-295; Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Guerrilla Warfare*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1961.

[13] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare. Theory and Practice*, Westport, Praeger, 1964, p. 26.

[14] Kenneth E. Boulding, *Conflict and Defense. A General Theory*, New York, Harper, 1962.

[15] Sebastian Schutte, "Geography, Outcome, and Casualties", cit. One of the most publicized LAG examples in Egypt is the killing of the Mexican tourists by the incumbent's Apache helicopters in September 2015. The killings of Egyptian civilians due to LAG are common Sinai, but much less publicised.

[16] Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, cit., p. xiii.

over civilian population, form ties with the locals and gather valuable human intelligence.[17] Other scholars argue that insurgent access to new technologies in arms, communications, intelligence information, transportation, infrastructure and organisational/administrative capacities has allowed them to enhance their military tactics to levels historically reserved for state-affiliated armed actors.[18] This significantly offset the likelihood of being defeated by incumbents' forces. Strategically, Arreguín-Toft offers a complex model of strategic interactions between militarily weaker actors and their stronger opponents. His study concludes that weaker forces can overcome resource paucity by employing opposing strategies (direct versus indirect) against stronger ones. A guerrilla warfare strategy (an indirect strategy) is the most suitable to employ against direct attack strategies by stronger actors, including "blitzkriegs."[19]

Several elements of these explanations apply closely to the case of IS in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere at different stages and points in time, most notably the LSG, the LAG, military tactics and strategy arguments. But the story of its endurance and expansion also deviates from the above review. Certainly the political environment in the Arab-majority Middle East has its own particularities. A combination of arms and religion/sect or arms and chauvinistic nationalism in most of the Arab-majority world has proved to be the most effective means by which to gain and remain in political power. Votes, constitutions, good governance and socio-economic achievements are secondary means, and in many Arab-majority countries are relegated to cosmetic matters. IS can certainly endure and expand in a regional context where bullets keep proving that they are much more effective than ballots, where extreme forms of political violence are committed by state and non-state actors and then legitimated by religious institutions, and where the eradication of the "other" is perceived as a more legitimate political strategy than compromise and reconciliation. This is not to suggest, in any way, that the region is inherently violent. However, its dominant sociopolitical elites, with few exceptions, consistently choose to conduct politics via violent methods, ranging from systematically torturing individuals to genocidal policies.

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[17] Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, "Rage against the Machines", cit.

[18] Seth G. Jones and Patrick B. Johnston, "The Future of Insurgency", cit.; David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains. The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2013; Hans Martin Sieg, "How the Transformation of Military Power Leads to Increasing Asymmetries in Warfare? From the Battle of Omdurman to the Iraq Insurgency", in *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (April 2014), p. 332-356.

[19] Ivan Arreguín-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars", cit., p. 100 and 122. According to Arreguín-Toft, strong actors won 76 percent of all same-approach strategic interactions, while weak actors won 63 percent of all opposite-approach interactions. See *ibid.*, p. 111.

2. On counter-strategy(ies): an overview

Between late 2013 and mid-2015, IS expanded its control in Northern and Western Iraq as well as in Eastern and Central Syria. The group has incorporated some of the Iraqi Sunni individuals and clans who hold significant grievances against the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad. Those individuals include former members of Saddam Hussein's regime and alienated tribes, several armed Syrian opposition groups (from different ideological backgrounds) and thousands of foreign fighters from over 100 countries. IS has capitalised strongly on already existing sectarian divisions, intra-Sunni disputes, the frustrations of Syrian revolutionary forces, repressive and corrupt ruling elites and generally a violence-engendering political environment. The greatest military success of IS came in mid-2014 when the organisation further expanded in Iraq and Syria, partly overpowering both incumbent and insurgent forces in the two countries, while there were international fears that IS might expand into neighbouring states, especially Jordan.[20]

As a result, the United States and its allies have developed a strategy to confront IS. First, they employed air strikes, which sought to degrade and contain IS but not necessarily destroy it.[21] Building on that, a second element of the strategy was to arm and support local partners on the ground who would attack and eventually destroy IS.[22] This is based on decisions made by the Obama administration (as well as the UK government and other NATO allies) that the US must refrain from sending ground troops. Hence, the alternative is to build up the capacities of local partners.[23] In Iraq, the US and the allies have armed, trained, funded and provided intelligence support and military advice to Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), Kurdish *peshmerga* and several Sunni tribal militias. The US and the allies are also gradually ramping up their support for selected Syrian opposition groups, despite major setbacks that included attacks by *Jabhat al-Nusra* (JAN, "The Support Front") and Russian airstrikes on US-supported Syrian revolutionary groups. The third pillar acknowledges that IS is a symptom, not a cause, of the broken politics in the region.[24] Therefore, any long-term solution must reform a political environment that has consistently engendered violent radicalisation for more than four decades. Certainly, defeating IS militarily would only temporarily mask the deep structural problems at the source of its emergence, as the earlier defeat of the mother organisation, Islamic State in Iraq (ISI), in 2007-8, has done. Given the widespread levels of repression and corruption as well as senses of frustration and alienation among Arab Sunnis, the emergence

[20] Omar Ashour, "How Can Jordan Aid the Fight Against Islamic State?", in *BBC News*, 10 February 2015, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-31208815.

[21] Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Air Campaign Against the Islamic State: The Need for An "Adequacy of Resources"*, Revised ed., Washington, CSIS, 29 October 2014, p. 3-5, http://csis.org/publication/air-war-against-islamic-state-need-adequacy-resources.

[22] White House, *Strategy to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)*, 10 September 2014, http://go.wh.gov/vEgQqx.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.; Jessica D. Lewis, "The Islamic State: A Counter-Strategy for a Counter-State", in *ISW Middle East Security Reports*, No. 21 (July 2014), p. 4-5, http://www.understandingwar.org/node/2568.

of a new expression of anger would be inevitable, and perhaps one worse than IS (which is currently more extreme than al-Qaida). The outcome of this strategy is not necessarily ideal. It is more likely to be containment of IS, not necessarily the destruction of it in the short term. Certainly, a failure to significantly boost local partners and find political solutions in Iraq and Syria would de facto lock the US and NATO allies into a long-term conflict and a containment strategy.[25]

The critics of this strategy, and its ineffectiveness in defeating IS are numerous, however. Among the most well known is Sir David Richards, the former British Chief of Defence Staff, who led the coalition forces in Southern Afghanistan against the Taliban between 2006 and 2008. Before the rise of IS, in 2010, Richards warned that the war on the al-Qaida network would fail, and that the elimination of Islamist militancy was "unnecessary" and will not be achieved.[26]

This is not "a counter-terrorism operation. This is a conventional enemy in that it has armour, tanks, artillery, it's quite wealthy, it holds ground and it's going to fight. So, therefore, you have to view it as a conventional military campaign," said Richards in an interview.[27] Richards and other experts insist that the strategy may fail to neutralise IS, and that IS must be engaged in ground warfare, with at least 100,000 troops. This line of argument is politically costly, but military and counter-insurgency studies and historical precedents both back it. For example, the period which saw the decline of ISI (one of five previous titles of IS) began in late 2007, after former US President George W. Bush sent 32,000 additional troops to Iraq, bringing the total number of US forces there by April of the same year to 150,000. This was known as the "surge." But this was not the only existing anti-ISI force at the time. The "Awakening Councils" began fighting after rapid escalation took place between some of the Sunni tribes in Anbar and Diyala provinces and ISI/al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) from the end of 2005. By October 2008, the Councils had more than 54,000 fighters supporting the efforts of US forces and the ISF. In other words, between 2007 and 2008 there were more than 400,000 soldiers and fighters (US forces, regular Iraqi troops and Sunni militias) seeking to eliminate the same enemy. This large force did not succeed in eliminating ISI, but only succeeded in weakening it and minimising its activities and influence. The phrase that was used then to describe ISI status was "down, but not out." Comparing the military capacities and the resources of ISI in 2006-7, and those of IS in 2014-15, one can understand critics' scepticism.

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[25] Jessica D. Lewis, "The Islamic State: A Counter-Strategy for a Counter-State", cit., p. 28; Thomas Juneau, "Containing the Islamic State", in *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Fall 2015), p. 38-39, http://www.mepc.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/containing-islamic-state.

[26] Sean Rayment, "General Sir David Richards: Why We Cannot Defeat al-Qaeda", in *The Telegraph*, 14 November 2010, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/defence/8131217/General-Sir-David-Richards-Why-we-cannot-defeat-al-Qaeda.html.

[27] See the transcript of the Andrew Marr interview with General Lord Richards, Former Chief of the Defence Staff, in *BBC1*, 5 October 2014, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/05_10_14_general_richards.pdf.

3. On IS military capacity

IS and its five predecessors mainly employed three types of tactics and field operations.[28] First, there were the common tactics of "urban terrorism." These include attacks in cities and towns via a combination of car bombs, suicide attacks and targeted assassinations. The second type was classic guerrilla warfare, in which small mobile units employed hit-and-run tactics on security and military targets. They were usually lightly armed and avoided prolonged direct confrontation with the regular forces.[29] The third was the conventional military force, where IS used heavy artillery, armoured vehicles and tanks as well as various types of guided and unguided missiles. This latter type of warfare was undermined by the airstrikes. But the IS response to consistent Western airstrikes has been to disperse and conceal equipment and blend in with civilians when not directly on the attack.[30] While on the offensive, IS fighters use tactical surprise and take full advantage of "the fluid, confusing battlespace where both sides use the same mismatch of Russian- and US-made equipment, making discernment of friend from foe extremely challenging – a situation exacerbated by the limited number of joint terminal attack controllers."[31]

IS draws its military skills from three categories within its members. The first category is the former members of regular armed forces, including Iraqi, Syrian, Egyptian and Georgian, among others. From Iraq, soldiers and officers include former Special Forces, Republican Guard, military intelligence, artillery, armored, as well as police officers. The second category is battle-hardened guerrillas who fought in earlier local or foreign insurgencies such as those in Afghanistan or Iraq. The third category is persistent local insurgents, who accumulated significant experience both of combating the incumbents' forces and building logistical support networks over the last decade.

Beside the locals, foreign fighters can belong to any of the aforementioned categories, and therefore bolster the military capacity and the overall morale of IS fighters. In April 2015, the United Nations estimated that at least 22,000 foreign fighters (FFs) from 100 countries had joined the conflict in Syria and Iraq, including an estimated 3,000 Tunisians, 2,500 Saudis, 1,500 Jordanians, 1,550 Frenchmen, 700 British and 700 Germans. Unnamed intelligence officials suggested in April 2015 that the number of British fighters was likely much higher, as many as 1,600.[32]

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[28] In addition to ISIS and ISI, the other predecessors were the Mujahidin Consultative Council (2006), al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers commonly known as AQI (2004-2006) and al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad or Monotheism and Holy Struggle (2003-2004).

[29] Omar Ashour, "Sinai's Stubborn Insurgency: Why Egypt Can't Win?", in *Foreign Affairs Snapshots*, 8 November 2015, http://fam.ag/1HCAmVL.

[30] Justin Bronk, "The Air Campaign", in Elizabeth Quintana and Jonathan Eyal (eds.), "Inherently Unresolved. The Military Operation against ISIS", in *RUSI Occasional Papers*, October 2015, p. 12, https://rusi.org/node/15156.

[31] Ibid., p. 12-13.

[32] Richard Kerbaj, "Twice as Many UK Jihadists as Police Thought, Officials Say", in *The Sunday Times*, 19 April 2015, p. 4.

The more distant US has seen only an estimated 200 citizens travelling – amounting to 0.6 per million; a much lower ratio compared to smaller European countries such as Belgium (40 per million) and Denmark (27 per million).[33] For IS, the type of soldier that a foreign fighter represents is much needed: ideologically committed and willing to die for the cause. Hundreds of the foreign fighters became suicide bombers. Generally, this type of fighter supplements locally rooted insurgents, owing to ideological symmetry.

4. On IS strategy towards the West

Before 2015, the strategy of IS was primarily geocentric. It aimed initially to capture geographical territory, then to cleanse and control it, and then to state-build within it according to its ideology. After doing so (and in some cases while doing so), IS expanded into nearby territory by attacking their neighbouring enemies. This pattern gradually started to change from the summer of 2014, especially after airstrikes began in June and August 2014 (first by the Iranians and then the Americans).

Based on open sources, IS affiliates and sympathisers have allegedly conducted no fewer than twenty-five plots/attacks against Western citizens and interests since October 2014.[34] This is compared to only two alleged plots and one attack before that date.[35] The attack was on a Jewish museum in Brussels and was planned and executed by a militant who allegedly trained in IS camps. But the IS connection in these attacks/plots was just declared support for the organisation, as opposed to an order from a high-level IS commander.

This significantly changed after the airstrikes, starting in October 2014; and not only for IS, but also for JAN. "The directive that came to us so far is not to target the West and America from *al-Sham* [Syria and other parts of the Levant]. And we are committed to the directive of Dr Ayman [al-Zawahiri] may God protect him. But if this situation [airstrikes] continues, I think that there will be consequences which are not in the favour of America or the West," said Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, the Emir of JAN in May 2015 in an Al-Jazeera interview.[36] Al-Jolani also said that al-

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[33] RFE/RL, "Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria: Where Do They Come From?", in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 December 2015, http://www.rferl.org/contentinfographics/foreign-fighters-syria-iraq-is-isis-isil-infographic/26584940.html. The UN Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee gives similar estimates. See UN documents on foreign terrorist fighters: http://www.un.org/en/sc/ctc/resources/index.html#ftf_documents.

[34] Author's preliminary dataset on IS-related attacks and plots in the West.

[35] Tom Whitehead, "Erol Incedal Cleared of Terror Attack Plot but Row Erupts Over Secret Courts", in *The Telegraph*, 26 March 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/11479825/Erol-Incedal-cleared-of-terror-attack-plot-after-secret-trial.html; Paul Cruickshank, "Raid on ISIS Suspect in French Riviera", in *CNN*, 28 August 2014, http://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/28/world/europe/france-suspected-isis-link.

[36] Ahmad Mansour interview with Abu Muhammad Al-Jolani, in *Al-Jazeera Network*, 25 May 2015, http://www.aljazeera.net/home/Getpage/0353e88a-286d-4266-82c6-6094179ea26d/c2488504-

Qaida may attack from elsewhere, but not from *al-Sham*, as a result of the order from al-Zawahiri. Assuming that his statement is genuine, the words seem to contradict the modified strategy of IS towards the West, highlighted in November 2015 by the deadly terrorist attacks in Paris.

In the last two issues of the IS multilingual magazine *Dabiq*,[37] the narrative escalated and focused on inciting terrorism inside the West. This differed from earlier issues, where the focus was on legitimating IS rule, de-legitimating state and non-state actors at war with IS (including al-Qaida and the Taliban) and calling on Muslims to migrate to IS-controlled territory. The only *Dabiq* issue that equally incited attacks within the West was the fourth: "The Failed Crusade." This was published in October 2014 in the aftermath of the Coalition airstrikes, and it included the following directive: "At this point of the crusade against the Islamic State, it is very important that attacks take place in every country that has entered into the alliance against the Islamic State, especially the US, UK, France, Australia, and Germany."[38] In the ninth issue of *Dabiq*, IS made this directive a secondary choice by stating: "Either one performs *hijrah* to the *wilāyāt* [provinces] of the *Khilāfah* [Caliphate] or, if he is unable to do so, he must attack the crusaders."[39] Overall, calls to attack the West represented a tiny proportion of the contents of *Dabiq* when compared, for example, with *Inspire* magazine, issued by al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.

If IS prioritised terrorist attacks within the West after the Coalition airstrikes, then what does IS aim to achieve from these attacks? After all, such tactics failed miserably in the case of al-Qaida. After attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, the organisation lost its bases in Afghanistan by the end of the same year as a result of the US-led counter-offensive. The Taliban, al-Qaida's main host and ally, also lost control of Afghanistan by the end of 2001. Additionally, most of al-Qaida's commanders were killed or captured, including Osama bin Laden. However, some of al-Qaida's affiliates and Jihadist figures have made a different calculation. They argue that by bringing the US and its allies to Afghanistan and Iraq, they succeeded in bringing their "far enemy" nearer to hand and, therefore, were able to cause more damage because they were attacking from closer up. IS leadership could be aiming either for a similar scenario or to "deter" the West from attacking the territories it controls. This does not mean that the terror strategy in the West will be successful this time, but it does mean that the threat level is higher. IS resources and capacities are much more significant compared to those of al-Qaida.

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dc43-41de-9f2d-e8c96c893a36. An English translation is available in the Al-Minara blog: http://wp.me/p3kIwx-kz.

[37] Issues No. 11 (August 2015) and No. 12 (November 2015). All issues of *Dabiq* are available in the Clarion Project's website: http://www.clarionproject.org/news/islamic-state-isis-isil-propaganda-magazine-dabiq.

[38] *Dabiq*, No. 4 (October 2014), p. 44.

[39] *Dabiq*, No. 9 (May 2015), p. 54.

5. On strategy and environment: concluding observations

The counter-strategy employed by the US-led coalition had some positive impacts. Airstrikes and air presence over Iraq and Syria have compelled IS to limit the use of conventional military tactics, which it used in mid-2014 when it invaded swaths of territory by moving convoys of tens or hundreds of vehicles. Airstrikes also provided limited space and time for capacity-building efforts and, perhaps optimistically, for political solutions to be found. But this element of the strategy did not prevent advances and victories being made by the group in Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. This is partly because of the lack of well-trained, equipped and committed military partners on the ground. Efforts to build a Western-backed armed opposition in Syria have not been promising and are currently being undermined by Russian military intervention. In Iraq, the military performance of ISF forces and loyalist militias (many backed by Iran) has been far from ideal. Politically, the actions of some of these militias in Sunni-majority areas has exacerbated the sectarian dimension of the conflict.

Related to the political dimension, it is critical to realise that IS is a symptom and not a cause of the deeply dysfunctional politics in the region, especially in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya and Saudi Arabia. Hence, the military defeat of IS would not be enough. A sustained political reform and reconciliation process will be necessary eventually. This strategic prospect is not missed by some of the Western politicians and military commanders. "We do not understand the movement [Islamic State], and until we do, we are not going to defeat it," said Maj. Gen. Michael K. Nagata, the commander of US Special Operations forces in the Middle East.[40]

More generally, regarding the political environment, the Arab-majority uprisings have given scholars and practitioners several important lessons about how changes within the political environment can affect the rise and/or the transformation of armed radical groups. The violent extremist rationale, that political violence is the only significant method for sociopolitical change, was briefly undermined by successful civil resistance campaigns that brought down two dictatorships in Tunisia (2010 and 2011) and Egypt (2011) and initiated democratic transition processes. But the brutal tactics of the Qaddafi and Assad regimes in dealing with protestors have shown the limits of civil resistance. These limits were also highlighted in Iraq (April 2013 crackdowns by the al-Maliki government on Sunni-majority sit-ins) and in Egypt (during and in the aftermath of the July 2013 military coup).

In the context of partly democratic institutionalised transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Iraq and Yemen (especially between 2011 and 2013), a few critical policy-relevant observations can be deduced regarding the political environment and

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[40] See Eric Schmitt, "In Battle to Defang ISIS, U.S. Targets Its Psychology", in *The New York Times*, 28 Decemeber 2014, http://nyti.ms/1H95PzH.

the long-term strategic vision. First, former violent extremist organisations that transformed to non-violent political activism have notably remained in their transformed state. Groups such as the Egyptian Islamic Group (IG) and the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) and factions and individuals from the Egyptian al-Jihad organisation established political parties, competed in elections, participated in constitutional assemblies and made significant political compromises to bolster transition from authoritarianism. For example, in 2011, the IG became a mainstream political party in Egypt, organising anti-sectarian violence rallies and issuing joint statements for peaceful coexistence with the Coptic Church of Assyut (a southern city and an IG stronghold). In Iraq, US officers and employees of Task Force 134 – the unit commanding all detention operations in Iraq, including Camp Bucca, the former home of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – have witnessed similar transformations. A rehabilitation programme with a "deradicalisation" component was introduced by the US in Iraqi prisons in 2007. It had some initial positive effects, and by 2008 about 10,000 prisoners had been freed while the country was in a process of de-escalation and political transformation. But by 2010 most of the effects had dissipated, largely because of a deterioration in the mainstream political process as a result of increased sectarianisation.

Another policy-relevant observation has to do with security sector reform (SSR). From previous research, it is apparent that deradicalisation and transition from violent to non-violent activism is less likely to be sustained unless the security sector is thoroughly reformed.[41] This reform process should entail changing the SOPs, training and education curricula, leadership and promotion criteria, as well as oversight and accountability by elected and judicial institutions. Violations of the security sector, and the lack of accountability to address such violations, have been a major contributor to sparking and sustaining violent extremism. This goes all the way back to when Sayyid Qutb significantly altered his ideology after witnessing a massacre in former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's prisons in 1957.[42] Jihadism and Takfirism, in their purest forms, were both born in Egyptian political prisons in the 1960s, where torture was an endorsed systematic practice by multiple and overlapping security establishments; not that different from today's Egypt. Ultraconservative and extremist ideologies such as Salafism and Wahabbism were also born and developed under authoritarian systems. None of the aforementioned ideologies have come out of a consolidated or a mature democracy.

Related to SSR are the unbalanced civil-military relations in most of the Arab-majority countries.[43] The supremacy of armed institutions over all other state

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[41] Omar Ashour, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists. Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*, London and New York, Routledge, 2009.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Omar Ashour, "Collusion to Crackdown: Islamist-Military Relations in Egypt", in *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Papers*, No. 14 (March 2015), http://brook.gs/1PwQW0D; Yezid Sayigh, "Militaries, Civilians and the Crisis of the Arab State", in *Monkey Cage*, 8 December 2014, http://wpo.st/YPj-1; Youssef Chaitani, Omar Ashour and Vito Intini, *An Overview of the Arab Security Sector amidst Political Transitions: Reflections on Legacies, Functions and Perceptions*, paper for the UN

institutions has engendered a political environment in which state repression has become the most important method for attaining and remaining in political power. Such a context, in which state-sanctioned violence is legitimated in various forms (including official religious institutions and hyper-nationalist propaganda), is less likely to lead to deradicalisation or sustained stability.

Demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) are also critical processes that can engender or undermine political environments that are supportive of violent extremism. The politicisation of these processes and their failure in Libya and Yemen in the aftermath of the Libyan revolution and Yemeni uprising have led to the rise of multiple armed non-state actors. This resulted in facilitating necessary resources and logistics to organisations such as IS as well as al-Qaida affiliated groups. DDR is directly related to SSR. Most armed non-state actors in post-conflict environments will refuse to disband and demobilise if there is no mutual trust or weak institutional arrangements to balance relations with the official security and military sectors. This is especially the case when these official sectors have been traditionally above oversight, accountability and law. This is among the reasons for the failure of de-escalation in towns and regions including Derna in Eastern Libya to Sinai in North-Eastern Egypt, Central and Northern parts of Iraq, and Southern and South-Eastern and Northern parts of Yemen, where armed actors representing the authorities are deeply mistrusted owing to historical violations and impunities. SSR and DDR failure will undermine any future political solution in Syria and hence in the long term empower various non-state actors.

A final observation is also critical: popular support for national reconciliation, compromises, inclusion and general de-escalation is crucial for undermining violent extremism and the environments that engender and sustain it. Popular support for these processes is partly a result of a political culture that "can be created and promoted via elementary, secondary and higher education, as well as a result of a responsible free media that promotes such concepts, as opposed to a hysteric media that promotes social and sectarian polarization,"[44] which is currently the case in many of the Arab-majority states.

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