

AIR WAR COLLEGE

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THE GRAND STRATEGY OF THE ISLAMIC STATE:

WHAT CAN THE COALITION DO ABOUT IT?

by

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A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

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10 February 2016

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Biography

Lieutenant Colonel Harmon (Hugh) Curry, Jr., United States Air Force (retired) is assigned as a student to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama. Retiring from active duty in 2005 after serving 21 years in uniform which included three years in the United States Army Infantry, he is currently a Department of the Air Force Civilian senior analyst in the Operations career field. For the past nine years he worked in the Office of Air Force Lessons Learned, where he was responsible for sharing relevant lessons with the allies of the United States. While commissioned, he was a career intelligence officer serving at the tactical to strategic levels, including in joint and combined commands. He gained extensive experience in targeting at the operational/theater level of war, serving in three different Air Operations Centers and two theater intelligence centers. He has written extensively, and helped develop policies and doctrine on Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance, Targeting, Battle Damage Assessment, Air Force efforts in defeating Improvised Explosive Devices, Security Cooperation, the post-Cold War drawdown, Remotely Piloted Aircraft, Command and Control, Irregular Warfare, and provisional commands. Lieutenant Colonel Curry is a veteran of Operations DESERT SHIELD/STORM, SOUTHERN WATCH, and DESERT FOX, and has been assigned, deployed to or had official duties in Germany, Sweden, Portugal, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Ukraine, Bahrain, Thailand, South Korea, and Canada. He has also been on several church-sponsored short-term humanitarian mission trips to Haiti and Montenegro to minister to earthquake victims and war refugees, respectively. He is a graduate of the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps program at the Florida State University where he received a Bachelor of Science Degree in Electrical Engineering. He also has a Master's of Business Administration degree in Management from the Golden Gate University.

Abstract

The pronouncement in June 2014 by its self-proclaimed caliph that the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) would be henceforth a caliphate known just as the Islamic State seemed to catch the United States government by surprise. Just six months before, President Barack Obama implied that ISIS was the “jayvee” [junior varsity] team to Al Qaeda. Since the United States government does not understand the Islamic State and the undercurrent of the radical Islamic jihadist ideology that drives it, he failed to recognize that the Islamic State was actually playing at the “varsity” level. Therefore, the United States cannot possibly develop a comprehensive, long-term strategy to defeat it without first understanding it and the environment it is operating in. Hence, this paper attempts to assist strategists to better understand the Islamic State. It does so by introducing its origins, and then proceeds to show it has the makings of a “proto-state.” It then uses the Islamic State’s own literature combined with expert analyses to construct the Islamic State’s grand strategy, and assess whether it is a threat to the United States and its allies. Then, three brief recommendations to improve the current United States strategy will be presented: 1) the United States should facilitate a long-term generational counter-ideological strategy led by Salafi and secular Muslims; 2) continue a more aggressive air campaign but in combination with a larger special operations effort in support of moderate indigenous Sunni forces; and 3) attempt more aggressive diplomacy among all stakeholders in the region to prevent the spread of the conflict into adjacent countries while shaping the conditions for a cooperative Arab and Sunni Muslim follow-on peacekeeping force once the Islamic State is crushed. The paper concludes that the current strategy of containment conducted more cohesively with allies, and more diplomatically aggressive is still the best course since the Islamic State is not an existential threat to the United States.

We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea.

Major General Michael K. Nagata,
Commander, U.S. Special Operations Forces,
Middle East, December 2014
Comments Regarding ISIS' Ideology

Introduction

The jihadi Salafi¹ group formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS) got the attention of the world in June 2014 when its scraggly militia of approximately 7,000 rolled into the Iraqi cities of Mosul and Tikrit, seemingly almost unopposed from the 30,000 Iraqi soldiers it faced. On June 29th, 2014, ISIS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself the caliph² of a newly established caliphate³ now renamed the Islamic State. His spokesman declared that all true Muslims should pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and that it was their duty to immigrate to the Islamic State. He especially encouraged Islamic legal professionals, judges, doctors, administrators and engineers to migrate to help establish, build or sustain an Islamic judicial system, services and infrastructure required by the new state. Despite the Islamic States' reputation for savagery and cruelty, tens of thousands of new recruits were inspired to migrate to the Islamic State to do their Muslim duty to fight and possibly die as martyrs struggling to establish this new state.⁴

This stunning development seemed to catch the United States government by surprise and unprepared to counter it. In fact, regarding ISIS' takeover of Fallujah on January 3, 2014, just six months before its spectacular gains in western Iraq, President Barack Obama implied that ISIS was the "jayvee" [junior varsity] team to Al Qaeda during a January 7, 2014, interview with David Remnick, the editor of the *New Yorker*.⁵ The president went on to say in the article published on January 27th: "I think there is a distinction between the capacity and reach of a bin

Laden and a network that is actively planning major terrorist plots against the homeland versus jihadists who are engaged in various local power struggles and disputes, often sectarian."⁶ This notion about ISIS changed following the takeover of Mosul and Tikrit. Since then, the United States has been leading an air campaign as the predominant force in what appears to be a strategy of containment to “degrade and defeat” the Islamic State. However, following the unconnected November 13 and December 2, 2015 attacks in Paris and San Bernardino, California, respectively, by Islamic State adherents, which killed hundreds of civilians, including 15 Americans, many Americans are wondering whether the United States actually has an effective, coherent strategy.⁷ The intent of this paper is to assist strategists to better understand the Islamic State by using its own literature combined with expert analyses to construct the Islamic State’s grand strategy, and assess whether it is a threat to the United States and its allies.

Thesis

The president of the United States failed to recognize that the Islamic State was playing at the “varsity” level because the United States government does not understand the Islamic State and the undercurrent of the radical Islamic jihadist ideology that drives it. Therefore, the United States cannot possibly develop a comprehensive, long-term strategy to defeat it without first trying to understand it and the environment it is operating in.

Origin and the Caliphate as a “Proto-State”

The Islamic State had its origins in the Al Qaeda-sponsored training camps of western Afghanistan. With the approval of Mullah Omar, the leader of the Afghan Taliban and funding from Osama bin Laden, a radical Jordanian jihadi Salafi fugitive, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, ran his own organization, *Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad*, from a camp in Herat.⁸ When the United States invaded Afghanistan following the 911 attacks, Al-Zarqawi defended the Taliban and Al

Qaeda and was wounded. He fled to northern Iraq in 2002, and joined the Kurdish terrorist group, *Ansar Al-Islam*, which viewed the Iraqi regime as apostate, and intended to overthrow Saddam Hussein and establish a Salafi state governed by Shariah.⁹

Following the invasion of Iraq by the United States and its allies in 2003, *Jamaat al-Tawhid wal Jihad* gained notoriety for fighting against the coalition. However, Al-Zarqawi did not pledge allegiance to Osama Bin Laden until 2004 because they disagreed over the mission of jihad and the doctrine of Salafi Islam. For example, Osama bin Laden and Al-Zarqawi disagreed over whether Shia Muslims should be put to death as apostate. Nevertheless, after Al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden, his organization was renamed Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and gained a reputation for its savage fighting against the Shia, blatantly attacking Shia civilians causing a rift between him, and Osama bin Laden and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Both bin Laden and al-Zawahiri tried to steer al-Zarqawi to focus solely on attacking the coalition but he could not be swayed. Even after al-Zarqawi was killed in a United States airstrike on June 7, 2006, the animosity AQI held against the Shia did not change.¹⁰ In fact, it is still a tenant of the Islamic State, fueling the sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria today.¹¹

In January 2006, IQI changed its name to the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Around this time, the United States began its surge in Iraq while encouraging Sunni insurgents to defect and join the so-called Sunni Awakening in exchange for security. Known as the Sons of Iraq, these more moderate Sunnis were disgusted by ISI's brutality so General David Petraeus put thousands of former insurgents on the American payroll, forming Sunni militias that became part of the United States-led security force against ISI and other recalcitrant insurgents. These Sunni militias were promised that they would eventually be integrated into permanent units as part of

the Iraqi army and local police forces. By 2008, ISI and other insurgent groups had been quashed bringing some long-awaited stability to the Sunni areas of Iraq.¹²

By 2011, since the Shia-dominated Iraqi government was disbanding the Sunni militias and had begun to take control of Sunni areas, in order to save itself from extinction, the ISI remnant fled to Syria. By this time, the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria was in the midst of a civil war against many disparate factions that surfaced during the Arab Spring. In Syria, ISI reconstituted itself after gaining new recruits from the foreign fighters that were flowing into Syria to defend Sunnis from the Shia Alawite forces of Assad. ISI emerged as one of the many insurgent, but important factions fighting against the government forces, and announced another name change to ISIS in 2013 to reflect its greater interests in both Iraq and Syria. At this time ISIS tried to absorb the Al-Nusra Front, Al Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, but Al-Nusra rejected this. Al Qaeda central came down on the side of Al-Nusra and directed ISIS to concentrate its activities only in Iraq. Serious violence erupted between the two organizations over missions and goals. Al-Nusra is made up primarily of Syrians whose priority is to defeat Assad while ISIS was made up of Iraqis and international fighters and focused on a global mission. In February of 2014, Zawahiri, by now the leader of Al Qaeda central after Osama bin Laden's death, disavowed ISIS, formally splitting it from Al Qaeda. Despite this, ISIS gained territory in Syria formerly occupied and controlled by Al-Nusra, and then pushed into Iraq all the way to Mosul and Tikrit, coming within just a few miles of Baghdad. It was on June 29, 2014 that the leaders of ISIS declared it a caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS since 2010, as the caliph and the "leader of Muslims everywhere" and officially changed its name to the Islamic State.¹³

It was no coincidence that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself the caliph of the new caliphate on June 29, 2014, the first full day of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. This new caliphate is allegedly a “utopian” political-religious state of pure Muslims governed by Shariah presided over by a caliph recognized as the true political successor of Muhammad. His alleged full name, Ibrahim bin Awwad bin Ibrahim al-Badri al-Hashimi al-Husseini al-Qurashi al-Samarrai, signifies that he is from the proper clan, tribe and region of the ummah, the Muslim community, who can rightfully assume the title of caliph.¹⁴ Since he is so secretive and rarely makes public appearances, it would be difficult for a third party to trace and verify his true lineage. Nevertheless, his zealous followers recognize him as the true caliph.

Once ISIS occupied territory and declared a caliphate, to prove that it behaves much like all “legitimate” states, it had to demonstrate that it rules and governs. In fact, two of the major distinctions that separate the Islamic State from Al Qaeda, making the Islamic State attractive to potential recruits, are the occupation of territory and the provision of governance. Instead of Al Qaeda’s long-term strategy to establish a global utopian Islamic society in some distant future, citizens and immigrants into the Islamic State ostensibly have the immediate gratification of living and working in this ideal society.¹⁵ Thus, based on a formula it learned from its five-month struggle to control al-Raqqa, its capital in Syria, as soon as the Islamic State takes over new territory, it consolidates its gains by forming a centralized security force, and begins to integrate and incorporate existing government services and sets up governance based on Shariah.¹⁶

To pay for these services, it generates revenue by many of the tried and true methods of thugs via criminal enterprises, as well as via the legitimate methods of all states through taxing. According to David S. Sorenson, “the Islamic State is in reality a rent-seeking criminal

enterprise.”¹⁷ In fact, many of its officials and commanders are former Iraqi Baath party officials and public servants, and ex-Army soldiers who fought against the Shia-dominated government of Nouri al-Maliki once he abandoned the Sunni militias.¹⁸ So, they are familiar with the old tried and true methods of corruption as well as how the legitimate forms of tax revenue were handled under Saddam.

The Islamic State raises revenue by many innovative methods. When it occupies territory it loots culturally significant sites as in the case of Palmyra, the ancient Roman city in Syria, and Shia mosques. It then sells artifacts on the black market sometimes taking in huge yields. In the case of Mosul, it robbed the Iraqi state bank of hundreds of millions of dollars. From the areas it occupies with oil reserves, it continues to pump oil which it sells on the black market at greatly reduced market rates across the border in Turkey, and even to the Assad regime. By some estimates the Islamic State sells 70,000 barrels of oil per day, making \$1 to 3 million per day from oil revenues alone.¹⁹ It loots the houses of Shia and other religious sect followers like the “polytheists” of anything valuable, selling their jewelry, and even melting silver and gold to produce bullion for its coins and currency reserve. It extorts money from business owners, “taxes” trucks bringing in goods and food from across the borders, sells non-Muslim women and children like the Yazidis into slavery (allowed by their strict and narrow interpretation of the Koran and the Hadith²⁰), holds hostages for ransom, and assumes control over the legitimate government tax revenue system in the areas it occupies.²¹

Of course the revenue that the Islamic State generates is for the privilege to govern and provide for the common good of its citizens. In this regard, the Islamic State touts itself as a benevolent government in essence similar to a socialist economy. Education for boys and girls, and medical care is free. It purports to provide security and protection from bandits for its

citizens. It provides public transportation like bus services, keeps the power on, the water running, and pays its civil servants, military and police force. It takes control of the industries and facilities that provide public goods to keep them running. It sets up a judicial system based on Shariah law and its narrow, literal interpretation of the Koran and brutally enforces it. It savagely represses rebellion, and makes public examples of those who would overthrow its government to intimidate would be insurgents.²² Indeed, its wealth and success and the fact that it generates revenue to pay for its services appeals to its citizens, and attracts immigrants looking for adventure or opportunities to settle in the new caliphate.²³ In fact, any significant reaction to the Islamic States' activities by foreign governments brings in a fresh wave of new recruits to come to the aid of the proto-state.

Except for the official recognition from a foreign government or an international body like the United Nations that the Islamic State is indeed a state, it behaves like a new state. It may not yet perform state operations well, but it provides some semblance of goods and services to its citizens including security, justice, transportation, education and medical care. In fact, former Iraqi Sunni Baathist government and military officials have helped set up the security and military (and criminal) apparatus to stabilize the communities it occupies, and the government administrative services every state needs to thrive. The steady stream of immigrants, money to finance its operations and services, and locals willing to serve the caliphate while actually getting paid to do so are a major propaganda coup for the proto-state.²⁴

The Grand Strategy of the Islamic State

According to scholars, a state has a grand strategy whether it actually calls it that or not. In fact, if one agrees or not that the Islamic State is actually a state, it would be hard to argue that the Islamic State does not at least have the concept of a grand strategy as a theme of its security

strategy. So, to help understand the Islamic State's grand strategy, Peter Trubowitz defines "Grand Strategy [as]...the purposeful use of military, diplomatic, and economic tools of statecraft to achieve desired ends. Scholars often define these goals in terms of national security, power or wealth, but the ends can also refer to other valued goods such as national honor, prestige, and profit."²⁵ Another useful concept of grand strategy is described by Hal Brands as: "...the theory, or logic, that binds a country's highest interests to its daily interactions with the world... At its best, then, grand strategy represents an integrated conception of interests, threats, resources, and policies. It is, in this sense, the intellectual architecture that gives structure to foreign policy and helps nations find their way in the world."²⁶ Therefore, this paper also includes the use of the information domain as part of a state's grand strategy since the exploitation of information in the form of propaganda and public information releases via the internet is the most important tool that the Islamic State employs to interact with the world. However, at this point, diplomacy is not considered a viable element of the Islamic State since it has not been officially recognized by any other state; and by its doctrine, except for those who pledge allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, all other states and people are considered either apostate, sinful, infidels or "innovators" of true Islam as are the Shia. In particular, they do not recognize secular governments, either democratic or based on a Muslim foundation, especially the Iranian, Syrian and Iraqi governments who they consider to be headed by "rafida" a derogatory term for Shia. So, there is no intentional public diplomacy since the Islamic State denounces and alienates all governments and most of the rest of the world's people.²⁷

It is not difficult to distill the Islamic State's strategic vision from its social media and video propaganda machine. In fact, its slick new glossy on-line magazine, *Dabiq*, which is published in several western languages including English, spells things out clearly with each new

edition. Its penultimate, long-term desired endstate is “a global caliphate secured through a global war.”²⁸ However, to get to that point, it appears that the Islamic State is attempting to follow a script it extracted from the Hadith and Muslim tradition regarding Muslim eschatology or the “End of Days.” In fact, to many Salafi-jihadists, the events leading up the present situation in Iraq and Syria has tangible meaning to them portending that the “End of Days” is near requiring their attention, piousness, support, immigration to populate the new caliphate, and even the sacrifice of their lives to defend it if required.²⁹

The name of the magazine, *Dabiq*, is especially telling. Dabiq is the name of a small village in northwestern Syria, between Aleppo and the Syrian border with Turkey. Salafi-jihadists believe that on the plains of Dabiq, the armies of Islam will defeat the Crusader armies of Rome or the West, and then will move on to defeat the army of Constantinople, modern day Istanbul. When al-Zarqawi stated in 2004: “The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify — by Allah's permission — until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq,” AQI did not have a prominent presence in Syria.

When the civil war broke out in Syria and Nouri al-Maliki was abandoning the Sunni militias in Iraq in 2011, ISI seized the opportunity to move into Syria to exploit the seams between the warring factions, and to consolidate and revitalize. After the caliphate was declared in June of 2014 and the first edition of *Dabiq* was published on July 5, it did not control the town of Dabiq. However, as if on script, Dabiq fell to the Islamic State shortly thereafter. “Now that it has taken Dabiq, the Islamic State awaits the arrival of an enemy army there, whose defeat will initiate the countdown to the apocalypse,” wrote Graeme Wood in *The Atlantic*.³⁰

Every edition of *Dabiq* carries the banner “Remaining and Expanding,” reflecting its short-term strategic objectives to hold on to what it attained while continuing to expand its

influence in the territory it occupies, to adjacent countries, and even to the rest of the world.³¹

Daryl G. Press writes, “a country’s vital interests are preserving its sovereignty and protecting its citizens.”³² With the establishment of the caliphate and governance over its territory, since the Islamic State is at war, its vital interests are preserving the territory it conquered, its revenue, and the prestige it garnered among like-minded jihadists and organizations who pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi after the establishment of the caliphate. As part of its glossy public affairs campaign every edition of *Dabiq* reports on progress it is making to rebuild infrastructure, feed the hungry, provide medical care, educate the “ignorant,” and keep its citizens safe. *Dabiq* also takes great lengths to publicize the successes of its recent military campaigns, and the Islamic extremist movements around the world that have pledged allegiance to the caliph enabling the Islamic State to declare new *wilayat* or provinces. Indeed, if it is too weak to hold on to its conquered territory, all the pledges “are no longer binding.”³³

Regarding new provinces, the Islamic State does not recognize manmade, “artificial” boundaries like the *Sykes-Picot line*, “the colonial-era border that divides Iraq and Syria” or between other nation-states, e.g., between Iraq and Saudi Arabia.³⁴ This reflects its mid-term strategic objectives of inspiring its new geographically separated wilayat via its model to wreak havoc on the governments within the borders of the countries they inhabit, and expand until all the provinces join, beginning with the provinces closest to Iraq and Syria. Since Saudi Arabia contains the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina, which play major parts in Muslim eschatology, the Saudi government may be next on the list of the Islamic State as it follows its script.³⁵

Is the Rise of the Islamic State a Threat to the United States and Its Interests?

According to Hal Brands, “To avoid overreach, states must determine which interests are truly vital and which threats and opportunities most urgent, and deploy their resources accordingly.”³⁶ So, is the Islamic State a threat to the United States and its interests? The Islamic State is a weak state. Compared to the United States, it has a small irregular army of about 30,000 that is currently being stretched to its limits in Iraq and Syria.³⁷ It has no power projection capability other than “lone wolf” operatives who are usually not even operationally directed by the Islamic State. It cannot invade United States territory; and its economy, which compares to the gross domestic product of Barbados, obviously does not come close to rivaling the economy of the United States.³⁸ However, it has demonstrated that it is a threat to United States citizens within the country and abroad. It has captured and executed United States civilians within the territory controlled by the Islamic State and it has inspired attacks on United States citizens within the United States.

Daryl G. Press defines “important interests” as “a broad set of material concerns that are not vital to a country’s survival. For example, the United States has longstanding allies...whose security is an important [United States] interest.”³⁹ Since the November 13, 2015 Paris attacks, it is a certainty that the Islamic State is a threat to the citizens of France and Belgium. Indeed, it is probably a threat to every European citizen on the continent. In addition to the attacks, governments are being forced to respond to the refugee crisis, spurred partly by the wars the Islamic State is taking part in in Iraq and Syria. European governments are coming to grips with the cost of sheltering the refugees, the reality that some terrorists are sneaking in among the immigrants, and the overload on government services.⁴⁰ The weaker states of Jordan and

Lebanon have been particularly stretched, and are now threatened by the instability caused by the sectarian and civil conflict in Syria.⁴¹ Indeed, even in Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the legitimacy of their governments are being influenced by the war. So, while the Islamic State is not an existential threat to the United States, if more aggressive action is not taken to counter it, it does threaten the sovereignty of our weaker allies by shaping the conditions for further instability, and as discussed, will continue to be a threat to United States and allied citizens residing in Europe and the Middle East.⁴²

Recommendations

So, with this in mind, is there more the United States could be doing “to defeat and destroy” the Islamic State? Should the United States be more aggressive in the air campaign or insert large numbers of conventional ground forces? The following three recommendations are suggested:

- 1) The extreme differences between the ideologies of the Islamic State and the rest of the world will continue to produce a long-term violent struggle. It has lasted for decades, and is currently producing conflict and violence in spots all over the world. The struggle will likely continue for at least a couple of more decades. As Huba Wass de Czege put it, “the [Islamic State] problem is not a Syrian or Iraqi problem, it is an international problem.”⁴³ Since it is a long-term problem, it should be viewed similar to global warming. Therefore, recommend that the world’s leaders come together to coordinate a cohesive and coordinated response to radical Islamic jihad ideology much like the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Global (COP21)⁴⁴ that wrapped up in Paris on December 11, 2015. Leaders and agents of the diplomatic, informational,

military, economic and cultural (DIME-C) organizations and agencies within each of the countries can determine a path forward. However, only the Sunni Muslim leaders of the ummah can ultimately determine a cultural and religious path to free the world of Salafi jihadism.⁴⁵ It has to come from them since no secular or other religious community has any credibility with Salafis to counter the propaganda radicalizing millennials.⁴⁶

- 2) Continue a more aggressive air campaign but in combination with a larger special operations effort in support of moderate indigenous Sunni forces similar to the success in defeating the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001/2.⁴⁷ Following the November 13, 2015 attacks in Paris, France and the United Kingdom stepped up their air efforts against the Islamic State element located in Syria. However, it does not appear that the United States-led coalition is making headway in reining in Russia's air operations against the anti-Assad regime factions in areas not under the control of the Islamic State, as well as its use of less precise weapons which is purportedly killing scores of innocent civilians.⁴⁸ It is urgent that all parties work together towards the same objectives being careful to minimize collateral damage, especially civilian casualties since reporting indicates that "indiscriminate" use of air-delivered weapons by the Russians and the Assad regime is contributing to the refugee crisis.⁴⁹ It will take an aggressive diplomatic effort to induce the Russians to work more cooperatively toward the same goals. (See next recommendation.) Avoid inserting even a modest western conventional ground force, as has been suggested by some politicians running for president. It may defeat the Islamic State in the short-term, but probably will not work in the long-term. Following the overthrow of Saddam

Hussein in Iraq in 2003, the handling of the occupation exasperated the Iraqis and was a major contributing factor to the violence that ensued. Therefore, this very recent history should suggest to political elites that the presence of another large United States ground force in the theater would probably only turn moderate Sunnis against it, inciting more violence and jihadi fervor, costing more American lives and treasure. Even though the Islamic State would be defeated, it would not neutralize the ideology which would morph and spread somewhere else, possibly in one of the new *wilayat* discussed above where former Islamic State officials and mujahedeen can find refuge. In fact, the United States and its allies would actually be participants in the Muslim apocalyptic script being manipulated by the Islamic State discussed previously.⁵⁰

- 3) Barring “boots on the ground,” the United States is forced to attempt more aggressive diplomacy. The sectarian violence between Shia and Sunni in the region has the potential to escalate way beyond the borders of Iraq and Syria. In this regard, the more aggressive diplomacy should start with Saudi Arabia and Iran since they are waging proxy wars in Iraq and Syria, as well as other areas of the Middle East. The United States also has to get Russia and Turkey to cooperate more fully not only between themselves, but also with the coalition. Figuring out a peaceful, face-saving solution to remove Assad while preparing for some type of combined Kurdish-Turkish-Arab-Persian peacekeeping force to fill in the power vacuum once he departs is a beginning.⁵¹ In addition, the same peacekeeping force could then be trained to move into areas formerly occupied by the Islamic State once it is defeated.

Conclusion

The conflict against the Islamic State is a struggle against a religious ideology bent on establishing a new world order based on a very narrow interpretation of the Koran and the Hadith. By staging the script found in the Hadith, the Islamic State's long-term strategic vision is to accelerate the "End of Days" which included establishing the caliphate governed by Shariah, then expanding its influence, first to adjacent states, then to other parts of world, to prepare the way for further territorial expansion. It needs fighters, and colonists willing to come and work and possibly die for this mission in the proto-state. The only way to counter this narrative is for moderate Sunni Muslim clerical and political elites to work within their communities, and with their counterparts in Shia, Persian, Arab, and Turkish enclaves in the Middle East and Europe. Secular governments, especially those in the West, and other Muslim sects cannot lead it since they do not have credibility to do so.⁵²

The Islamic State is currently not an existential threat to any country except the weaker governments adjacent to it. The Islamic State is a "weak state," but world leaders have to show they are doing more to protect their citizens from random radical Islamic jihad ideological violence inspired by it. If they do not, they face internal political turmoil within their own countries from their citizens who may believe they are not doing enough to protect them. If these governments overreact, the ideological poison will continue to spread, precipitating another recruiting boon for the Islamic State that could threaten to topple those weak governments adjacent to it.⁵³ These new regimes may pledge allegiance to the Islamic State, so it is vitally important to those countries, most of whom are allies of the United States, to contain and quell the jihadi insurgencies in their countries, and for the United States to determine a path for how to assist them that is appropriate to their cultures. As for dealing directly with the Islamic State in

Iraq and Syria, a more aggressive air campaign working in coordination with a larger contingent of Special Operations Forces on the ground that is advising and assisting moderate Sunnis is preferable than a large conventional ground force. They could work together much the same way as the initial phase of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2001-02 where Special Operators supporting indigenous anti-Taliban forces, supported by airpower, overthrew the Taliban within just a few months. However, any semblance of the United States invasion of Iraq in 2003 and then a subsequent occupation will likely only enrage the moderate Sunnis in both Iraq and Syria.

In Syria, the coalition needs to at least coordinate with the Russians and Iranians for a cease fire and the possibility to remove Assad peacefully. Once established, efforts to include moderate Sunnis in peace talks with the goal of including them in a future new government and providing public goods and services to them in their areas should be the main effort. In Iraq, the central government should work towards a similar goal. It needs to work towards including Sunnis in the governance of their territories, and ensuring they can prosper so that they do not continue to be vulnerable to the Sunni jihadi movement.⁵⁴

In summary, hopefully, this paper provided some background to help strategists understand the Islamic State better, and why inserting even a modest conventional force on the ground against it could be another disaster akin to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. For the short-term, recommend that all parties work together to develop a more effective military containment campaign without putting “boots on the ground.” Once the Islamic State is defeated, to fill the power vacuum, all parties must work together to come up with a Kurdish-Turkish-Persian-Arab peacekeeping and stabilization force to provide for security and interim governance while the

infrastructure is being rebuilt. In the long-term, the United States must allow the Muslim world to come up with their own peaceful solutions to neutralize radical Islamic jihad ideology.



Endnotes

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- 1 According to the book *ISIS: the State of Terror* by Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, Jihadi Salafism “believes that any government that does not rule through Shariah is an illegitimate infidel regime. Jihadi Salafism embraces the use of violence to overthrow the regime.” According to Stern and Berger, Salafi “is a fundamentalist Sunni Islamic movement that believes in strict adherence to Islam as they believe it was practiced by Muhammad.” Shariah is the Islamic moral code and religious law.
- 2 A caliph is the ruler of the Muslim community.
- 3 A caliphate is a political-religious state ruled by a caliph.
- 4 Stephan Rosiny, “The Rise and Demise of the IS Caliphate,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XXII, No.2, Summer 2015, 99-101.
- 5 Steve Contorno, “What Obama said about Islamic State as a ‘JV’ team,” *Politifact*, September 7, 2014, <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2014/sep/07/barack-obama/what-obama-said-about-islamic-state-jv-team/>.
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