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**NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
Newport, R.I.**

**Defeating the Islamic State at Three Levels of War**

**by**

**Kenneth Hank Chilcoat**

**Major United States Air Force**

**A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.**

**The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.**

**Signature: \_\_\_\_\_**

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## **Contents Page**

Introduction	1
National-Strategic Level	3
Theater-Strategic Level	6
Operational Level	10
Other Views	13
Conclusions	14
Recommendations	16
Notes	19
Selected Bibliography	25

## **List of Tables**

<b>Table</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
1.	IS' Critical Strengths at the National-Strategic Level	5
2.	IS' Critical Strengths at the Theater-Strategic Level	8
3.	IS' Critical Strengths at the Operational Level of War	11

## **Paper Abstract**

### *Defeating the Islamic State at Three Levels of War*

The Islamic State (IS) continues to be weakened at the operational level in Syria and Iraq. To remain legitimate, the insurgency is shifting its strategy to pursue its objectives at the national-strategic (N-S) and theater-strategic (T-S) levels of war. IS is expanding throughout the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Southeast Asia while using terrorism to attack the West. In order to fulfill the President's end state of "ultimately defeating" IS, U.S. and coalition forces must not only continue to apply pressure at the operational level but also include a concept that attacks the insurgency at the N-S and T-S levels of war. This paper uses operational art and the Joint Operation Planning Process (JOPP) to identify and examine IS' objective, desired end state, and center of gravity (COG) at each level of war. The current fight must attack at all three levels. This paper concludes with recommendations to aid planners in developing a concept to achieve the President's desired end state.

## INTRODUCTION

In April 2016, President Obama labeled the transnational jihadist insurgency of the Islamic State (IS) “the most urgent threat to our nations”.<sup>1</sup> He stated, the insurgents “are doing everything in their power to strike our cities and kill our citizens, so we need to do everything in our power to stop them”.<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates his commitment to pursue his objective “to degrade and ultimately defeat” IS.<sup>3</sup> U.S. and coalition forces, in support of Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR), have launched over 11,500 airstrikes against the insurgency in less than two years, destroying more than 22,700 targets in Syria and Iraq.<sup>4</sup> The operation has made tactical and operational gains in degrading IS’ capabilities in Syria and Iraq,<sup>5</sup> but there has been little progress towards “ultimately defeating” the organization at the national-strategic (N-S) and theater-strategic (T-S) levels of war (See Figure 1). The insurgency is rapidly expanding throughout the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Southeast Asia while staging brutal terrorist attacks against the West. In order to defeat IS, U.S. and coalition partners must continue to apply pressure at the operational level as well as implement a concept that attacks the insurgency at the N-S and T-S levels of war.

Commanders and staffs can develop this concept by applying operational art.<sup>6</sup> Varied design elements are available in operational art to understand the strategic direction and environment, define the problem, and formulate a strategy.<sup>7</sup> Three such elements are objective, desired end state, and center of gravity (COG). Improperly defining these steps during planning will translate to an operation that “will at best be inefficient and, at worst, end in failure”.<sup>8</sup> The Maritime Advanced Warfighting School (MAWS) at the Naval War College stresses the importance of identifying objectives and COGs in the planning process. MAWS defines the COG “as the primary source of moral or physical strength, power, and

resistance that has the most decisive impact on one’s ability to achieve a given objective in relation to the enemy”.<sup>9</sup>

This paper uses operational art, operational design, and the Joint Operation Planning Process (JOPP) to identify and examine IS’ objectives and desired end states at three levels of war. Analyzing and deconstructing each objective in this context reveals that IS has three COGs: its ideology at the N-S level, its regional affiliates at the T-S level, and its insurgent fighters at the operational level. Although some sources reference the COG construct in their IS counter-strategies, none account for IS’ N-S and T-S objectives. To “ultimately defeat” IS, coalition forces must attack its COGs at all three levels. This paper closes with recommendations to aid planners in developing a concept that will achieve the President’s desired end state.

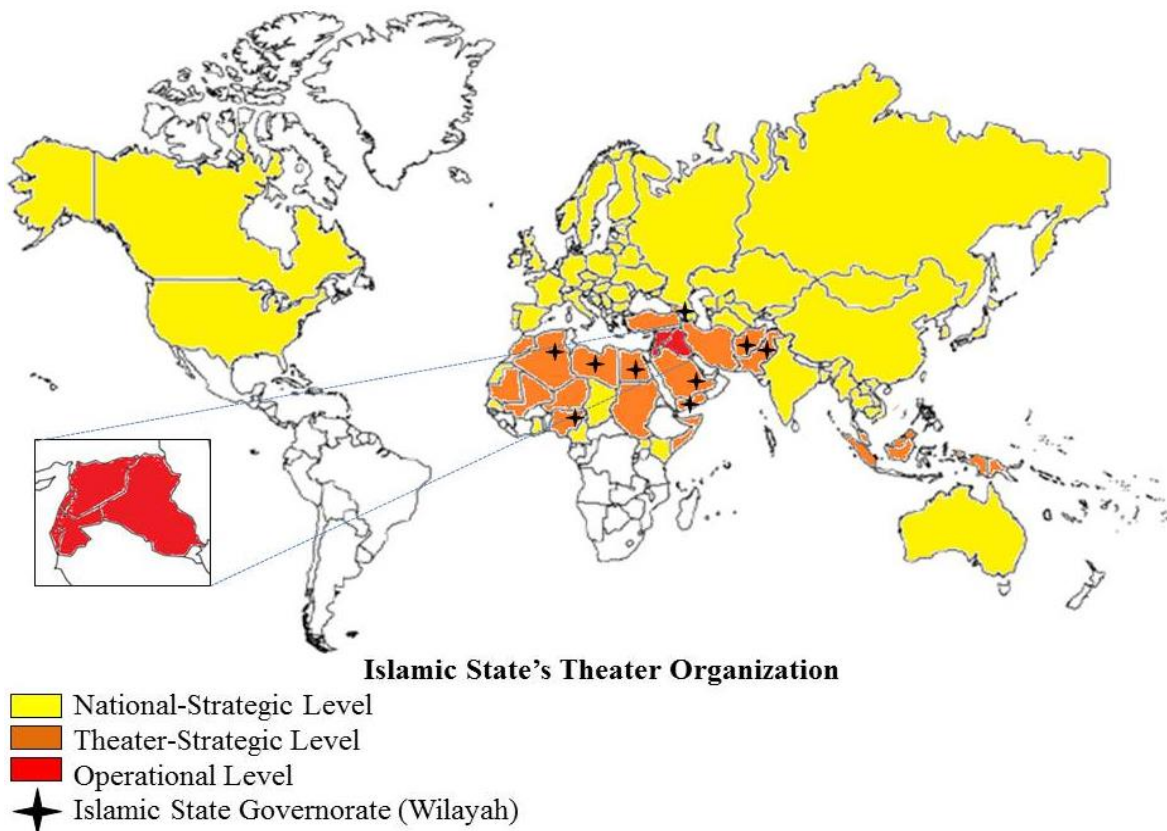


Figure 1. IS’ Theater Organization<sup>10</sup>

## NATIONAL-STRATEGIC LEVEL

### **Objective: Establish a Global Caliphate while Attacking the West**

In 2011, Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, IS' chief spokesman, stated that the group's objective was "to restore the Islamic caliphate" while bringing about the apocalypse.<sup>11</sup> In April 2013, al-Adnani announced that IS was "ready to redraw the world upon the Prophetic methodology of the caliphate",<sup>12</sup> and stated its new aim of geographical expansion. At the start of Ramadan the following summer in 2014, the new caliph, Ibrahim Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi officially declared the formation of an enduring Islamic Caliphate in Syria and Iraq.<sup>13</sup> The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) defines the caliphate as "a universalist concept, referring to the restoration of the unitary Muslim state established and expanded by the successors ... of Mohammad".<sup>14</sup> IS' propaganda magazine, *Dabiq*, commands Muslims to pledge allegiance to the new caliph,<sup>15</sup> wage war, and expand<sup>16</sup> by seizing land and purging "Muslim societies of immorality and non-Islamic practices".<sup>17</sup> IS' aim does not end in Syria and Iraq; it is simply the first stage of the establishment of a global caliphate.<sup>18</sup>

In pursuit of its objective, IS declared that it must "attack and defeat" the West while destroying and replacing all existing Muslim states.<sup>19</sup> Harleen Gambhir, a Counterterrorism (CT) Analyst from ISW, identifies IS' global strategy as the "Far Abroad ring". She assesses it as one that "intends to polarize Muslim communities and isolate supporters in the Far Abroad while drawing adversaries into a global war".<sup>20</sup> The insurgency attacks the West in the anticipation that states and societies "will target and alienate Muslim communities", driving Muslims "away from the global community and toward the Caliphate".<sup>21</sup> IS recruits,



radicalizes, and trains in areas of IS control, and then releases its fighters to create disorder and instability.

Attacking the West represents a global shift from IS' original strategy. At the outset, IS' priority was inward-looking, destroying the "near enemy" first. This differed from al-Qaeda which prioritized attacking the West or "far enemy" first in order to set the conditions for a caliphate in the distant future. However, as IS takes operational losses in Syria and Iraq, the insurgency's leadership is shifting its focus to its N-S objectives by attacking both the "near" and "far enemy".<sup>22</sup> The recent IS terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, San Bernardino, and to Russian Metrojet Flight 9268<sup>23</sup> embody this global shift in strategy to the "Far Abroad ring" and support IS' N-S objective of the establishment of a global caliphate. However, IS' desired end state does not rest with the caliphate. It is merely the precursor to what will "eventually incite a global apocalyptic war".<sup>24</sup>

### **Desired End State: Global Caliphate that Ends with the Apocalypse**

Adnani proclaimed in 2011, "That there are but a few days left."<sup>25</sup> The insurgency's creed embraces the restoration of a global caliphate that ends with an "apocalyptic final battle with the West that will herald the coming Day of Judgement".<sup>26</sup> The "End of Days" serves "as a central character"<sup>27</sup> in IS' narrative distinguishing it from other jihadist movements like al-Qaeda.<sup>28</sup> The insurgency's strategy of destabilizing and provoking the West through acts of terror sets the conditions for this end state.<sup>29</sup> IS insists that "the armies of Rome [The West] will mass to meet the armies of Islam [IS] in northern Syria [Dabiq]", and the West's defeat will initiate the apocalypse.<sup>30</sup> To achieve this desired end state, IS must establish the caliphate and attack the West. It utilizes the critical strengths listed in Table 1 to accomplish this N-S objective.

Critical Strengths	
Ideology (COG)	Terrorist attacks against the West
Use of media	IS affiliates

Table 1. IS' Critical Strengths at the N-S Level of War

### Center of Gravity: IS' Ideology

At the N-S level, IS' COG is its ideology. It has the most decisive impact on the insurgency's ability to achieve the objective of a global caliphate that ends in an apocalyptic battle.<sup>31</sup> IS alleges that political sovereignty belongs to God, not to man, and justifies the use of jihad against a large number of individuals that it considers as idolaters, infidels, and apostate regimes. The objective of establishing the Caliphate is based off sections of Koranic law and requires Muslims to immigrate, wage war, and expand.<sup>32</sup> Its ideology justifies brutality and terrorism against its enemies as "policies of mercy" that accelerate the achievement of set objectives.<sup>33</sup>

Significant setbacks in achieving objectives, including loss of territory and leadership, mean little to the insurgency since "God has preordained the near destruction of his people".<sup>34</sup> Similar to the Vietnamese Communists' *dau trahn* (struggle) ideology,<sup>35</sup> "jihad" in Arabic also designates "struggle".<sup>36</sup> IS intertwines enduring struggle in its apocalyptic narrative. Adnani declares, "We will conquer your Rome, break your crosses, and enslave your women. If we do not reach that time, then our children and grandchildren will reach it, and they will sell your sons as slaves at the slave market".<sup>37</sup>

IS expertly uses social media and its online magazine, *Dabiq*, as its focal platform to disseminate its ideology. Levi J. West, Director of Terrorism Studies at Charles Sturt University, in a speech at the Naval War College, asserted that IS seeks to achieve three objectives using its social media campaign. It uses social media, first, to disseminate propaganda and reinforce ideology, second, to recruit and radicalize, and third, to

decentralize its command and control.<sup>38</sup> IS has gained legitimacy and support, recruited thousands of foreign fighters to the caliphate, and incited destabilizing terrorist attacks against the West through its unprecedented ability to digitally spread its ideology.

IS' ideology is rich in what Bernard Lewis coined in 1990 as the "Roots of Muslim Rage". Grievances of "secularism", "imperialism", and "modernism" have provoked a "holy war" of Islamic fundamentalism against the West.<sup>39</sup> He encapsulates that if fighters of the "holy war" are fighting for God, then "their opponents are fighting against God".<sup>40</sup> IS also believes that the world is divided into the House of Islam and the House of Unbelief [non-Muslims] and "The obligation of holy war therefore begins at home and continues abroad, against the same infidel enemy".<sup>41</sup> Its leadership strategically uses this concept in its narrative to gain support, "if you are not with us, you are against us."

The caliph is a pivotal role in the insurgency's ideology, but this leadership position can also be a potential vulnerability. For example, the death of the founder of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, "crippled" the insurgency.<sup>42</sup> However, IS' ideology states that there will be 12 caliphs (Baghdadi is the eighth).<sup>43</sup> Baghdadi's death would not initiate the same strategic consequence as bin Laden's. The IS leader serves only as a stepping stone to when the West will meet with the armies of Islam in the professed apocalyptic battle.

## **THEATER-STRATEGIC LEVEL**

### **Objective: Expand Caliphate Regionally throughout the "Islamic Lands"**

In March 2016, IS lost control of the Syrian city of Palmyra to pro-Assad forces while Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) retook sub-districts south of the Iraqi town of Hit.<sup>44</sup> Anti-IS forces threaten IS' legitimacy and narrative by recapturing territory from the insurgency. In

order to remain legitimate, IS must pursue its T-S objective of expanding the caliphate regionally throughout the Middle East, Northern Africa, and Southeast Asia.

IS' T-S objective falls under its N-S objective of the establishment of a global caliphate. To achieve this objective, IS must expand through the creation of regional governorates throughout the "Islamic Lands" of the Middle East, Northern Africa<sup>45</sup>, and Southeast Asia.<sup>46</sup> Since 2014, decentralized affiliates have recognized IS as a caliphate and have vowed allegiance to the insurgency.<sup>47</sup> The Arabic word "wilayah," meaning state or province, is used to "describe themselves as constituent members of a broader IS-led caliphate".<sup>48</sup> Identified in Figure 1, IS has wilayahs in Algeria, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt, Nigeria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Caucasus.<sup>49</sup> Gambhir labels this region as IS' "Near Abroad ring" and states that IS' regional priorities are to "establish affiliates and increase disorder".<sup>50</sup> Although no wilayahs are named in Southeast Asia, IS recently extended its influence into this region as part of its T-S objective.

IS must strengthen its current affiliates while capitalizing on both preexisting and IS-led disorder in other regions. The insurgency will then bridge its sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq to its wilayahs to form a unified territorial caliphate throughout the Middle East and Northern Africa. To achieve this T-S objective, IS will employ a similar strategy that it used in Syria and Iraq. ISW describes this insurgent strategy as one that commences by "exploiting an unstable state", "immigrating there to recruit and train members", and "forcefully compelling apostate forces to withdraw from the territory". Under the next phase, the insurgency attacks the stability of the country using both conventional and unconventional means until the apostate regime collapses. Once collapsed, the caliphate can govern by "filling the security vacuum" that was left behind.<sup>51</sup>

### **Desired End State: Regional Caliphate throughout the “Islamic Lands”**

IS’ T-S desired end state is the regional expansion of the caliphate throughout the “Islamic Lands” of the Middle East, Northern Africa, and eventually Southeast Asia. The caliphate will be a successional growth, bridging IS’ wilayahs to its current territory in Syria and Iraq. To accomplish the T-S objective and achieve its desired end state, IS must utilize its critical strengths listed in Table 2.

<b>Critical Strengths</b>
Wilayahs (COG)
Use of media
Terrorist attacks
Challenging local government’s legitimacy
Exploiting sectarian animosity and instability
Providing governance
Recruitment
Ideology

Table 2. IS’ Critical Strengths at the T-S Level of War

### **Center of Gravity: IS’ Wilayahs**

At the T-S level of war, IS’ COG is the wilayahs that represent an extension of the caliphate. These remote governorates have the most decisive impact on IS’ ability to achieve the objective of a regional caliphate throughout the “Islamic Lands”.<sup>52</sup> The wilayahs are the key to connecting the caliphate in Syria and Iraq to the rest of the Middle East and Northern Africa. While IS has established a broad presence throughout the T-S region (Figure 1), the wilayahs in Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and Afghanistan/Pakistan are the most structured and capable.<sup>53</sup> The insurgency will likely capitalize on these affiliates first to accomplish its T-S objective.

IS targets countries with disorder and civil war. In Libya, three IS wilayahs have been announced<sup>54</sup> with a strength of 4,000 to 6,000 fighters, which has doubled in the last 12

to 18 months.<sup>55</sup> Its northern affiliate controls the large coastal city of Sirte and surrounding regions (105,000 inhabitants) as well as its port and international airport.<sup>56</sup> The insurgency utilizes this region as its main operating base to expand and “export terrorism and subversion” to the surrounding cities and countries, as well as Western Europe.<sup>57</sup> ISW assesses that Libya possesses the “strongest source of redundancy”.<sup>58</sup> As IS obtains significant losses in Syria and Iraq, it can transition operations to Libya. In Yemen, IS militants have capitalized on the ongoing war between al-Houthi rebels and anti-al-Houthi forces often escalating the conflict to further destabilize the government and gain power.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been “rebranded” as members of “The Islamic State of Khorasan”. Although U.S. officials have labeled this governorate as in the “exploratory stage”,<sup>60</sup> IS could effortlessly capitalize on the instability and expand in this region.

The Wilayah Sinai in Egypt ranges from 500 to 1,000 fighters and possesses advanced weaponry including man-portable defense systems (MANPADS) and anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) systems.<sup>61</sup> The wilayah claimed responsibility for the attack on Metrojet Flight 9268 that exploded mid-flight killing all 224 passengers on board.<sup>62</sup> In Saudi Arabia, IS’ wilayah is credited for many attacks throughout the country. This demonstrates the insurgency’s threat to the sovereignty of Saudi Arabia, a predominantly Sunni country, as IS claims that all Sunni Muslims owe allegiance to the caliphate above nation states.<sup>63</sup>

The Nigerian-based Sunni-insurgency, Boko Haram, pledged loyalty to IS in March 2015.<sup>64</sup> In 2015 alone, Boko Haram killed more than 11,000 people while capturing territory in northeast Nigeria.<sup>65</sup> According to the Global Terrorism Index, Boko Haram is the world’s deadliest terror group,<sup>66</sup> spreading violence into the surrounding countries of Cameroon,

Chad, and Niger,<sup>67</sup> while displacing over 2.1 million people.<sup>68</sup> Boko Haram and Libya's wilayahs are the strongest and most capable affiliates outside of the Levant. Thus, IS' leadership in Syria and Iraq will primarily focus on funneling resources and fighters to expand these wilayahs in pursuit of its T-S objectives.

IS' wilayahs continue to gain strength throughout the Middle East and Northern Africa by spreading IS ideology and fighting tactics.<sup>69</sup> Targeting regions of instability, IS encourages local groups to band together "under a single banner" and to elect a leader to receive resources and sustainment.<sup>70</sup> The affiliates exploit social media and other online outlets to address grievances and recruit fighters who are unable to enter Syria or Iraq. Additionally, wilayahs use asymmetric warfare, including terrorism, to cause disorder and to remove western influence. In March 2015, U.S. Special Forces withdrew from Yemen after IS led one of the largest terrorist attacks in Yemen's history.<sup>71</sup>

IS will leverage and expand its wilayahs to achieve its T-S objective of establishing a regional caliphate in the "Islamic Lands". To unite this region with the Levant, IS must synchronize efforts amongst its affiliates. However, IS must gain strength and expand at the T-S level in order to maintain legitimacy, as its fighters and claimed territory are continually threatened in Syria and Iraq.

## **OPERATIONAL LEVEL**

### **Operational Objectives: Defend Caliphate and Expand**

IS' geographical operational area is the Levant, composed of Syria and Iraq as well as the surrounding countries of Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan (Figure 1). Gambhir describes this region as IS' "Interior ring" where the organization concentrates its main effort in defending the "core lands" of its proclaimed caliphate.<sup>72</sup> In its beginning, the insurgency's

operational objectives were “to remain and expand”<sup>73</sup> in Syria and Iraq. At its strongest point, IS controlled territory the size of Great Britain<sup>74</sup> but anti-IS forces have halted IS’ expansion, and in many areas have recaptured land from the insurgency.

Today, nested within IS’ T-S objective, the group’s primary operational objective is to maintain the territory that it controls in Syria and Iraq. The loss of territory threatens the insurgency’s legitimacy and strategic narrative.<sup>75</sup> IS must control its caliphate, continue to govern the population within it, recruit additional fighters, manage finances, and defend against counter-attack. Although the insurgency must first defend the Caliphate, it will continue to pursue its ultimate operational objective: abolish the Iraqi state and Assad regime, remove political boundaries, and expand throughout the Levant.

#### **Desired End state: Control the Levant**

IS’ operational objectives are complete once IS controls the entire Levant, provides effective governance for its population, and delivers financial autonomy through the control of key infrastructures.<sup>76</sup> In the insurgency’s desired end state the Levant countries’ current boundaries are erased;<sup>77</sup> the region is rid of apostate regimes, infidels, immorality, and non-Islamic practices;<sup>78</sup> and is populated with “true” Muslims. When the Levant is conquered, IS can connect its affiliates in the Middle East and Africa to establish the regional caliphate. To accomplish its operational objectives, IS will utilize its critical strengths listed in Table 3.

<b>Critical Strengths</b>
Insurgent fighters (COG)
Control of territory
Use of media
Governance that settles grievances
Recruitment of fighters
Financial autonomy
Ideology

Table 3. IS’ Critical Strengths at the Operational Level of War



## **Center of Gravity: Insurgent Fighters**

At the operational level of war, IS' COG is its insurgent fighters. They have the most decisive impact on IS' ability to achieve its operational objective of defending its current caliphate and expanding throughout the Levant.<sup>79</sup> It is estimated that IS commands tens of thousands of fighters in Syria and Iraq.<sup>80</sup> However, OIR has weakened IS' total strength by killing an estimated 26,000 fighters so far with coalition airstrikes.<sup>81</sup> To replenish its core fighting force, IS relies on local recruiting and conscription as well as incoming foreign fighters.<sup>82</sup>

The insurgency has also taken territorial losses but remains in control of vast zones including the city of Mosul and areas of Anbar Province.<sup>83</sup> Since taking over large regions of Syria and Iraq in 2014, IS has lost over 40 percent of its territory in Iraq and 20 percent in Syria. In the past 15 months alone, rivals reclaimed almost 25 percent of the caliphate from the insurgency<sup>84</sup> putting IS on the defensive. There is a continual fight to reclaim territory from opposing jihadist groups as well as other armed groups in the region, including the Kurds, Syrian Government, Syrian Opposition, Shia militias, Hezbollah, Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Russia, and U.S. and coalition forces. As IS takes the defensive to regain the initiative, it must continue administrating subordinate tasks including funding and propaganda dissemination.

IS fighters control its financial autonomy and economic strength. While lootings and kidnappings provide generous revenue for the insurgency, smuggling oil and gas from its captured territory in Syria and Iraq is the "most resilient income stream" often making the organization \$1 to \$3 million a day.<sup>85</sup> The insurgency controls the smuggling networks and routes used for the black market sale of these resources<sup>86</sup> including the vital lines of

communication (LOC) between northwest Syria and Turkey.<sup>87</sup> The LOCs provide the sustainment link through which weapons and foreign recruits flow in while oil and gas are smuggled out.<sup>88</sup> Currently, this source of funding is in jeopardy. Damage inflicted by airstrikes to production facilities combined with a loss of territory has triggered a 30 percent drop in oil revenue since mid-2015.<sup>89</sup> This distress on IS' financial autonomy further indicates signs where the insurgency is weakening at the operational level.

IS utilizes what Levi J. West calls "social media as a weapon."<sup>90</sup> Fighters in combat send real-time messages that are delivered globally. This is "a substantial evolution in which terrorists distribute propaganda".<sup>91</sup> Streams of uncensored violent images and videos enter households daily, inundating front-page headlines on news channels, websites, and newspapers. IS' use of social media permits access to audiences otherwise unable to be reached and provides the "oxygen for terrorism"<sup>92</sup> required for its N-S and T-S objectives. The insurgency's unprecedented employment of social media has had a "profound success" in recruitment, encouraging terrorism, and gaining support and legitimacy.<sup>93</sup>

U.S. and coalition partners, in addition to rival IS forces, are weakening the insurgency at the operational level of war. However, a concept that attacks and defeats only the operational COG will not "ultimately defeat" the organization. The concept must also attack and defeat the COGs at the N-S and the T-S levels of war.

## **OTHER VIEWS**

In an expert commentary for *The Cipher Brief*, Gambhir stated, "This claim to control terrain as a caliphate is ISIS's primary source of strength or its center of gravity".<sup>94</sup> General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, while testifying in front of the House Armed Services Committee in December 2015, also specified that "the existence of a

caliphate” is the organization’s COG.<sup>95</sup> The caliphate contributes to the insurgency’s legitimacy, but to claim that its ability to control territory is its primary source of power is misguided. IS’ ideology, its wilayahs, and its fighters all provide legitimacy and power to the insurgency. Although controlling territory is a critical strength for IS, it is not its COG. Anti-IS forces can reclaim land from IS, but as long as the insurgency’s ideology, wilayahs, and fighters still exist, it will continue to fight to establish the caliphate. Removing terrain from IS’ control will not defeat the insurgency.

In the *Joint Forces Quarterly (JFQ)* article, “Three Approaches to Center of Gravity Analysis: The Islamic State of Iraq and Levant”, the authors argue that when using the JOPP as a framework, IS’ “main strategic objective is to create an Islamic state across Sunni areas of Iraq and in Syria”. Nested inside are the operational objectives: “to control Sunni areas in Iraq, recruit more fighters, and continue to gain funding”. The authors define the strategic COG as its “radical ideology” and the operational COG as its “forces”.<sup>96</sup> Although the article’s COGs match those outlined in this research, its objectives are misrepresented. Both objectives listed in *JFQ* more closely resemble IS’ intermediate objectives at the operational level of war. Additionally, the authors’ assessment fails to account for the insurgency’s global (N-S) and regional (N-S) intentions, as well as its shift in strategy to one that attacks the “far enemy”.

## **CONCLUSION**

During President Obama’s United Nations summit aimed at violent extremism, he stated: “Ideologies are not defeated with guns, they’re defeated by better ideas”.<sup>97</sup> In the joint operating environment, the use of “better ideas” is operational art. Dr. Milan N. Vego, a professor at the U.S. Naval War College, states, “By themselves, technological advances,

numerical superiority, and brilliant tactical performance are inadequate to achieve ultimate success in war. A sound, coherent strategy combined with operational excellence were the keys to winning wars in the past and will remain so for the future”.<sup>98</sup> The U.S. and its coalition partners have the technology, superiority, and experience in the fight against IS, but the preponderance of the current strategy remains focused at the tactical and operational levels in Syria and Iraq. Utilizing operational art has revealed that IS operates at three distinct levels of war, with separate objectives, desired end states, and COGs. “A sound, coherent strategy”, must address these three levels.

At the N-S level of war, IS pursues its objective of the establishment of a global caliphate that ends with an apocalyptic battle with the West. As the insurgency’s strategy shifts to one that attacks both the “near” and “far enemy”, IS will continue to exploit its COG, its ideology, to prepare the battlefield on the global stage. It uses its ability to disseminate its ideology using social media and other online sources to recruit insurgent fighters, gain global support and legitimacy, and organize destabilizing attacks against western targets. “Ultimately defeating” IS at the N-S level means to defeat its ideology. A strategy must include this concept.

At the T-S level of war, IS pursues its objective of establishing a territorial caliphate throughout the “Islamic Lands” that joins its controlled terrain in the Levant. IS expands by utilizing its T-S COG, its wilayahs, to target regions of instability to establish control and governance. The insurgency will synchronize areas of control to create a regional caliphate and then bridge it to its operational efforts in Syria and Iraq. As IS takes losses in the Levant, it relies on its affiliates to remain legitimate, especially its most organized and

capable wilayahs in Libya and Nigeria. For the U.S. and its coalition partners, victory lies in their ability to counter IS' wilayahs and thwart expansion at the T-S level.

At the operational level of war, the insurgency's objective in Syria and Iraq is to defend its caliphate first, then expand throughout the Levant. *JP 5-0, Joint Operation Planning* states that commanders can take either a direct or indirect approach to contend with an adversary's COG.<sup>99</sup> OIR is applying combat power through airstrikes and raids directly against IS' fighters while indirectly applying combat power against a series of decisive points" (DP).<sup>100</sup> Operations have affected IS' DPs including territory, command and control, funding, LOCs, and sustainment which has weakened the insurgency. Due to losses at the operational level, IS must focus efforts on the higher levels of war to remain legitimate. The coalition must present a strategy that accounts for this shift. This paper closes with recommendations to aid planners in developing a concept that will attack IS at both the N-S and T-S levels of war.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**National-Strategic Level:** To defeat the insurgency at the N-S level, planners must include a concept that directly and indirectly attacks its ideology. A digital counterinsurgency (COIN) narrative that "exploits negative aspects"<sup>101</sup> of IS' beliefs and addresses the "Roots of Muslim Rage" and the "Holy War" should be disseminated along the same platforms IS uses to spread its propaganda. The COIN narrative must reach audiences globally to delegitimize the insurgency, inhibit recruitment, and minimize "lone wolf" terrorist attacks. Using all available media options, U.S. European Command, U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM), and U.S. Central Command must tailor the COIN narrative to address regional grievances in order to prevent IS from gaining popular support and

expanding. Additionally, the concept should include methods that indirectly attack IS' ideology by obstructing its media platforms and its ability to disseminate its message. Graphic images and threats that are posted to the internet fuel IS' ideology. It deepens the rift between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, radicalizes believers, glorifies the jihad, and draws the West towards the apocalyptic battle. These all grant IS undue legitimacy.

Planners must integrate CT operations, intelligence operations, and intelligence sharing at the N-S level to impede IS' expansion and mitigate attacks against the West. The insurgency is exploiting both gaps in intelligence and sharing deficiencies among European countries. In addressing the necessity for seamless intelligence sharing in the wake of uncovering an increased IS presence in Europe, James L. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, stated that "Europe's biggest problem is a lack of seamless intelligence sharing and collaboration".<sup>102</sup> A part of IS' shift in strategy is to continue to attack the West, drawing it closer to its desired end state. Planners must include concepts to uncover IS' presence and intentions using intelligence operations, share data collectively, and integrate CT operations in order to neutralize terrorist threats.

**Theater-Strategic Level:** Planners must incorporate a concept that degrades and defeats the insurgency's most capable wilayahs at the T-S level of war. A vast array of missions, including limited contingency operations, may be necessary to apply combat power to the adversary's COG. The U.S. and its coalition partners successfully struck IS operatives in Libya in November 2015<sup>103</sup> and February 2016.<sup>104</sup> As the first airstrikes against the insurgency outside of Syria and Iraq,<sup>105</sup> they represented the start to a direct approach to contend with IS' wilayahs. IS uses Libya as a "springboard" to export terrorism to the surrounding countries.<sup>106</sup> In order to thwart IS expansion in this region, additional airstrikes

against the insurgency in Libya will be required. While IS continues to accomplish its T-S objectives, planners must extend airstrikes to other capable wilayahs such as Boko Haram.

In October 2015, U.S. Armed Forces were deployed to Cameroon to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) missions in support of the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) to defeat Boko Haram.<sup>107</sup> USAFRICOM recently requested approval from Washington to send special operation forces to Nigeria in an advise and assist mission.<sup>108</sup> To defeat Boko Haram, it is necessary to transition from a support role to combat operations. Planners must include a limited contingency operation in support of MNJTF with direct airstrikes against IS operations in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger.

Furthermore, planners must include stability operations in this concept. Stable governance is the strongest self-defense against IS expansion. In collaboration with host-nation governments and other instruments of power, military contributions to stability operations may include peace operations, COIN, foreign humanitarian assistance, CT, protection, ISR, and intelligence sharing. One region in need of immediate attention is Northern Africa.

Libya's current instability presents a difficult challenge in stability operations. Nonetheless, as this country has the second largest and the fastest growing IS wilayah,<sup>109</sup> the international community must act now. Without immediate action, IS-control will spread like wildfire in Libya as it did in Syria and Iraq in 2014, and the insurgency will be one step closer to accomplishing its T-S and N-S objectives. IS must not be allowed to flourish; its existence threatens the balance of our global society. As demonstrated in this paper, to "ultimately defeat" the insurgency, U.S. and coalition forces' contribution must include a strategy that attacks IS at all three levels of war.

## NOTES

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