

# Fighting on All Fronts: A Critical Review of the US Strategy Against ISIL

A Monograph

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The current US counter-ISIL strategy from the White House is to degrade and destroy ISIL in Iraq and Syria. This strategy is a military focused strategy that fails to account for the deep complexity involved in the region, of which ISIL is only a part. Looking at ISIL through the lens of complexity makes it clear that military intervention should only be part of a much broader, more comprehensive, whole of government approach to address the root causes of ISIL. As part of a comprehensive and long-term approach, the United States should also be looking at ways to discredit the ISIL narrative while providing viable alternatives. These changes will require strategic patience and many will be generational shifts. Finally, the use of information operations and strategic communications to effectively engage adversaries in the information environment is key now in the fight against ISIL. More importantly, it will shape how the United States engages in future conflicts with near peer competitors who have already exercised these trade-crafts and have woven them into all aspects of their national strategy.

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## **Abstract**

Fighting on All Fronts: A Critical Review of the US Strategy Against ISIL, by MAJ Ryan M. Nacin, 47 pages.

The current US counter-ISIL strategy from the White House is to degrade and destroy ISIL in Iraq and Syria. This strategy is a military focused strategy that fails to account for the deep complexity involved in the region, of which ISIL is only a part. In effect, only the symptom of a problem is being addressed instead of the getting at the core of the problem. Looking at ISIL through the lens of complexity makes it clear that military intervention should only be part of a much broader, more comprehensive, whole of government approach to address the root causes of ISIL, such as political and security vacuums, as well as radical Islamic extremism. As part of a comprehensive and long-term approach, the United States should also be looking at ways to discredit the ISIL narrative while providing viable alternatives. These changes will require strategic patience and many will be generational shifts. Finally, the use of information operations and strategic communications to effectively engage adversaries in the information environment is key now in the fight against ISIL. More importantly, it will shape how the United States engages in future conflicts with near peer competitors who have already exercised these tradecrafts and have woven them into all aspects of their national strategy.

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## **Acronyms**

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
AEI	American Enterprise Institute
AQI	Al Qaida in Iraq
BPC	Building Partner Capacity
CARL	Combined Arms Research Library
CGSC	US Army Command and General Staff College
CJCS	Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
CTF	Combined Task Force
COG	Center of Gravity
FM	Field Manual
IO	Information Operations
IRC	Information Related Capability
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
IS	Islamic State
ISI	Islamic State in Iraq
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Sham
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
JCS	Joint Chiefs of Staff
JFC	Joint Force Commander
JP	Joint Publication
MISO	Military Information Support Operations
NSC	National Security Council
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
SOCENT	Special Operations Command Central
USCENTCOM	United States Central Command
USG	United States Government
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command

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## Introduction

We do not understand the movement, and until we do, we are not going to defeat it. We have not defeated the idea. We do not even understand the idea.

— MG Mike Nagata, Commander of Special Operations Command Central

The world is increasingly threatened by a dangerous ideology that manifests itself in the physical world as radical Islamic extremism. One of the most recent manifestations of this ideology in the twenty-first century is the group that calls itself the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Based out of Syria, ISIL has expanded rapidly into Iraq using a calculated mixture of horrific violence, military organization, governmental semblances, and a propaganda campaign which has allowed them to recruit fighters, supporters, and allegiances from across the globe. What started as a localized offshoot of Al Qaida in Iraq has grown into an organization of over thirty-thousand gunmen in Iraq and Syria, combined with an alarming increase in Islamic extremist organizations and individuals from across the globe pledging support. As ISIL continues to gain territory, additional recruits, and momentum, the global response has been steadily mounting to counter them.

A number of factors have converged to set the stage for how this phenomenon came to flourish in the region. One of the most critical factors included the United States Military complete withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Power in Iraq was left in the hands of a Shia hardliner who polarized relations with the majority Sunni populations. This, coupled with the instability that was created when the Assad Regime crumbled and began fighting its own people in Syria, helped create ripe conditions for ISIL's rise and propagation. The resulting power vacuum in Syria became the assembly area for the remnants of Al Qaida in Iraq and the beginning of what would become ISIL. ISIL's carnage began dominating international media in 2014 with their capture of Mosul and Tikrit in northern Iraq, rendering the borders between Syria and Iraq politically irrelevant in the process. With over 1 million Iraqi residents displaced from their

homes, ISIL's brutal tactics against Christians and fellow Muslims made front page news on media outlets around the world. ISIL capitalized on this media surge on June 29, 2014 when their leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, appointed himself as the leader of the Caliphate, and therefore, the new leader of the world's roughly 1.5 billion Muslims. In September 2014, a month after ISIL beheaded the Western journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, the United States began an intensive air campaign against ISIL in both Iraq and Syria. In addition to the air campaign, a small number of US military advisers deployed to assist the fledgling Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), who at best were conceding vast swaths of territory after defeat by ISIL forces, and at worst, abandoning their posts and US-provided, vehicles, and equipment without a fight and even defecting to ISIL. As US airpower and the training mission ramped up dramatically during the first several months, so did the ISIL brutality, propaganda, and recruiting campaign. The campaign harnessed the propaganda value of the United States' intervention to fuel a popular anti-Western narrative which drew thousands of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria to directly support their cause, in addition to eliciting indirect support from sympathizers around the globe.

The United States was not alone in this fight though. The White House emphasized that there were sixty-five partners in the global coalition to fight ISIL. Many of these partners are the habitual partners such as the UK, Germany, and Australia. Some of the other actors in the region, such as Russia and Iran, add further complexity to an already complex problem set in the region. The first example of one of these countries is Iran. Iran sent in two battalions of its Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to support the predominately Shia-based Iraqi government in the fight against ISIL.<sup>1</sup> While at first glance, it would appear that Iranian contributions would directly support the US interests of supporting the ISF and defeating ISIL, the Iranian political and military leadership declined to coordinate with US military forces already operating in the

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Freeman, "US Under Pressure to Act as Iran Helps Iraq Fight Al-Qaida," *News Middle East* (13 June, 2014), Accessed 16 March, 2016, <http://www.independent.ie/world-news/middle-east/us-under-pressure-to-act-as-iran-helps-iraq-fight-alqaida-30351513.html>

area. Operational, this disconnect forced the US military to halt offensive actions against ISIL until proper battlefield coordination was established. Strategically, Iran's support of the Shia-dominated Iraqi Government exacerbated Shia-Sunni relations that already served as the basis for the ISIL movement.

The second major event in the regional conflict was Russia's deployment of military support to prop up the Assad regime in Syria in October 2015. Under the guise of assisting the coalition to defeat ISIL forces, Russia's true interest became apparent as it prioritized preserving the Assad regime's survival through mitigating the opposition, including the rebel forces that the United States was directly supporting in the fight against ISIL. Russia's involvement further muddied the waters in an already complex regional situation and dangerously risks the chances of military miscalculations between the United States and Russia that could lead to an irreversible escalation of tensions.

Between the United States-led coalition and the Iranian and Russian interventions, there are numerous forces and strategies being leveraged in the fight against ISIL. This monograph will focus only on the current US counter-ISIL strategy and evaluate the strategy's assumptions, goals and intent, and methods and metrics. The goal currently articulated from the White House counter-ISIL internet homepage is "degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy."<sup>2</sup> This website also has a running tally of actions-to-date that are displayed as a metric of success. The metrics presented span the last four months and list the number of airstrikes carried out by the United States and its coalition partners, along with what countries are contributing to these airstrikes and to the train and advise mission with the ISF.

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<sup>2</sup> *ISIL Strategy*, White House Homepage, accessed March 15, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/isil-strategy>.

The central question this monograph will address is whether the US military strategy that currently shapes actions against ISIL is tailored to achieve the President of the United States' specified goal of degrading and defeating ISIL. This monograph will argue that the current military strategy against ISIL is based on an incomplete understanding of the overall ISIL phenomenon, as well as a national strategy prioritizing near-term impacts while minimizing domestic political risks. Subsequently, the military strategy is disproportionately weighted towards the destruction of ISIL in the physical environment and not on exploiting the causes and ideology that underpins it. Most importantly, the United States has never had a contextual understanding of ISIL as a phenomenon, from its initial engagements against them.

In order to expose this, the monograph will look at the ISIL phenomenon in its strategic setting, through the lens of complexity theory to highlight the disconnects within the current strategy. This monograph will also examine external factors, such as Iranian and Russian involvement in Syria, Iraq, and the wider Middle East, that would require a strategic reframing of the environment, and possibly a modification of the strategy.

Next, the monograph will explore the kinetically weighted strategy and the usefulness of a center of gravity (COG) analysis. This section endeavors to show how the US military strategy against ISIL is too heavily weighted on the destruction of ISIL in the physical domain while largely ignoring the information domain that ISIL so expertly exploits. A discussion on the value of a COG analysis of ISIL, and whether or not that COG is being effectively engaged across any of the aforementioned domains, makes up the other part of this section.

Finally, this work shows how the United States participation in the battle of narratives falls short for lack of relevance. This will include an examination of the ISIL narrative, the usefulness and reality of a coalition counter narrative, and credibility gaps in narrative delivery.

Tying these three components together will be an analysis of how the United States engages adversaries in the information domain through information operations and strategic communications. This discussion will posit that if the United States has a hard time conducting operations in the information environment against an asymmetric threat group like ISIL, that it will struggle to do the same against a near-peer opponent such as Russia whose mature information operations are embedded into every facet of their updated military doctrine and national strategy? Before delving into the crux of the thesis, a brief summation of the rise of ISIL and the strategy being waged by the West to combat them will set the context for what follows.

#### The Rise of ISIL and the Counter-ISIL Strategy

The story of ISIL began well before the name became a recurring theme on the nightly news. Even the name ISIL and its genesis tells a story about the group and how it sees itself. In fact, the group has only recently become labeled as “ISIL” by officials in the Western governments and mainstream media. The name used by the group to refer to itself and the name used by those who oppose it has undergone several iterations of change. From October of 2006 until April of 2013, the group referred to itself as the Islamic State of Iraq, or ISI. From then until June of 2014, they referred to themselves as the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham (ISIS), and from June 2014 until the present day, only as the Islamic State (IS).<sup>3</sup> There have been debates within government and media circles about what to refer to this group as and the term being used most by the White House and the US Department of Defense is Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL. The term “DAISH” has also been used frequently in the media. “DAISH is the Arab acronym for Al-Dawlah Al-Islamiyah fe Al-Iraq wa Al-Sham (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,

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<sup>3</sup> Cole Bunzel, "From paper state to caliphate: the ideology of the islamic state," *The Brookings Institute Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World* Analysis Paper no. 19 (March 2015) 3.

or Sham), for which the acronym is ISIL or ISIS, as was originally used by the group that now prefers to be called Khilafat, or Islamic State (IS).<sup>4</sup> The term DAISH carries a negative connotation which is used intentionally by some Western media and governments as a jab at ISIL, but it has not caught on in official channels.

There is significant meaning inherent in these names that are central to the understanding of ISIL from a cultural and political perspective. In 2006 when the Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI) spokesman announced that it had changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq, Cole Bunzel of Brookings said, it was a monumental shift in strategy for the group signaling “the start of an ambitious political project: the founding of a state in Iraq, a proto-caliphate, that would ultimately expand across the region, proclaim itself the full-fledged caliphate, and go on to conquer the rest of the world.”<sup>5</sup> This is not just semantics, as an Islamic State must exist to fulfill the claim of the Caliphate. Amin Saikal of the Sydney Morning Herald says:

The reason for the group's insistence on using the term IS is because it wants to be recognized and respected as a sovereign, independent entity in the region and beyond. Its leadership, under the self-styled khalif, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, wishes to promote this unit as borderless, encompassing not only the Muslim Middle East but also the entire Muslim world, and therefore attracting Muslims to support it and join it from wherever they are located.<sup>6</sup>

This is the reason there is some resistance from the anti-ISIL coalition to call them by any name that serves to feed the ISIL narrative that they are actually an “Islamic State” as they claim. Although this is more than just a simple problem of semantics, the term used in the White House anti-ISIL strategy is “ISIL” and therefore is the term that will be used throughout this monograph.

What later became ISIL was initiated by Abu Musab al Zarqawi who established AQI in 2004. When he was killed two years later by a US airstrike in Iraq, Abu ayyub al Masri replaced

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<sup>4</sup> Amin Saikal, "What Should We Call Islamic State: Daish or IS?" *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 18, 2015, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/what-should-we-call-islamic-state-daish-or-is-20150117-12sii7.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Bunzel, *From Paper State to Caliphate*, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Saikal, *What Should We Call Islamic State: Daish or IS?*

him at the helm. A few months later on October 15th, 2006, Masri announced that Abu Omar al Baghdadi would be the leader of a newly established Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). This announcement was the beginning of a new and radical path which sought regional and global rule through the reestablishment of the caliphate. Between 2007 and 2010, the ISI was achieving only limited success in Iraq when a US-led military operation killed both Masri and Baghdadi in a joint raid in April 2010. It was then that Abu Bakr al Baghdadi took the reins and began planning for a resurgence in the region. He ordered forces from Iraq into Syria in 2011 which later became what is known as the “Nusra Front”, another Al Qaida affiliate. Another significant event in 2011 was the final withdrawal of US military forces from Iraq. This helped to breathe new life into ISI and ceded maneuver space to them across large swaths of Iraq where the Iraqi government was unable to exert sufficient influence and security. In 2013, the Syrian town of Raqqa fell to the Syrian opposition and set the conditions for the Nusra Front and Baghdadi’s ISI to coalesce in that area and to build combat power, refocus on recruitment, and regain momentum. Later in 2013, Baghdadi’s ISI staged in Raqqa and declared that the ISI and Nusra Front have merged to become the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria,” but the leader of the Nusra Front rejected this alliance and maintained his allegiance to Al Qaida. This began to exacerbate some of the tensions between ISIL and Al Qaida, even though ISIL originated from Al Qaida.<sup>7</sup> Michael Morell, the former Deputy Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) describes this relationship best in his book, “The Great War of Our Time” when he writes:

Although there is a deep rift between the leadership of Al Qaida and the leadership of ISIS (ISIL), it is important to note that ISIS shares Bin Laden’s long-term goal of establishing a global caliphate, it sees both the West and its allies in the Middle East as its primary enemies, and it sees violence as the most effective means of achieving its goals. The only reason that ISIS is not formally part of Al Qaida is that the group does not want to have to follow the guidance of Zawahiri. It’s an issue of ‘who should be calling the shots,’ not an issue of a different vision.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Timeline: Rise and Spread of the Islamic State” (Wilson Center, March 22, 2016): Accessed March 21, 2016, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-rise-and-spread-the-islamic-state>

ISIL spent the remainder of 2013 and 2014 expanding their footprint and span of control in Syria with Raqqa as their Headquarters. Meanwhile, Al Qaida decided to completely cut formal ties with ISIL due to their differences in approach and not necessarily difference in their desired end states. Al Qaida and ISIL both share the goal of establishing the Caliphate and worldwide Sharia law, but their timeframes for doing so their methodologies differ. In June of 2014, ISIL publicly declared itself to be the caliphate and leader of all Islam around the world. At the same time, it pushed into Iraq and began to take territory, beginning with Tal Afar and Mosul in northern Iraq and moving quickly south to Tikrit which is only a few hours' drive from Baghdad. While ISIL swept across northern Iraq, they did so in an exceptionally violent way that rapidly captured the awe of the civilized world. Figure one provides graphical depiction of the timeline and some additional details of these events, overlaid on top of when US military forces were present in Iraq.

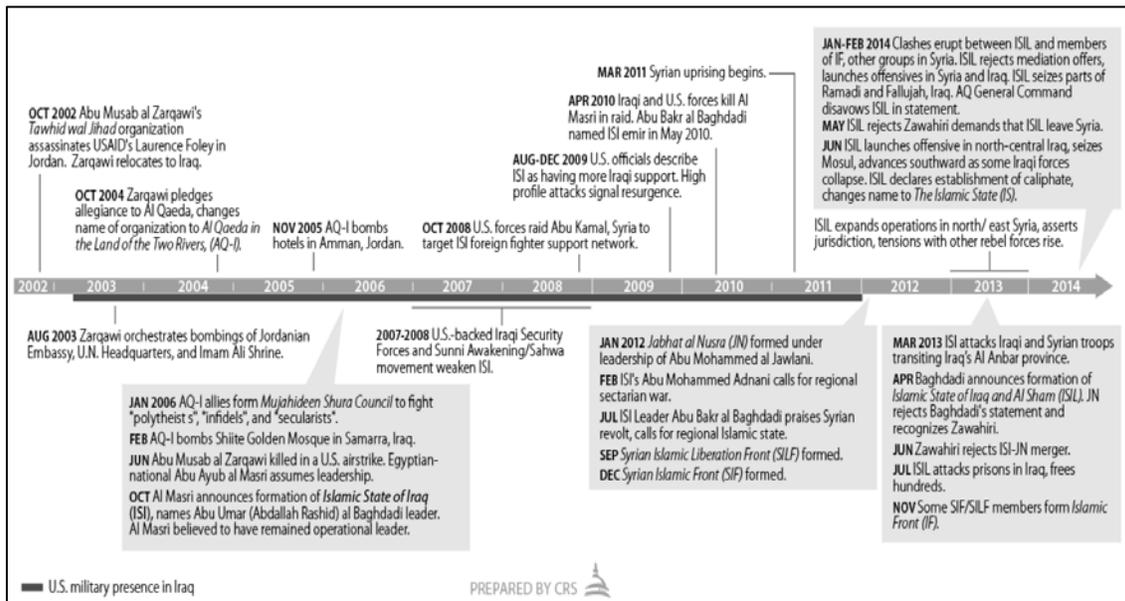


Figure 1. Timeline: The Roots of the Islamic State

Source: Christopher M Blanchard and Carla E. Humud, "The Islamic State and US Policy" (Congressional Research Service, February 9, 2016): accessed March 21, 2016, 8, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43612.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Morell, *The Great War of Our Time: The CIA's Fight Against Terrorism-- From Al Qaida to ISIS* (New York, NY: Little, Brown & Company, 2015). 307.

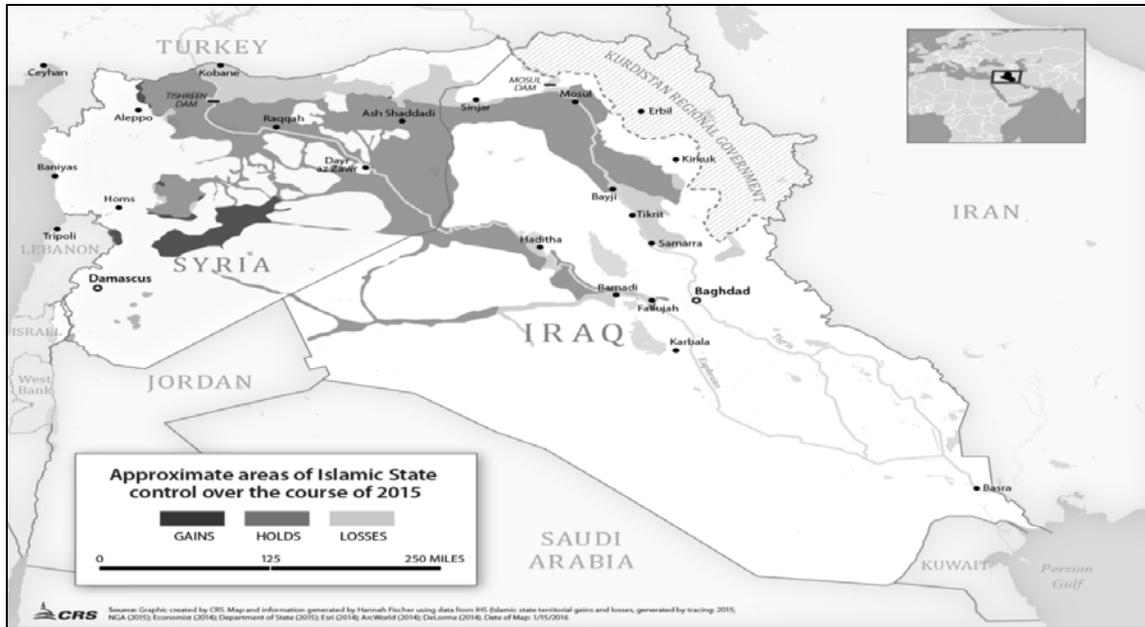


Figure 2. Status of Islamic State Held Territory, January 2016

Source: Christopher M Blanchard and Carla E. Humud, “The Islamic State and US Policy” (Congressional Research Service, February 9, 2016): accessed March 21, 2016, 3, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R43612.pdf>.

The military strategy ISIL is using is driven by its desired end states and beliefs systems. Dr. Sebastian Gorka of the Knowledge Threat Group maintains that, “ISIS presents itself first and foremost as a theocratic enterprise, with the goal to reestablish the Caliphate and return all Muslims to a pure form of Islam as it was lived during the time of Mohammed.”<sup>9</sup> He goes on to say that ISIL’s goal is to institute a ‘pure’ form of Islam through the establishment of the caliphate, destruction of democracy, and adherence to a strict form of Sharia law for everyone. These goals feed right into already established Al Qaida goals that were translated and published by Jordanian journalist Fouad Hussein in a 2005 Al Qaida manifesto. In this manifesto, Al Qaida outlined a seven-point plan that spanned over a 20-year period and labeled it as, “An Islamic Caliphate in Seven Easy Steps.” See Figure 3 below.

<sup>9</sup> Sebastian L Gorka and Katharine C Gorka, “ISIS: The Threat to the United States,” *Threat Knowledge Group* (November 17, 2015), 5, accessed March 7, 2016, [http://threatknowledge.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/TKG-Report\\_The-ISIS-Threat.pdf](http://threatknowledge.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/TKG-Report_The-ISIS-Threat.pdf).

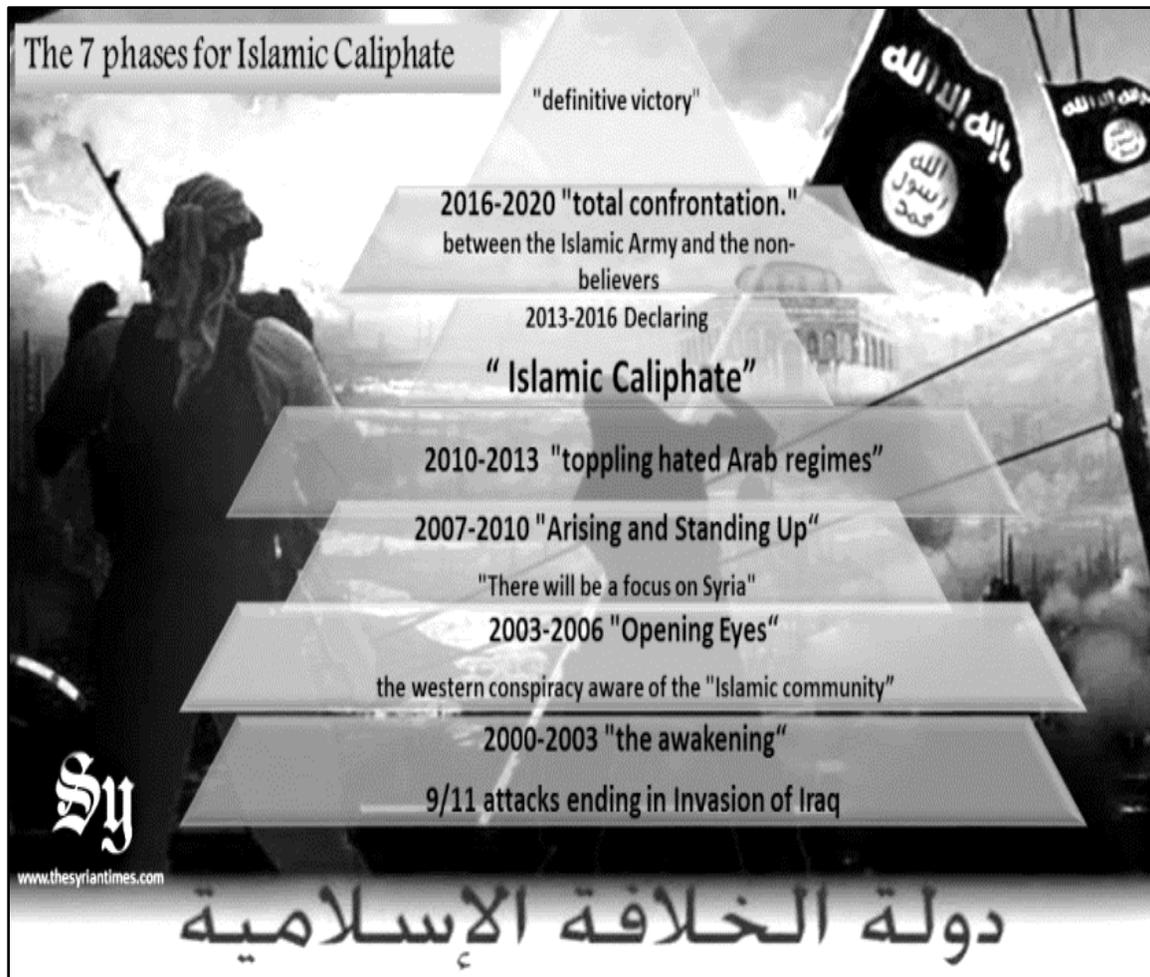


Figure 3. The Seven Phases for Islamic Caliphate

Source: —Matar Matar, "Islamic Caliphate Birth After Long Pregnancy" (The Syrian Times, 26 June 2014) accessed March 21, 2016, <http://thesyriantimes.com/2014/06/26/islamic-caliphate-birth-after-long-pregnancy/>.

Based on this diagram and the seven steps for the establishment of the Islamic Caliphate, it is clear that ISIL has taken the strategy from the Al Qaida playbook and is in the execution phase. While this strategy is vague and only represents major events, it helps frame the strategic goals of radical Islam and the ideology that fuels groups like ISIL and Al Qaida. Yet, ISIL is not like Al Qaida. Dr. Gorka explains why ISIL is far more dangerous than Al Qaida in four key points. First, ISIL holds territory roughly the size of the United Kingdom, with a population of around six million people. This can be described as the world's first trans-

national insurgency, in that, it holds territories in at least three countries. Second, ISIL is the richest threat group of its type in human history, and this excludes funds from black market oil sales and ransom from kidnappings. Third, the recruiting capacity of ISIL is staggering. Their combination of social media and one-on-one recruiting has proven highly effective. Finally, he argues that there is no peer competitor for ISIL in the region and that airstrikes alone will not stop their progress. There will be a need for boots in order to take and hold territory back from them.<sup>10</sup>

When ISIL claimed the establishment of the caliphate, this fundamentally meant their influence will bound out of the confines of Iraq and Syria. This creates the potential to draw Muslim supporters from around the globe as their radical Islamic ideology spreads through the media and social media. For example, ISIL has secured the allegiances of militant groups in Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, and the Philippines.<sup>11</sup> ISIL has also supported and inspired attacks around the globe including the tragic shootings in Paris, France and San Bernardino, CA, as well as the March 2016 attacks in Brussels, Belgium. The most recent string of ISIL attacks against the West has Western leaders relooking at the strategies being applied to ISIL in Iraq, Syria, and now, at home.

The United States policy against ISIL was hastily developed in 2014, in response to ISIL's proclaiming the establishment of the caliphate and physically taking territory in northern Iraq. In September 2014, President Barack Obama made a public statement defining his counter-ISIL strategy. He defined the overall objective to "degrade, and ultimately destroy,

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<sup>10</sup> Sebastian Gorka, "4 Reasons Why ISIS is More Dangerous Than Al Qaeda," The Gorka Briefing (July 10, 2015), accessed 27 March, 2016, <http://thegorkabriefing.com/4-reasons-why-isis-is-more-dangerous-than-al-qaeda/>.

<sup>11</sup> Zachary Laub and Jonathan Masters, "Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder: The Islamic State," Council on Foreign Relations, last updated 22 March 2016, accessed 26 March, 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state/p14811>.

ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.” He then described the four pillars of his strategy:

First, we will conduct a systematic campaign of airstrikes against these terrorists. Second, we will increase our support to forces fighting these terrorists on the ground. Third, we will continue to draw on our substantial counterterrorism capabilities to prevent ISIL attacks. Fourth, we will continue to provide humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians who have been displaced by this terrorist organization. This includes Sunni and Shia Muslims who are at grave risk, as well as tens of thousands of Christians and other religious minorities.<sup>12</sup>

The US military began launching airstrikes on ISIL targets in Iraq and Syria in August of 2014, even before the President laid out the above strategy to the public. On October 15, 2014, the U.S. Department of Defense Central Command (USCENTCOM) made the official announcement that US military operations in Iraq and Syria against ISIL terrorists were designated as Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR).<sup>13</sup> The White House boasts that as of March, 2016, there are sixty-six nations that are partnered with the United States in OIR. The simple fact is, the United States is leads the effort in military and monetary commitments, and in many cases still trying to influence our partners to assist more substantially.

To review the context, ISIL is a growing danger that threatens regional and global security and stability and must be dealt with. Although ISIL was created from elements of Al Qaida, and in many cases, still has members who were previously aligned with Al Qaida, it is a considerably more dangerous version of radical Islamic extremism. ISIL is trying to co-opt the worlds’ Muslim population into their struggle to establish the caliphate and impose Sharia law throughout the world. ISIL thrived in the perfect storm of events that included the United States withdrawal from Iraq, the internal conflict in Syria, and an increasingly dissatisfied Sunni

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<sup>12</sup> Barack Obama, “Statement by the President on ISIL,” White House Office of the Press Secretary, September 10, 2014, accessed 22 March, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>.

<sup>13</sup> Department of Defense, Operation Inherent Resolve Homepage, updated on March 17, 2016, accessed on March 21, 2016, [http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-reports/0814\\_Inherent-Resolve](http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve).

population in the region that was promulgated by the strong-arming, Shia-led, Iraqi government. The US counter-ISIL strategy is one of airstrikes and limited ground forces responsible for building partner capacity and arming the various organizations aligned against ISIL, and creating a coalition of allies who will help in the fight to degrade and destroy ISIL in Iraq and Syria. With a firm grasp of the overall context with regards to the situation in the region, there are some important military doctrinal references that require a brief understanding as they will support the thesis development.

## Literature Review

Much has already been published about ISIL by analysts, historians, pundits, and academics. What has already been written spans everything from the history of ISIL to policy recommendations on combating them; and everything in between. When ISIL began making the news on a regular basis in 2014, a slew of books and white papers flooded the media describing ISIL and its origins. Now, a few years into the strategy to defeat ISIL, there are a number of papers, books, and editorials about the effectiveness of the strategy. While many of these pieces will be cited in the following pages, this monograph will address an area that has, thus far, received negligible attention from previous authors. Few, if any, authors have attempted to take the systems theory approach to the United States strategy to combat ISIL, more specifically, examining the strategy specifically in the context of the information environment as opposed to only the physical environment. In attempting to fill that gap, this monograph is informed heavily by the open-source counter-ISIL strategies of the White House the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), statements from world leaders and subject matter experts, joint military doctrine, media reports and commentary perspectives, detailed reports and thought-pieces from think tanks and academia, and military professional journals. Other background resources include Islamic organization statements on ISIL, primary source documents on the

Islamic religion and the teachings of Sharia Law, a variety of books from interagency subject matter experts, and perhaps most importantly, ISIL strategy in their own words which includes their publications and propaganda.

To fully comprehend the arguments presented below, it is important to create a baseline in understanding on how US military doctrine defines the space in which military operations occur. This is fundamental in that many of the key arguments presented in this monograph will discuss the incongruities between the different domains with regard to the US military strategy against ISIL. United States military operations take place in what is termed the operational environment. The Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Operations*, has been described as the “linchpin” of the US military doctrine hierarchy by former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen. This publication provides the “common perspective from which to plan and execute joint operations independently or in cooperation with our multinational partners, other U.S. Government departments and agencies, and intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations.”<sup>14</sup> The JP 3-0 defines the operational environment as:

The operational environment is the composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influences that affect employment of capabilities and bear on the decisions of the commander. It encompasses physical areas and factors (of the air, land, maritime, and space domains) and the information environment (which includes cyberspace).<sup>15</sup>

This definition divides the operational environment into two separate environments that always coexist and overlap; the physical environment and the information environment. The physical environment contains the tangible elements of an area such as roads, rivers, mountains, population centers, ports and military formations. The information environment is defined in the JP 3-0 as:

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<sup>14</sup> Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), Introduction Letter, Admiral Michael Mullen.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, IV-1.

Where humans and automated systems observe, orient, decide, and act upon information, and is therefore the principal environment of decision making. This environment is pervasive to all activities worldwide and to the air, land, maritime, and space domains of the Joint Force Commanders operational environment. The actors in the information environment include military and civilian leaders, decision makers, individuals, and organizations.<sup>16</sup>

The information environment is further broken down into three separate dimensions; physical, informational, and cognitive (see Figure 4). A further explanation of these three domains is provided below from the Joint Pub 3-13, *Information Operations*:

Within the information environment, the physical dimension is composed of command and control systems, key decision makers, and supporting infrastructure that enable individuals and organizations to create effects. The cognitive dimension encompasses the minds of those who transmit, receive, and respond to or act on information.<sup>17</sup>

As the thesis depends heavily on the argument that the US military strategy is not being effectively waged in the information environment, it is critical to delve into more detail on each of these three domains within the information environment so that there is a clear understanding of what each encompasses and why it is so important:

The physical dimension is composed of command and control systems, key decision makers, and supporting infrastructure that enable individuals and organizations to create effects...The informational dimension encompasses where and how information is collected, processed, stored, disseminated, and protected. Actions in this dimension affect the content and flow of information...The cognitive dimension encompasses the minds of those who transmit, receive, and respond to or act on information. It refers to individuals' or groups' information processing, perception, judgment, and decision making.<sup>18</sup>

Just as the information domain and the physical domains overlap, the dimensions within the information domain (physical, informational, and cognitive) also overlap and blend into each other. For example, an influence operation aimed at garnering support for a new national law in a conflict area can be targeted at the local influence leaders in the informational dimension by using

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<sup>16</sup> JP 3-0, IV-2.

<sup>17</sup> Joint Publication (JP) 3-13, *Information Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), ix.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, I2-I3.

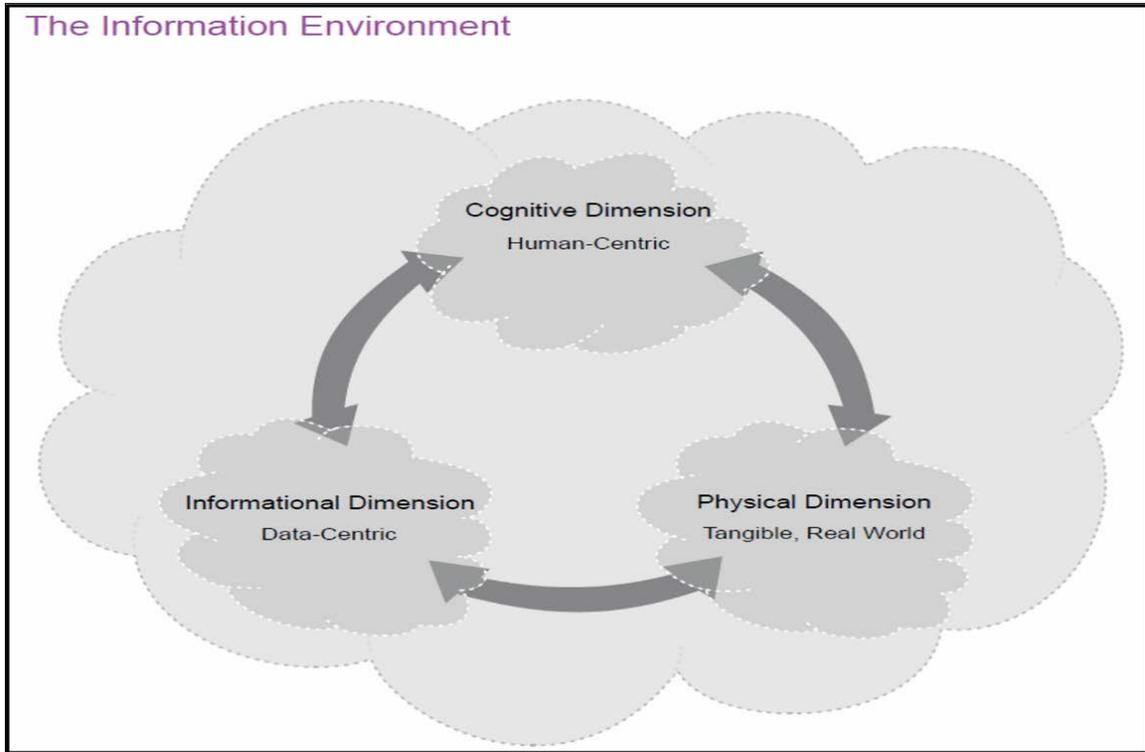


Figure 4. The Information Environment

Source: Joint Publication (JP) 3-13, *Information Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2014), I-2.

hand bills, talking points, and television, radio, and internet ads in the physical dimension, to help facilitate the message that will help influence the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors of the wider population in the cognitive dimension. The cell phone towers, television networks, radio stations, and internet servers all exist in this physical dimension of the information environment, as well as in the overall physical environment. This same example holds true for the elements of the informational and cognitive domains. The thought leaders, people, and their beliefs all exist in the information environment as well as the physical environment. This is an important distinction to make as there is a tendency within the US military to focus a majority of the military efforts on elements of the physical environment while the analysis on the information environment is left to specialists such as information operations and intelligence officers. The outcome of this divide results in a plan that divorces the physical realities and the informational consequences. The

information environment and operating environment are so inextricably intertwined that they cannot be viewed as separate entities. Armed with the doctrinal concepts and terminology that will help frame the thesis being presented, the first component of the thesis is to examine whether or not the United States is solving the right problem in terms of its strategy against ISIL.

### Solving the Right Problem: Framing ISIL Through Complexity Science

The United States entry point into the war against ISIL is based on an incomplete understanding of the phenomena as a whole, as evidenced by the strategy being executed on the ground. Since the US military and coalition partners began kinetic operations against ISIL, there have been over eleven-thousand airstrikes against ISIL in Iraq and Syria.<sup>19</sup> However, the radical Islamic extremist ideology persists and continues to spread its tentacles from the Middle East to the furthest reaches of the globe. In the physical realm of the operational environment, surely ISIL has taken some severe blows to their material organization, but in an almost “catch-22” type fashion, their setbacks are being exploited to feed recruitment efforts through their sophisticated propaganda apparatuses. Even if the military strategy was one hundred percent successful at eliminating ISIL fighters in Iraq and Syria, the ideology behind the ISIL movement will continue to swell outside of the region through social media and other groups who have pledged allegiance to the cause. Unless the United States is willing to lead or create Anti-ISIL military operations around the globe indefinitely in a game of cat-and-mouse, it is prudent that the right problem is being solved.

The current military strategy of airstrikes and building partner capacity (BPC) operations is akin to an analogy in the medical world of conducting only pain-management instead of

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<sup>19</sup> Department of Defense, Operation Inherent Resolve Homepage, updated on March 17, 2016, accessed on March 21, 2016, [http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-reports/0814\\_Inherent-Resolve](http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve).

treating the actual root causes of the pain. While the treatments, and the military strategy, may have some short term benefits, they fail to address the underlying issues and will therefore never solve the actual problem. ISIL is the physical manifestation of the much more complex issue of radical Islamic extremism which has taken advantage of a region rife with instability, corruption, and ethnic grievances. Applying complexity science to the study of the problems in the region will help planners paint a more detailed picture of the of the underlying problems in a system as opposed to only the superficial. By examining the ISIL phenomenon through the lens of complexity science, it becomes evident that ISIL is merely the symptom of much deeper underlying problems in the region.

Complexity science is the scientific study of complex systems, systems with many parts that interact to produce global behavior that cannot easily be explained in terms of interactions between the individual constituent elements.<sup>20</sup> In his book, “Making Things Work: Solving Complex Problems in a Complex World,” Yaneer Bar-Yam defines complex systems as, “a new approach to science, which studies how relationships between parts give rise to collective behaviors of a system and how the system interacts and forms relationships with its environment.”<sup>21</sup> Another leader in complexity science, Antoine Bousquet, reminds everyone that complexity theory is not a unified body of theory. It is an emerging approach or framework set of theoretical and conceptual tools and not a single theory to be adopted holistically.”<sup>22</sup> Robert Jervis, a notable author on issues of complexity and international relations, describes some of the distinctive attributes of a system. “We are dealing with a system when (a) a set of units or

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<sup>20</sup> “Complexity Science Focus,” Agents, Interaction and Complexity Group University of Southampton, UK, accessed 22 March, 2016, <http://www.complexity.ecs.soton.ac.uk/>

<sup>21</sup> Yaneer Bar-Yam, *Making Things Work: Solving Complex Problems in a Complex World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Knowledge Press: NECSI, Knowledge Press, 2005), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Antoine Bousquet and Curtis Simon, "Beyond Models and Metaphors: Complexity Theory, Systems Thinking and International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, no. 01 (2011): 43-62.

elements is interconnected so that changes in some elements or their relations produce changes in other parts of the system, and (b) the entire system exhibits properties and behaviors that are different from those of the parts.”<sup>23</sup> Thinking about this in terms of ISIL, it becomes clear that the situation in Iraq, Syria, the region as a whole, and increasingly, the worldwide information domain, is all part of a large system made up of a myriad of subsystems. Using Jervis’ parameters of a system, ISIL is completely interconnected with its environment in both positive and negative ways, and that any change in this environment would in-turn produce changes across many other parts of the environment. For example, coalition strikes against ISIL-held oil facilities will have far reaching effects with troop movements, vehicle capabilities, overall funding, their ability to govern, and the list can continue. As for the second part of Jervis’ parameters for a system, the many different agents within the overall system of the Levant region interact together in particular ways that cannot be understood simply by a close examination of one agent at a time. It is a futile effort to attempt an understanding of ISIL without understanding them in the context of the dynamic relationships and linkages they have with the other actors in the system. Without this type of understanding, or at least some attempt at it, a successful strategy could not take form.

Devising a strategy against a group like ISIL is inherently difficult because there is no single solution to this complex problem. Jervis highlights this issue when he says, “We can never do merely one thing in a system. The chains of consequences extend over time and many areas: the effects of action are always multiple.”<sup>24</sup> Applied to the situation in the Levant, this would suggest that airstrikes alone by the United States against ISIL will not achieve the desired goal, and may in fact, have unintended consequences. Jervis goes on to say that, “outcomes do not follow from intentions. In a system, actions have unintended effects on the actor, others, and the system as a whole, which means that one cannot infer results from desires and expectations and

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<sup>23</sup> Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*, 3rd ed. (United States: Princeton University Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

vice versa.”<sup>25</sup> Because of the complexity involved with ISIL and the region there is no way of ever completely understanding all the elements of the system, their linkages, and their reactions to changes in the any part of the environment. Measuring success cannot be accomplished by counting the number of airstrikes successfully striking an ISIL target. Without understanding how the many parts of the system react to this new input, there is a real danger in not only failing to achieve actual success, but in also enabling an eventual catastrophic failure of the overall system. Complexity theory can be used to help build understanding of the system at all levels and between all linkages so that the strategists can better frame and anticipate how the system might react to perturbations. The military strategist familiar with complexity science can then apply this to common military planning efforts.

Charles Lister captures this point best in his 2014 Brookings Institute research paper, “Profiling the Islamic State,” when he asserts that “by expanding amidst a tremendous wave of regional instability and by exploiting and exacerbating such conditions, ISIL successfully gained military power, a multiplying international membership, and unprecedented financial resources. The key to undermining IS’s long-term sustainability, therefore, is to solve the socio-political failures within its areas of operation.”<sup>26</sup> Lister identifies the underlying problems to be the socio-political failures in the region that have created vacuums that ISIL has filled. Jessica Lewis from the Institute for the Study of War states, “ISIS draws strength from the complex circumstances that are independently causing Iraq and Syria to fail, including domestic civil and sectarian cleavages, authoritarian leadership, and polarizing regional stressors.”<sup>27</sup> The complexity of the

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*, 3rd ed. (United States: Princeton University Press, 1998), 61.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Lister, “Profiling the Islamic State,” Brookings Doha Center Analysis (Analysis Paper Number 13, November 2014), 2-3, accessed 24 February, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports2/2014/12/profiling-islamic-state-lister>.

<sup>27</sup> Jessica Lewis, "The Islamic State: A Counter-Strategy for a Counter-State," *Institute for the Study of War* (July 2014), 4, accessed March 7, 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/islamic-state-counter-strategy-counter-state>.

systems at play in Iraq and Syria cannot be overstated. The following points will assist developing a base sense of the sheer complexity.

The Shia led Iraqi government has exacerbated tensions with the Sunnis through its heavy-handedness and dominant grip on Iraqi power. ISIL has exacerbated this already present rift and co-opted many Sunnis in their cause to re-establish the Caliphate at the expense of all who oppose them. The Kurds in the northern portion of Iraq have been fighting for their own autonomous region that they refer to as “Kurdistan”, and though they are not necessarily loyal to the Iraq government, they fight against ISIL. Iran, which is predominantly Shia, is assisting the Shia dominated Iraqi government in its fight against ISIL while at the same time maintaining a tenuous relationship with the United States. The Saudi Arabian government, which is predominantly Sunni, is also taking part, alongside the United States, in the airstrikes against ISIL in Syria, but not in Iraq. With the exception of Jordan, other Muslim nations in the region who are conducting airstrikes against ISIL are only conducting them within Syria and not Iraq. Moreover, Turkey, who is a member of NATO and has a long-standing dispute with the Kurdish forces in northern Iraq which are directly supported by the United States, has been ratcheting up tensions with the Russians in Syria while also enduring horrific terrorist attacks within its own borders at the hand of ISIL and the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party. Exacerbating these tensions was the downing of a Russian fighter jet by Turkish forces in late November of 2015 over the Turkey-Syrian border region.

The Russian military entered the fray in Syria to prop up the Assad regime under the guise of fighting ISIL in September, 2015. Fighting against the Assad regime in Syria is the Free Syria Army (FSA) and other anti-Assad forces, who are in many cases aligned with or even give their tacit support to ISIL. Enter, the United States.

The US military strategy has been to conduct airstrikes against ISIL leadership in both Syria and Iraq, as well as to provide military support to the remains of the Iraqi government, the Kurds in the north part of Iraq, and the Free Syria Army in Syria. There is a diverse cast of

competing characters currently receiving either direct or tacit military support from the United States. While all the factions receiving US military support are aligned against ISIL, many of them are also aligned against each other. This dynamic should have policy makers in Washington, DC asking questions about what will happen after the physical manifestations of ISIL are defeated in Iraq and Syria, who will fill that void, and what does that mean in regards to the larger implications for the region. The current actions being taken by the United States in the region would indicate that the strategy against ISIL is shortsighted and does not take into account the complex problem set that actually set a group like ISIL into motion in the first place. A greater appreciation of the operational and information environments that ISIL operates in may have better shaped the United States strategy. This highly complex problem-set is where complexity science and operational design become invaluable tools for national level strategy development and military campaign planning.<sup>28</sup>

Joint military doctrine states that the Joint Force Commander (JFC) and staff develops plans and orders through the application of operational art and operational design. They combine art and science to develop products that describe how (ways) the joint force will employ its capabilities (means) to achieve the military end state (ends).<sup>29</sup> Operational art is the design studio in which tactics are developed and executed to achieve the strategic aims, while operational design is a planning methodology based in conceptual planning that later feeds more detailed planning efforts. The complexity science described above informs the operational design process and enables operational art. The design methodology is applicable for complex, ambiguous, problems and is one way to conceptualize and explore the intricacies of the environment in terms of what it looks like in the present and what the desired future state is, as well as how to frame the

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<sup>28</sup> Joint Publication (JP) 5-0, *Joint Operation Planning* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2011), III-2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, III-1.

problems being examined and then examine approaches to achieving that desired state. It would be nearly impossible to use this doctrinal methodology without incorporating elements of complexity science. One of the first elements of the design methodology is to frame the environment as it currently is.<sup>30</sup> Complexity science allows the military planner to examine the operating environment as a system of systems with many different agents who are linked together in an unfathomable amount of non-linear ways.<sup>31</sup> This way of analyzing the operational and information environment will garner a deeper understanding of the system and sub-systems, which will in turn, help to frame the actual underlying problems as opposed to just the symptoms that bubble to the surface and gain the most attention. This view brings the United States strategy against ISIL into question as an effective strategy

Unfortunately, this appears to be the case with the United States approach to defeating ISIL, which, complexity science helps illuminate. The strategy that the United States is employing against ISIL suggests that during the planning process, the wrong problem was defined. With the wrong problem set defined, the strategy will most certainly miss the mark in achieving an overall successful strategy. The problem set defined by the White House is one where ISIL is at the root of all problems in Iraq and Syria.<sup>32</sup> This view does not take into account the initial state of affairs that set the conditions for the manifestation of ISIL, as well as all of the other intricate linkages between the players incorporated within the system of systems. While ISIL certainly is causing many problems in the region, it is not the root cause of what ails the region. It appears as if the military operation is being conducted in a vacuum devoid of political and regional realities. Carl Von Clausewitz discussed this in 1827 when he critiqued a friend's

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., III-8.

<sup>31</sup> Antoine Bousquet and Simon Curtis, "Beyond Models and Metaphors: Complexity Theory, Systems Thinking and International Relations," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, no. 1 (March 2011), 46.

<sup>32</sup> *ISIL Strategy*, White House Homepage, accessed March 15, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/isil-strategy>.

military strategy created as a mental exercise. Major von Roeder, a Prussian general-staff officer, asked his friend and mentor, Clausewitz, for advice on his strategy for the fictitious defense of Prussia from an Austrian aggressor. When Clausewitz found out that the exercise was only from the military purview and devoid of any politics, he asked his friend, “how then is it possible to plan a campaign, whether for one theatre of war or several, without indicating the political condition of the belligerents, and the politics of the relationship to each other.”<sup>33</sup> This same type of question can be asked today of the military strategist who are executing a military campaign against ISIL without a political strategy beyond the “degrading and destruction of ISIL.”<sup>34</sup>

Is ISIL really the problem, or is the problem much deeper and more complex with ISIL being only the symptom? One way of answering that question is to ask another question. What happens if ISIL, in its physical form, it completely destroyed in Iraq and Syria? Will all the major problems in the Levant come to an end and stability and governance flourish abundantly? This question may sound ridiculous, but it helps to frame the complexity involved in this problem set. Regrettably, destroying ISIL in Iraq and Syria with a strategy focused almost completely on military means will only create a new set of challenges in the region. One of these new challenges will likely include competition for power between the regional competitors who are supported by the United States, such as the Free Syria Army, Kurds, Iraq government, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>35</sup> Each of these entities is vying for a political aim that does not necessarily compliment the others. Another challenge will be in denying the existence of a vacuum that helped precipitate the rise of ISIL in the first place. Of course, there is also the expected backlash on social media that will

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<sup>33</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, Peter Paret, and Daniel Moran, *Carl Von Clausewitz: Two Letters on Strategy* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: US Army Command and General Staff College, 1984), 22.

<sup>34</sup> *ISIL Strategy*, White House Homepage, accessed March 15, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/isil-strategy>.

<sup>35</sup> BBC, "Syria Crisis: Where Key Countries Stand," *BBC Middle East*, October 30, 2015, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23849587>.

surely frame the defeat of ISIL as a war against Islam and another Christian crusade. All of these new challenges will have to be addressed should ISIL be completely vanquished.

The crux of the issue here is that the wrong problem is being solved in the region and that even the complete destruction of ISIL, in the absence of a much more comprehensive strategy that at least addresses the multi-faceted politics and socio-economic issues in the region, will result in conditions that will likely be worse than the current conditions. The strategy now being used now against ISIL looks remarkably similar to the strategy that was waged against ISI and Al Qaida in Iraq.<sup>36</sup> The differences between the groups are stark and an old strategy will not work against this new threat as the environmental, physical, and informational contexts are widely disparate. These differences are the fundamental reason why there is a distinct asymmetry in the overall strategy against ISIL; a strategy that has an overwhelming military emphasis where a whole of government approach is needed. One step in the right direction came from the Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism, Tina Kaidanow, when she stated:

Efforts will continue in the military realm with vigor and a continued amount of focus and attention, but I think it's clear we cannot address counterterrorism solely through military means. We need to keep denying them the supply of foreign terrorist fighters, cut off their access to financing, disrupt and expose their messaging, and stabilize the vulnerable communities that have been liberated from ISIL control.<sup>37</sup>

Her comments reflect the complexity involved in the region by showing that one option for action is not an option., but that it will take many actions, done over a span of time, to many different parts of the system.

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<sup>36</sup> Audrey Cronin, "ISIS is Not a Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs*, January 14, 2016, accessed March 15, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/isis-not-terrorist-group>.

<sup>37</sup> Tina Kaidanow, Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism, *Department of State Transcript* (Remarks at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 3 FEB 2016), accessed on 22 March, 2016, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/rm/252082.htm>

## Asymmetric Strategy and the Elusive Decisive Blow

The blame for the failure to adequately frame the operational and information environment in regards to ISIL and the region cannot be placed solely on the US military planners. The overarching United States counter-ISIL strategy developed by the White house is focused almost entirely on military objectives instead of regional desired end states. In effect, the political strategy is the military strategy, with only negligible, asymmetric effort placed on anything other than direct military action, military partnerships, and aid. Figure 5, below, shows the White House's four-part plan to defeat and degrade ISIL abroad. These components include military strikes, training and equipping of anti-ISIL forces, stopping the financing and recruiting stream enabling ISIL, and ironically, in the last bullet, to establish a cease-fire and political resolution to the Syrian civil war. More important that what *is* stated in the strategy is what is *not* stated. There is no mention of an overall strategic communications plan by Western governments to combat the rise of radical Islamic extremism that is the driving force behind groups like ISIL.<sup>38</sup> Nor is there any mention of a plan to ease ethnic tensions between the Shia-based Iraqi government and the majority Sunni population in Iraq which feeds Sunni recruits straight into the ranks of ISIL. There is also no mention of how Russian, Iranian, and Saudi Arabian involvement in the conflict, each in their own way and with their own agenda, change the overall calculus of the situation. Undoubtedly, these are being discussed behind closed doors at the highest levels of the US government, but even so, none of these issues have made their way into the strategy being executed on the ground. Military means are being used to achieve limited military objectives. It is apparent that a more comprehensive, whole of government, approach that addresses political and strategic objectives is needed to defeat ISIL, combat the ideology that feeds it, and to work to

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<sup>38</sup> Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, February 15, 2015, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/03/what-isis-really-wants/384980/>.

create political resolutions that address more than just Syria. Only then can stability begin to take hold in the region and deny other radical groups from filling the void that ISIL will leave.



Figure 5. The White House Strategy Against ISIL

*Source:* White House, “ISIL Strategy: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat ISIL and Combat the Terrorist Threat,” accessed March 15, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/isil-strategy>.

It will not come as a shock to anyone that, based on the US military strategy, success is being measured in terms of kinetic effects on the enemy, as Figure 6 describes below. The Department of Defense is quick to show the financial costs associated with this military strategy as well. “As of February 29, 2016, the total cost of operations related to ISIL since kinetic operations started on August 8, 2014, is \$6.5 billion and the average daily cost is \$11.4 million for 571 days of operations.”<sup>39</sup> This conflict is already six billion dollars deep, and growing daily, all the while the politicians in the United States talk of fiscal austerity and cuts to the military forces which have already begun limiting capabilities.<sup>40</sup> This is exactly why having a correct

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<sup>39</sup> Department of Defense, Operation Inherent Resolve Homepage, updated on March 17, 2016, accessed March 21, 2016, [http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-reports/0814\\_Inherent-Resolve](http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve).

<sup>40</sup> Mark Moyer, "How Obama Shrank the Military," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 2, 2015, accessed March 12, 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/how-obama-shrank-the-military-1438551147>.

strategy is so important. Defining success in terms of enemies killed and equipment destroyed is surely the wrong measure of effectiveness in this complex problem set.

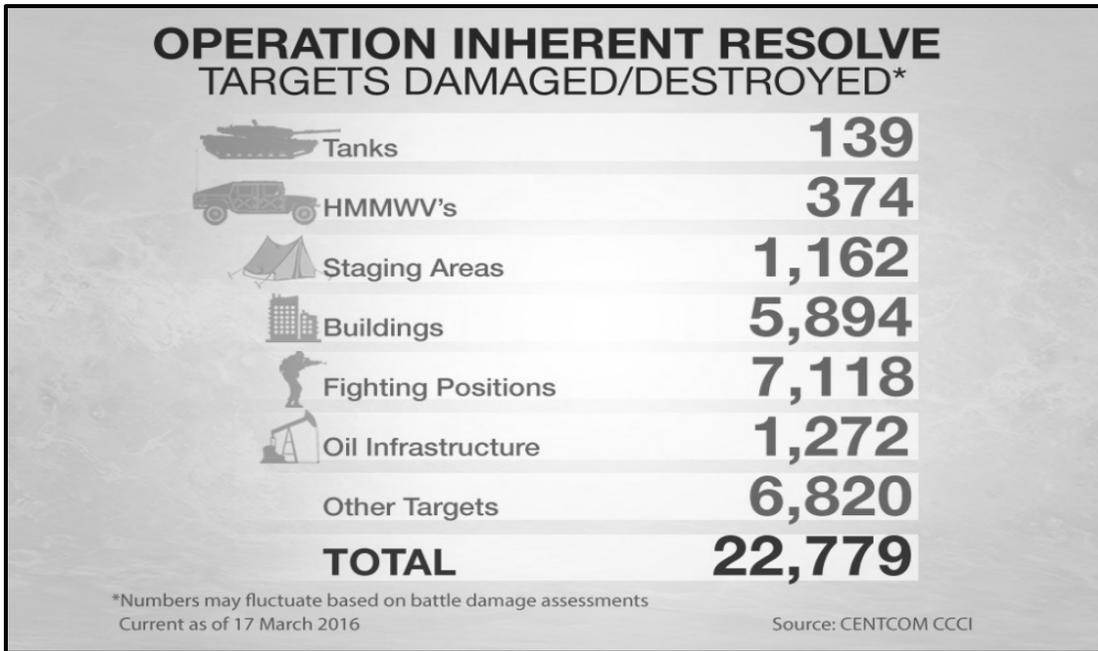


Figure 6. Operation Inherent Resolve Targets Damaged and Destroyed Report

Source: US Department of Defense, Operation Inherent Resolve Homepage, accessed on 28 March 2016, [http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814\\_Inherent-Resolve](http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve).

As it stands, the US military is executing a military strategy based on the strategic guidance given to them by the US President and his National Security Council (NSC). There is nothing inherently wrong or improper about this, as this is how military doctrine defines the chain of command and the relationship between the Presidents' administration and the military. The President and the NSC are responsible for giving strategic guidance. Joint military doctrine defines strategic guidance as the formulation of politico-military assessments at the strategic level that develop and evaluate military strategy and objectives, apportion and allocate forces and other resources, formulate concepts and strategic military options, and develop planning guidance leading to the preparation of courses of action. A whole of government approach is used to

formulate strategic end states with suitable and feasible national strategic objectives that reflect US national interests.<sup>41</sup>

Herein lies the tension with the current US counter-ISIL strategy. The strategic guidance from the White House did not address strategic end states, but instead, chose to focus on the military end states to degrade and defeat ISIL in Iraq and Syria. This could have been the case for a number of reasons ranging from politics and risk to a lack of clarity on the desired end states. Whatever the reason, the US military has been given a mission that they are currently executing and are using easily identified metrics, such as body counts and equipment strikes, to measure success.

As with any military action, leaders want to achieve a quick and decisive victory and therefore spend a lot of time trying to decide where to deliver the decisive blow to the enemy. Clausewitz refers to this as the “center of gravity...the point against which all our energies should be directed.”<sup>42</sup> US Joint military doctrine defines the center of gravity (COG) as a source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act, and that an objective is always linked to a COG.<sup>43</sup> The Joint doctrine goes on to explain that, “this process cannot be taken lightly, since a faulty conclusion resulting from a poor or hasty analysis can have very serious consequences, such as the inability to achieve strategic and operational objectives at an acceptable cost.”<sup>44</sup>

A quick search of the internet or any number of recent military professional journal will turn up several author who have solved the ISIL problem single-handedly by identifying the enemy COG. Part of the problem is that there are so many different ideas circulating within the

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<sup>41</sup> JP 5-0, II-19.

<sup>42</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 595-596.

<sup>43</sup> JP 5-0, xxi.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, III-23.

military, academia, think tanks, and media circles that each have identified different COGs and they cannot possibly all be correct, or wrong for that matter. Is finding the ISIL COG an exercise in futility, or is it that having so many different COGs identified by such a wide audience of so-called experts just a testament to complexity involved with ISIL and the region as a whole? While this monograph has no intention of trying to add to the list of identifying the one COG that will solve all the problems in the region, it will take a brief look at some of the COGs that have been identified to examine the utility of COG analysis and the breadth of the complexity.

In July of 2014, the Institute for the Study of War published a paper called *The Islamic State: A Counter-Strategy for a Counter-State*. In it, author Jessica Lewis proposed that ISIL has two distinct COGs that combine together to give them strength in the region. “The first is a classical military center of gravity that ISIS uses to wrest physical control from modern states and hold what it has gained. The second ISIS center of gravity is a political capacity to provide essential state functions within the territory that ISIS controls. ISIS strength emanates from the ability to translate military control into political control, and thereby to claim that the Caliphate is manifest.”<sup>45</sup> Simply stated, she proposes the COG as ISIL’s combination of military and political capabilities.

Dr. Anthony Cordesman, a well-known national security analyst from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, cites his view of the COG in the battle against ISIL as “having an Iraqi government and set of political compromises that is functional enough to unite its key factions, that offers all the incentives of security and a fair share of power and the nation’s oil wealth, and that can make a quick and real start in job creation, economic development, and reviving the nation’s education and medical systems when security is restored.”<sup>46</sup> In agreement

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<sup>45</sup> Jessica Lewis, "The Islamic State: A Counter-Strategy for a Counter-State," *Institute for the Study of War* (July 2014), 5, accessed March 7, 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/report/islamic-state-counter-strategy-counter-state>.

<sup>46</sup> Anthony Cordesman, “The Real Center of Gravity in the War Against the Islamic State,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 30 September, 2014.

with Dr. Cordesman is Michael Doran from the Brookings Institute who says the COG is “Syria, where Assad, Iran’s closest ally, presents the alliance at its most brutal, if also its most vulnerable. Until Assad is gone, Syria will remain the region’s most powerful magnet of global jihad. So long as the Jihadis enjoy a safe haven in Syria, they will continue to dominate the Sunni heartland of Iraq.”<sup>47</sup> Again, there are other experts pointing to something other than a military focus as key to the defeat of ISIL.

Another perspective comes from Retired Army Four-star General Jack Keane who states that the ISIL COG is Syria. “The facts are the headquarters is there. The logistical infrastructure is there. That’s where the recruiting takes place. And, that’s where the training takes place.”<sup>48</sup> General Keane’s assessment is that the COG is a physical location as opposed to the previous two assessments that had listed it as the group’s military control and a system of functional governments in the region. This is interesting since ISIL is attempting to reestablish a Caliphate, and, in order to do so, needs to possess a territory to do so with. With that logic, it could be deduced that to deny ISIL any territory, they are denied the ability to establish their caliphate, which then delegitimizes their strategic goals. This view is also shared by Dr. Michael Williams of the Mackenzie Institute where he states, “The most critical center of gravity then is territory. Territory provides ISIS with legitimacy, which helps recruitment and provides the ability to fund the ISIS state and war. Thus, unlike de-territorialized networked actors like Al-Qaida, ISIS must be dismantled on the ground. Allowing ISIS to maintain control of physical territory in the Middle East will only allow the cancer to grow, and eventually expand.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Michael Doran, “Misidentifying the Conflict in Iraq and Syria” (Brookings, July 10, 2014), accessed March 21, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/07/10-doran-obama-iraq-syria-strategy>.

<sup>48</sup> Wanda Carruthers, “Gen. Jack Keane: Syria 'Center of Gravity' for ISIS,” News Max (January 16, 2015), accessed 21 March 2016, <http://www.newsmax.com/Newsfront/Jack-Keane-Syria-ISIS-Islamic-State/2015/01/16/id/619065/>.

Counter-Insurgency Expert, Dr. Sebastian Gorka, declares that the ISIL COG is their ideology. Dr. Gorka asserts that “you can stop or kill an individual terrorist or jihadi leader but that won’t stop the ideology that will continue to motivate people to commit terrorist attacks.”<sup>50</sup> Scholars from the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), including Fred and Kimberly Kagan, agree with Dr. Gorka in that ideology is the COG for ISIL and Al Qaida. In a paper published in December of 2015 titled “A global strategy for combating al Qaida and the Islamic State,” the authors state that “the center of gravity for both ISIS and al Qaida is their ideology, a form of Jihadi-Salafism. That is, by delegitimizing the ideology that attracts Muslims to al Qaida and other extremist organizations and motivates their subsequent actions, we can defeat them. Conversely, if we fail to deal with the underlying ideology that motivates al Qaida and its affiliates, we are likely to enjoy only limited success.”<sup>51</sup>

It is evident that there is a wide array of ideas on what exactly the ISIL COG is. Ideas include the actual ISIL fighters, ISIL leadership, Syria and other physical locations, the governmental and political conditions in the region that allowed ISIL to manifest as it did, and the ideology that feeds the recruits and fervor in the organization. Some of the COGs similarly look at the COG as a physical manifestation while others agree that it is an intangible idea or condition. As was mentioned earlier, none of these are wrong. It would be interesting to pair these COG ideas up with the current counter-ISIL strategy to gauge if the strategy could potentially affect any of these COGs mentioned. Those who believe the ISIL COG is the fighters,

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Williams, “ISIS as a Strategic Actor: Strategy and Counter-Strategy” (Mackenzie Institute, APR 15, 2015), accessed 22 March, 2016, <http://mackenzieinstitute.com/isis-strategic-actor-strategy-counter-strategy/>.

<sup>50</sup> Sebastian Gorka, “Targeting the Center of Gravity.” *The Gorka Briefing* (4 JAN 2016), accessed March 21, 2016, <http://thegorkabriefing.com/targeting-center-gravity/>.

<sup>51</sup> Mary Habeck, et al., “A Global Strategy for Combating Al Qaeda and the Islamic State” (American Enterprise Institute, December 7, 2015), accessed March 17, 2016, <http://www.aei.org/publication/a-global-strategy-for-combating-al-Qaeda-and-the-islamic-state/>.

the leadership, and the physical locations are likely satisfied that the strategy is addressing the COGs that they have identified. The experts who believe that the COG is the stability of the region through governmental and political conditions are most likely not happy with the strategy as it does little, if anything, to address the issues that they see as key to the conflict. Similarly, the experts who think that the ISIL ideology of radical Islamic extremism is the COG, are left with little consolation as the strategy is monopolized by military action through airstrikes and partner capacity building operations.<sup>52</sup>

The White House's current counter-ISIL strategy is only effectively engaging ISIL in the physical part of the operational environment and not in the information environment where ISIL is making its most strategically significant gains with recruiting and propaganda that promotes its growth and resilience. The strategy remains narrowly focused on the symptoms of more strategic concerns such as socio-economic instability that comprise the root cause. Without an amended strategy to address the primary socio-economic and political conditions that sustain ISIL, the military-centric strategy will likely fail to achieve the current administration's stated goal of degrading and destroying ISIL in Iraq and Syria. Military means will remain only one aspect of a comprehensive anti-ISIL strategy that would ideally include plans to address Iraqi governance, political structures, and most importantly, radical Islamic extremism.

ISIL is winning in the information environment and in the battle of wills due to the White House's minimal efforts to contest ISIL in the information environment. ISIL's narrative continues to gain momentum despite military setbacks due in part to their mastery of media, propaganda, and recruiting. The flaws in the White House's current anti-ISIL strategy are driven home in the US Army Strategic Land Power study of 2013 which states "lasting strategic success is not a function of enemy units eliminated or targets destroyed. A successful strategic outcome

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<sup>52</sup> *ISIL Strategy*, White House Homepage, accessed March 15, 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/isil-strategy>.

rests, as it has since time immemorial, on winning the contest of wills.”<sup>53</sup> These wills are shaped by the information environment and are driven by powerful narratives that must be addressed.

#### A Battle of Narratives

While the kinetic fight against ISIL is underway, the one fight that is not being waged against ISIL in a strategic manner is the fight within the information environment. In order to counter the radical Islamic ideology that fuels terrorism around the globe, a battle must also be waged in the information environment on a strategic, not just tactical, level. While speaking of Al Qaida in the book, *Fighting the Ideological War: Winning Strategies from Communism to Islamism*, Dr. Sebastian Gorka writes, “Although we have proven our capacity in the last 10 years kinetically to engage our enemy at the operational and tactical level with unsurpassed effectiveness, we have not even begun to take the war to Al Qaida at the strategic level of counter-ideology, to attack it at its heart – the ideology of global jihad.”<sup>54</sup> This is where the asymmetry in strategy comes into play again. The United States is fighting a localized kinetic war against a transnational and ideologically driven enemy that has mastered the information environment. This sentiment is further confirmed by the former commander of US Special Operations forces in the Middle East, Army Major General Mike Nagata. General Nagata summed up the power of the narrative and the information environment when he says of ISIL, “Among all its various strengths, the one that has increasingly demanded attention has been the

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<sup>53</sup> Raymond Odierno, John Amos, and William McRaven. “Strategic Landpower: Winning the Clash of Wills,” US Army, US Marine Corps, and US Special Operations Command, combined white paper (October, 2013): 7, accessed date, 11 March, 2016, [http://www.arcic.army.mil/app\\_Documents/Strategic-Landpower-White-Paper-28OCT2013.pdf](http://www.arcic.army.mil/app_Documents/Strategic-Landpower-White-Paper-28OCT2013.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> The Westminster Institute, *Fighting the Ideological War: Winning Strategies from Communism to Islamism*, ed. Patrick Sookhdeo and Katharine C. Gorka (United States: Isaac Publishing, 2012).185-186.

“intangible” power of DA’ISH—its ability to persuade, its ability to inspire, its ability to attract young men and women from across the globe, and its ability to create an image of unstoppable power and spiritual passion and commitment.”<sup>55</sup> General Nagata goes on to say that this is one area where the current US strategy is inadequate and vulnerable.

The current overall US strategy to counter ISIL would suggest that there is little understanding of the enemy in the information domain. The previous sections of this monograph emphasized the battle occurring almost exclusively in the physical domain of the operational environment. Intelligence analysts across the US Government who work against ISIL can almost certainly point to data about the size, composition, and movement of ISIL forces with extreme accuracy. It is highly questionable whether the same number of people in the intelligence community and policy circles would be able to discuss the ISIL beliefs, goals, threat doctrine, and their narratives. This incomplete and unbalanced understanding of the enemy is the driving force behind the failings of the current strategy to defeat ISIL.

There is much more to the story than just ISIL in its physical form. The ideology and narratives that feed the ISIL movement should be examined closely as part of any strategy to defeat them. Army Lieutenant Colonel Brian Steed, a subject matter expert on narratives, describes the importance of understanding the narrative when he says, “The ‘decisive operation’ on the current Middle Eastern battlefield is narrative. Violence is still a critical portion of armed conflict, but it optimally serves a supporting role. Da’ash (ISIL) and others use violence primarily to communicate, confirm, or advance their narrative.”<sup>56</sup> Based on Lieutenant Colonel Steeds point, the US strategy is focusing its own main effort on the supporting effort of the enemy. The terms ‘narrative’ and ‘counter-narrative’ have been increasingly used in defense strategy circles

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<sup>55</sup> Hriar Cabayan and Sarah Canna, *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL* (Washington, DC: Strategic Multilayer Assessment Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2014), 1.

<sup>56</sup> Brian Steed, “Changing the Conversation: Conceptualizing the Fight against Non-State and Post-State Actors” (May 2015), 3.

over the past several years when trying to describe ways to understand what motivates groups of people and how best to influence them. It may be useful examine a few definitions of the concept of narrative from a scholarly perspective, a military practitioner perspective, and a military doctrine perspective. These three unique ways of looking at a narrative provide insight on what a narrative is and how a narrative can be used as influencing agents, internally and externally.

A scholar on narratives and narrative theory, H. Porter Abbott, defines narrative simply as, “the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse; story is an event or sequence of events (the action); and narrative discourse is those events as represented.”<sup>57</sup> In the 2016 white paper, *Maneuver in the Narrative Space*, a narrative is said to be an

organizing framework through which individuals make sense of their world and provides insight into the beliefs, norms, and values of a group. Narratives facilitate sense-making, the process of interpretation, and production of meaning. Insurgent groups often employ narratives as a means of communicating grievances, goals, and justifications for their actions within a story-like framework.<sup>58</sup>

Army doctrine also mentions narrative in the 2013 version of the “Inform and Influence Activities” manual, Field Manual 3-13, where narrative is said to be “a brief description of a commander’s story used to visualize the effects the commander wants to achieve in the information environment to support and shape their operational environments.”<sup>59</sup> These three definitions provide a broad understanding from both a civilian and a military perspective on what a narrative is. In its most basic form, a narrative is a story with events that aids in the understanding and recognition of multiple world views. One example is the American narrative of the tragic events on 9-11. America was attacked by terrorists but pulled together as a country to

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<sup>57</sup> Porter H Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19.

<sup>58</sup> Brigadier General Charles L. Moore, et al., “Strategic Multilayer Assessment White Paper: Maneuver and Engagement in the Narrative Space” (January 2016), 5, accessed 17 March, 2016, <http://www.soc.mil/swcs/ProjectGray/Maneuver%20in%20the%20Narrative%20Space.pdf>.

<sup>59</sup> Field Manual (FM) 3-13, *Inform and Influence Activities* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2013), 1-4.

show the terrorists and the world that the American spirit can never be crushed.<sup>60</sup> Some version of this narrative would likely resonate with everyone who was old enough to remember that day in 2001. These narratives, the stories that people tell themselves and each other, become woven into the fabric of their lives and shape their world view and decisions.<sup>61</sup> This is why understanding the concept of narratives, and more importantly, understanding the narratives of an enemy, is critical to any strategy.

The ISIL narrative is rich with history, religion, stories of victimization and triumph, and the belief that everything the organization is trying to achieve has been pre-ordained through their religious beliefs. It is a multi-faceted narrative that can be tailored to specific audiences depending on what their target of influence is. In its most basic form, components of the ISIL strategic narrative include the establishment of the Caliphate, universal Sharia law, conquest of the Infidels, and a message of hope and purpose for a largely hopeless and disenfranchised population. While an entire separate monograph can be written on the ISIL narrative, there is one summation provided in the US Special Operations Command, *Strategic Multilayer Assessment White Paper, Maneuver and Engagement in the Narrative Space*, that succinctly sums up the salient points included in the ISIL narrative. This White Paper suggests that some of the key components of the ISIL narratives include “victimization, the plight of Iraqi Sunni Arabs, Sunni-Shia antipathy, an alternative to chaos, and an alternative to the nation-state.”<sup>62</sup> The paper goes on

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<sup>60</sup> Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, "How Resilient is Post-9/11 America," *Sunday Review*, August 24, 2014, accessed February 11, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/sunday-review/how-resilient-is-post-9-11-america.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/09/sunday-review/how-resilient-is-post-9-11-america.html?_r=0).

<sup>61</sup> Julie Beck, "The Story of Your Life," *The Atlantic*, August 10, 2015, accessed March 10, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/08/life-stories-narrative-psychology-redemption-mental-health/400796/>.

<sup>62</sup> Brigadier General Charles L. Moore, et al., “Strategic Multilayer Assessment White Paper: Maneuver and Engagement in the Narrative Space” (January 2016), 5, accessed 17 March, 2016, <http://www.soc.mil/swcs/ProjectGray/Maneuver%20in%20the%20Narrative%20Space.pdf>.

to explain that, “While narratives provided the informational backdrop for ISIL’s appeal, the group was able to take advantage of regional instability to transform its goal of a state into reality and implemented successful recruiting practices.”<sup>63</sup> This suggests that ISIL had successfully synchronized their operations across the information and the physical domains of the operational environment and lend credibility to Lieutenant Colonel Steeds assertion that ISIL uses violence and military action as an enabler to their main effort of controlling and propagating their narrative. Omar Hammami, a relatively notorious Islamic extremist who used the pseudonym “Abu Mansoor Al-Amriki” made the comment that, “The war of narratives has become even more important than the war of navies, napalm, and knives.”<sup>64</sup> That statement provides a telling look inside the mindset that drives the ideology fueling ISIL.

ISIL puts forth a significant amount of effort into running their media campaign, propaganda, and recruiting. They see themselves at war in the information environment equally, if not more so, than in the physical environment.<sup>65</sup> The leader of Al Qaida, Ayman al-Zawahiri, said back in 2005 that “we are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media... we are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our umma.”<sup>66</sup> This media campaign appears to be successful if the number of foreign fighters recruited to the cause is a valid metric. As of early 2015, over twenty-thousand foreign fighters have traveled to Syria to

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<sup>63</sup> Moore, Strategic Multilayer Assessment White Paper: Maneuver and Engagement in the Narrative Space,5.

<sup>64</sup> Omar Hammami, *The Story of an American Jihadi* (Abu Muhammad As-Somaali, 2012), accessed on 22 March, 2016, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/93732117/The-Story-of-an-American-Jihaadi#scribd>.

<sup>65</sup> Ayman Al-Zawahiri, “Letter from Al-Zawahiri to Al-Zarqawi,” *Global Security*, October 11, 2005, accessed 15 March, 2016, [http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter\\_9jul2005.htm](http://www.globalsecurity.org/security/library/report/2005/zawahiri-zarqawi-letter_9jul2005.htm).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

join the ranks of ISIL.<sup>67</sup> The message is obviously resonating with their intended audiences and poses a significant challenge to the counter ISIL strategy.

One of the best ways to understand ISIL is to look at what they say and publish on a regular basis. They publish professional-quality magazines and periodicals, in English, to aid in their narrative, propaganda, and recruitment efforts. They are also active on social media sites like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. where they release propaganda videos and recruit both passive and active support from the broader Muslim community.<sup>68</sup> In a 2015 Brookings Institute paper titled, “Here to Stay and Growing: Combating ISIS Propaganda Networks”, Alberto Fernandez makes a compelling case as to why the ISIL media is so effective. He argues that if one was to summarize all the ISIL media into a few short words, the concepts that would emerge would be urgency, agency, authenticity, and victory. The urgency is created by emphasizing that innocent Sunni Arab Muslims, including children, are being slaughtered in Syria by the non-believers. The agency comes into play in that the viewer can do something to join the cause to right this wrong. Authenticity is established by the actions on the ground that show the establishment of the Caliphate as already underway. The last is victory, which is evident by the success on the ground in Iraq and Syria and the fact that, despite the amount of international attention focused on the region, ISIL still thrives.<sup>69</sup> These four elements combine to drive home a powerful narrative that has acted as an accelerant to fuel the fire of this dangerous brand of radical Islamic extremism. To contest this powerful narrative, the West will need more than just airstrikes and a few boots on the ground.

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<sup>67</sup> Peter Neumann, “Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s,” *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, January 26, 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/>.

<sup>68</sup> Javier Lesaca, "Fight Against ISIS Reveals Power of Social Media," Brookings, November 19, 2015, accessed January 14, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/techtank/posts/2015/11/19-isis-social-media-power-lesaca>.

<sup>69</sup> Alberto Fernandez, “Here to Stay and Growing: Combating ISIS Propaganda Networks,” Brookings Institute: October, 2015, 11-12.

A 2015 white paper endorsed by General Joseph Votel, the commander of US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), comments that “Thousands of airstrikes helped to check their (ISIL’s) rapid expansion, but the decisive effort against them will require discrediting their narrative and connecting the people to legitimate governing structures - areas where Department of Defense should not have primacy”<sup>70</sup> There is considerable talk in strategic communications circles about developing a counter-narrative to ISIL that discredits their narrative.<sup>71</sup> Some are directed directly towards ISIL, others towards the radical extremism that feeds it. It is as if the term narrative is being weaponized to further one’s cause and if someone wants to negate someone else’s narrative, they fire back with their own. There are several problems with this notion though. To begin with, narratives are not just ‘things’ that can be manipulated and negated through crafty wordsmithing. Going back to the earlier example, it would be hard to imagine that a non-Westerner could sell a counter-narrative to an American regarding the events of 9-11 that would fundamentally change any American’s perceptions of that event. That event is woven into the collective memory of the society, and even a well-crafted message has little chance of changing that. How then, can anyone expect to create a counter-narrative to the ISIL narrative and expect to gain traction?

This is especially true if that narrative was to come from the Western world where the population is comprised mostly of what ISIL would call “Infidels.” There is a significant gap between the reality of the West and that of ISIL, and Muslims in general, in the Middle East. This gap creates a perception challenge from both sides that clouds how each side interprets the others messages and intentions. American attempts to message ISIL on a more moderate method of

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<sup>70</sup> US Special Operations Command White Paper, “The Gray Zone”, September 15 2015, 7, accessed 15 March 2015, <http://www.soc.mil/swcs/ProjectGray/Gray%20Zones%20-%20USSOCOM%20White%20Paper%2009%20Sep%202015.pdf>.

<sup>71</sup> Simon Cottee, "Why It’s So Hard to Stop ISIS Propaganda," *The Atlantic*, March 2, 2015, accessed February 2, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/03/why-its-so-hard-to-stop-isis-propaganda/386216/>.

practicing Islam would meet certain dismissal as it would not be a credible message from that particular source. That same message coming from respected Islamic clerics would carry more credibility. Part of any potential counter narrative efforts should take the audience and the messenger into great account to ensure that there is as little gap in understanding and credibility as possible. A counter narrative's aim should not be to completely change what the target audience believes as that would be near impossible. Narratives are comprised of stories that are part of everyday life, and the reality of that cannot simply be erased from the mind. It is possible though to alter perceptions of the stories within the narratives that are being countered. This leads to counter narratives being more of a long term project as opposed to an immediate response to a threatening narrative. Therefore, a counter narrative is most successful when woven into a broader strategy that supports the overall strategic objectives.<sup>72</sup>

There is an ongoing in the information domain that the West is losing. While airstrikes and more troops flow into Iraq and Syria, ISIL continues to spread its narrative beyond the borders of the current conflict. In order to devise a strategy with any possibility for long term regional stability, and to slow the growing cancer that is radical Islamic extremism, United States policy makers must begin focusing on the ISIL problem in a broader context and with a more comprehensive strategy. This should include following the lead of ISIL in that the Western narratives start driving operations instead of the other way around. A serious review is needed in terms of Information Operations and Strategic Communications at the strategic level.

### Reframing Information Operations

Successfully challenging ISIL in the information environment requires serious introspection about how the United States wages war in this domain. Strategic level engagements

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<sup>72</sup> Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Nathaniel Barr, "Fixing How We Fight the Islamic State's Narrative," War On the Rocks, January 4, 2016, accessed March 16, 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/01/fixing-how-we-fight-the-islamic-states-narrative/>.

in the information environment occur typically through the White House and Department of State and fall into the realms of diplomacy and strategic communications.<sup>73</sup> Military-type engagements in the information environment are executed by the Department of Defense, specifically, through information operations and have effects that range anywhere from tactical to strategic. The military is in the unique position of being able to conduct direct actions in both the physical and information environment, and is therefore the usual implementation instrument for disseminating messaging and propagating narratives. Yet, when no higher level strategic plan or narrative exists to nest into, military information operations will inevitably be relegated to only tactical information operations that achieve local and limited effects. To be effective, messaging at all levels should be tied to an overall strategy and strategic messaging that guides all actions and communication efforts. This would typically be created by the administration and the Department of State. In the absence of an overarching strategy and narrative, there should be little surprise when successful tactical and operational successes still manage to result in a strategic failure.

A poignant example of the disconnect between military success on the ground, yet a failure to win the enduring narrative is presented in Steven Corman's 2013 book, *Narrating the Exit from Afghanistan*. Corman examines a case study of the well-planned and orderly Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and explains how, despite this, the enduring narrative is that the Soviets were forced out of Afghanistan by the Mujahedeen. His case study concludes that the military aspects of the withdrawal plan were quite well planned and organized, but it was the strategic level politics and dialogue, particularly with Pakistan, that forever branded the entire venture as a failure in the eyes of anyone but the Soviets themselves.<sup>74</sup> This case study helps illuminate the challenges of synchronizing military and diplomatic efforts to ensure that the

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<sup>73</sup> Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2011), 1-16.

<sup>74</sup> Steven Corman, *Narrating the Exit from Afghanistan* (Tempe, AZ: Center for Strategic Communication, 2013), 38-70.

desired strategic narratives are reinforced. The narrative from the Afghan Mujahedeen and the West on the Soviet withdrawal representing a strategic failure is by far the more powerful and remembered of any competing narrative from that event.<sup>75</sup>

Present day Russia has taken an increased interest in information operations and has woven it into nearly every aspect of their newly released Russian Federation National Security, dated December 15, 2015. Russia has identified the importance of information in both defensive and offensive capabilities and has worked it into all of their elements of national power as a tool to shape their internal and external narrative.<sup>76</sup> While this interest is not necessarily new, the successes that Russia had with their information operations against Estonia, Georgia, and most recently, the Ukraine, have validated the utility of incorporating and synchronizing information operations during all levels of conflicts.<sup>77</sup>

Russia's incorporation of information operations at all levels of strategy and warfare should be a warning for the West. In the United States, information operations are typically used to accentuate military plans instead of drive them. Part of the reason for this is a lack of understanding of the capabilities that information operations specialists bring to the fight.<sup>78</sup> Joint military doctrine defines information operations as, "the integrated employment, during military

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<sup>75</sup> Corman, *Narrating the Exit from Afghanistan*, 67-70.

<sup>76</sup> Vladimir Putin, Russian Federation Presidential Edict 683 approving appended text of "The Russian Federation's National Security Strategy," accessed 21 March, 2016, <http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf>.

<sup>77</sup> Maria Snegovaya, "Putin's Information Warfare in Ukraine: Soviet Origins of Russia's Hybrid Warfare," *Institute for the Study of War* Russia Report 1 (September 2015), 21, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Report%201%20Putin%27s%20Information%20Warfare%20in%20Ukraine-%20Soviet%20Origins%20of%20Russias%20Hybrid%20Warfare.pdf>.

<sup>78</sup> Brigadier General Ralph O. Baker and US Army, "Information operations: from good to great," *Military Review* July-Aug 2011 (July 2011), accessed April 1, 2016, [http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20110831\\_art004.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20110831_art004.pdf).

operations, of Information Related Capabilities (IRCs) in concert with other lines of operation to influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision making of adversaries and potential.”<sup>79</sup> The IRCs mentioned in the definition include capabilities such as psychological operations, civil affairs, public affairs, military deception, electronic warfare, computer network attack, defense, and exploitation capabilities, and special technical operations. The Information Operations Officers, at all levels of the military, serve to synchronize these assets to best meet the commander’s military objectives. These officers spend a considerable amount of time trying to understand the overall strategy and driving narratives of any operation because, unlike a bullet from a gun which has a small impact on its target, the information operations officer has the ability to have far-reaching effects with the information related tools at his or her disposal. When a military commander understands how to use an Information Operations Officer, it becomes a force multiplier, and in some cases, may even become the main effort. This was evident in Afghanistan in 2013 and 2014 as the military was restricted from conducting offensive operations outside of the relative safety of the forward operating bases. Commanders began to realize that they could still have powerful effects in their assigned areas of operations in the information environment through the use of information operations. While this is a tactical example, it has strategic implications.

Another key component of engagement in the information environment is through strategic communication. At the most basic level, strategic communication is the synchronization of words, deeds, and images, on a strategic level. Thinking of it like a three-legged stool where words, deeds, and images are each a leg. If even one leg is missing, the chair will fall. This concept advocates saying what is going to be accomplished, doing what was said, then showing audiences that you did what you said. It sounds simple, but it is the building block of a successful information campaign that builds credibility. A common misperception is that strategic

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<sup>79</sup> JP 3-13, ix.

communication is just the making of talking points and writing speeches for senior leaders in government. While that may be a part of it, Christopher Paul debunks this in his book, *Strategic Communication*, when he states, “strategic communication does not seek to have everyone in government speaking with the same voice, or repeating the same three talking points..., but to have everyone speaking in the same direction and avoiding orthogonal and contradictory utterances and behaviors.”<sup>80</sup>

It will take a synchronized effort between the information operations and strategic communications practitioners to effectively wage war on ISIL in the information environment and to begin chipping away at the credibility of their narrative, as well as the larger narrative of radical Jihadism. It does not matter if this is done by an actual, schoolhouse-trained information operations officer or strategic communications officer, but it should be done by someone who understands the importance of these types of engagements. Ideally, the information environment will be given as much prominence as the physical environment during campaign planning and done in conjunction with as opposed to after major combat operations planning.

## Conclusion

The current United States’ strategy against ISIL is based on a myopic understanding of the overall system in which ISIL is but one of many members. Because of this, the counter-ISIL strategy is disproportionately weighted towards the destruction of ISIL in the physical environment and not on exploiting the root causes and ideology that underpins it. While the White House may in-fact achieve its stated goal of defeating ISIL, the narrow lens used to view the problem will lead to a symptom being treated instead of the actual cancer in the region, making it ripe for further instability even after the mission has been accomplished.

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<sup>80</sup> Christopher Paul, *Strategic Communication: Origins, Concepts, and Current Debates* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Publishers, 2011), 61.

Complexity theory helps to paint a picture of a much more complex system at work in the region that goes well beyond just ISIL and highlights radical Islamic extremism which has taken advantage of a region rife with instability, corruption, and ethnic grievances. It also helped to show that a solely kinetic approach to combat ISIL, and the underlying issues that enable them to thrive, will not achieve anything more than tactical effects. What is needed is a more comprehensive approach that incorporates operations in both the information and physical environments, targeted at ISIL, but also at the root causes such as the radical Islamic ideology that fuels ISIL, as well as regional governmental and socio-economic issues.

An analysis was also conducted to look at why the current strategy being waged against ISIL is almost strictly kinetic while little is being done to combat them in the information environment. Given that the White House framed the strategy based on the physical manifestation of a much deeper problem, it is no wonder that the military strategy is having limited effects and ISIL continues to grow as a threat to Western civilization. Seven different expert opinions on the ISIL COG were also examined and compared. These COGs ranged from the physical and geographical to the intangible, and are only a small sample of the ideas floating around on this subject. While this may have brought the usefulness of a COG analysis into question, the intent was to show that the ideas generated by this function created space for ideas. It is not a bad thing that there are different views. None of the ideas are wrong and each was argued logically by its proponent. It is important to remember the frame that each expert took when looking at the COG. Some looked at it through the lens of the symptom as outlined by the White House counter ISIL strategy while others took the cognitive leap in recognizing that ISIL was only the symptom and that any COG analysis would have to take the larger, contextual issues into consideration.

Through a consideration of the role of narratives it becomes possible to see the futility of trying to offer competing narratives. However, by gaining a thorough understanding of an enemy narrative, it is possible to discredit and delegitimize portions of it as part of a more comprehensive strategy that includes a whole of government approach. Discrediting a narrative

typically requires strategic patience and the ability to offer credible alternative perceptions to stories already present in that narrative. The battle of the narrative requires a long term approach, a whole of government strategy, and actions commensurate with the message. Words, deeds, and images and the three-legged stool metaphor capture this point nicely.

Finally, a review of information operations functions and integration revealed that only a synchronized effort with strategic communications planners will be able to successfully engage ISIL within the information domain with any lasting effects. That can only happen within the framework of a strategic plan and narrative though. Therefore, due to the absence of either of these in the current fight against ISIL, only tactical and operational victories are likely possible in the information environment. More emphasis should be placed on coordinating strategic level information operations to fight the enemy where it is having largely unimpeded effects.

The fight against ISIL is an enormously complex scenario, but strategy drives action. If the overall US counter ISIL strategy is based on a military objective and not an overarching regional strategy, the results will reflect this strategy. Fighting against ISIL should be done on all fronts, not just the physical front. As the West struggles to engage ISIL in the information domain, the near peer Russia continues to evolve in this realm, giving them a potential advantage should a worst case scenario of confrontation ever take place. The time to explore and exploit the information environment for development of lessons learned is now, in this fight against ISIL. Maybe that shift will also take the strategy out of the weeds and back to a level where the effects can have lasting positive regional effects.

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