Knowing the Enemy

Understanding the Islamic State and Principles for Defeating It

Terrence K. Kelly, James Dobbins, Barbara Sude, and Ben Connable

The purposes of this Perspective are to help identify threats to U.S. interests posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL),[1] propose a context in which ISIL should be judged (particularly ISIL's character and motivations, as well as key regional and global issues that frame the context), provide an initial framework for interpreting these insights, and outline a way ahead for developing and assessing courses of action and generating concrete options. This paper does not attempt to develop discrete courses of action or critique current ones; rather, it seeks to outline general principles that U.S. policymakers must consider when conceiving and weighing appropriate strategies to combat ISIL.

Threats to U.S. Interests

In the wake of the recent attacks in Brussels, Paris, and California, ISIL has demonstrated the will and capability to pose the threat of terror attack in the West, and it has shown an even greater threat to the Middle East, Africa, and South and Central Asia. What is not

as clear is how threats to the countries and peoples of the Middle East affect U.S. core interests. These threats have longer-term manifestations, and nations in the region and close to it are, at least in the normal calculus of state power, far more capable than ISIL. Threats that remain at continental distances from the U.S. homeland for now but pose larger dangers than just terror attacks in the future are less certain and harder to determine. They are certainly possible, even if not currently manifest. Further, although military force could remove ISIL's control of territory, it could not eliminate the underlying ideology or support. Still, the question of why fighting ISIL is the business of the United States rather than that of Middle Eastern or European countries is a valid one.

Defining the Context for Understanding ISIL

Starting with ISIL itself and its so-called caliphate, we examine critical elements of the problem from the center and work outward to the global context.

What Is ISIL and What Does It Believe?

ISIL grew out of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi's Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, later al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and then the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). This extremist group sought to foment civil war within Islam, declaring all Shi'a, and indeed all Muslims who did not espouse the group's interpretations of the Koran, as *murtaddin* (apostates), thus permitting them to be killed according to many interpretations of sharia law. The group has an apocalyptic theology that is a powerful recruiting tool, and its transcendental themes strike a chord with many devout Muslims. In line with this theology, ISIL's propaganda envisions a climactic battle in northern Syria near Dabiq (or A'maq).[2] According to this narrative, ISIL forces, as those chosen by God, will fight "Roman" (Western) forces and prevail after the arrival of the Mahdi. These and other practices, while appearing fanatical and illogical to Western observers, are quite logical and practical when seen from ISIL's worldview.[3]

ISIL's claim to legitimacy, as well as its drive to establish a caliphate and conquer new territory, is based on a historical argument that dates to the time of Muhammad and his successors. ISIL is not unique in its concept of Islam, falling squarely within the Salafi-jihadi worldview, even if interpreting it more severely than others. In this worldview, the caliph, or ruler, is a central figure that not only is important for a political establishment based on the Koran and the example of Muhammad but is essential for "offensive jihad" (because only the caliph can order it, and indeed is obliged to do so). This political construct and offensive "foreign policy" also depend on having territory to govern. Without territory, there is no caliphate, no caliph, and therefore much more-limited ability and requirement to export violence.

In addition to these theological elements of ISIL, its claim to rule a caliphate, and its mandate for exporting violence, practical considerations are also important. To succeed, it needs the basic elements to run a state, including the following:

- *A workforce that can execute the functions of a state, regardless of worldview.* ISIL's ability to attract such people is likely related to its perceived success. Through its conquests, it has also captured many people whom it can impress for work.

- *The fiscal and other resources needed to keep minimal state functions operating.* Getting and maintaining these are directly related to the group's ability to survive in its neighborhood. ISIL started with an organizational plan and a fair amount of resources captured in its conquests. Whether these are sufficient to keep it functioning is a critical question and likely a real ISIL weakness.[4]

- *The ability to establish and maintain domestic and national security.* ISIL's extreme brand of suppression likely ensures that, barring some major upheaval or disturbance, it will not face a determined internal threat (similar to the situation for North Korea today or the Taliban in Afghanistan prior to the U.S. invasion in 2001).

Regional Context

Politically, solutions to ISIL are extremely challenging to craft. Sunni-Shi'a, Arab-Israeli, Turkish-Arab, Turkish-Iranian, and U.S.-Russian tensions all meet in the region, particularly in Syria. Competing goals and demands for a resolution to the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts obscure the need for solutions to the ISIL challenge. Some progress seems to have been made in February 2016 in Munich, where most parties other than ISIL and the Nusra Front

agreed to a temporary cessation of hostilities in Syria, opening the way for delivery of humanitarian relief. However, the partial ceasefire, which did not preclude all operations against ISIL or the Nusra Front, unraveled in several non-ISIL rebel-held areas by early April 2016, and extensions for the Aleppo area also failed after talks broke down in May, although key parties to the agreement continue to call for calm.[5] In any case, the challenges remain enormous, particularly to achieve a political settlement with or without Bashar al-Assad.[6]

After Iraqi Sunni and U.S. forces defeated it in detail in Iraq in 2007 and 2008, AQI, calling itself ISI, went underground in Iraq and moved into Syria, where the elements of the Syrian civil war were already brewing. That civil war gave ISI the opportunity to recreate itself as ISIL, where it joined the fray as one of the many combatant elements vying with the Assad regime for power. In 2014, taking advantage of the rising sectarian tensions in Iraq and possibly invitations from disgruntled and expatriate Iraqi Sunni leaders, ISIL moved quickly from Syria into Iraq, kicking off a series of territorial conquests that surprised Iraq, the region, and the world. These conquests enabled the group to declare itself a caliphate and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to declare himself Caliph Ibrahim.

As the self-proclaimed caliphate, ISIL has declared all other forms of government illegitimate and has condemned the regional monarchs and elected government alike as *murtaddin*. Although ISIL's fighting forces include some jihadists with significant experience and real skills in small-unit tactics, by any reasonable measure they should have been quickly defeated by Iraqi or other forces in the region. Estimates of ISIL's total force under arms are hard to establish, but they appear relatively modest. In 2014, U.S. gov-

In 2014, taking advantage of the rising sectarian tensions in Iraq and possibly invitations from disgruntled and expatriate Iraqi Sunni leaders, ISIL moved quickly from Syria into Iraq, kicking off a series of territorial conquests that surprised Iraq, the region, and the world. These conquests enabled the group to declare itself a caliphate and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to declare himself Caliph Ibrahim.

ernment estimates set the number between 20,000 and 31,500, and Russian estimates were more than twice that many.[7] The Soufan Group, which analyzes terrorism-related issues, assessed the number of foreign fighter volunteers to Iraq and Syria alone at 27,000 in late 2015, as ISIL takes an increasingly targeted approach to recruitment in key countries compared with other groups.[8] In early 2016, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "At least 38,200 foreign fighters—including at least 6,900 from Western countries—have traveled to Syria from at least 120 countries since the beginning of the conflict in 2012."[9] He did not specify the percentage joining ISIL, however, or the number that remained in the Middle East as of late 2015. In April 2016, the Pentagon estimated that monthly foreign fighter recruitment had shrunk from as many as 2,000 at its peak to 200, because of ISIL's reduced ability to pay personnel and lowered morale stemming from territorial and battlefield losses.[10]

While the transcendental appeal of ISIL's message to some Muslims is real and important, decades of oppressive government and failed economies in many majority-Muslim countries have created the conditions in which young people are seeking solutions and rejecting the status quo.

Despite the threat of ISIL in the region, neighboring states all face competing threats that they appear to deem more significant: Turkey is focused on eliminating the Assad regime in Syria and preventing the formation of an autonomous Kurdish enclave in northern Syria (and unrest in its own Kurdish minority); Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are concerned about the civil war in Yemen and Iranian influence in their areas; Jordan is focused on domestic stability; and Iran is focused on supporting the Assad regime, supporting the rebels in Yemen, influencing and supporting the Shi'a government in Iraq, and backing up Hezbollah in its support for Assad (and other efforts). In early 2016, only Iraq was fully focused on defeating ISIL, while Syria was focused on both ISIL and the other elements of its own civil war—which, while not as potent, are closer in proximity to the areas that Assad continues to control.

To support the failing Assad regime (and counter U.S. moves in the region), Russia deployed advisers and (primarily air) forces to Syria. Although President Vladimir Putin withdrew a significant number of air assets in March 2016, declaring that Russia's main mission had been achieved, it was clear a month later that

Moscow had not given up on helicopters and other assets.[11] U.S. forces in the region, including special operations units targeting ISIL in Iraq and a smaller number in Syria, are also increasing as the threat of terror attacks from ISIL increases, although decisionmakers in the government of Iraq have not all been clearly welcoming of U.S. military support.[12] Tensions between Russia and Turkey have raised the stakes because the potential for a conflict that could involve the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is real, even if unlikely. European powers, notably France and Belgium after the Paris and Brussels attacks, are also contributing air assets to the fight.[13]

Muslim World

While the transcendental appeal of ISIL's message to some Muslims is real and important, decades of oppressive government and failed economies in many majority-Muslim countries have created the conditions in which young people are seeking solutions and rejecting the status quo. Similarly, long-term conflicts in Iraq and Syria and increasingly sectarian conflict in the Persian Gulf have created personal grievances among Sunni military-aged males. ISIL provides an opportunity for these aggrieved Sunnis to exact revenge. Some argue that these political-, economic-, and conflict-induced conditions facilitate ISIL recruiting and support.[14]

Muslim minorities in other countries are often reported to live in communities that feel separated from mainstream society and denied the same opportunities as the native-born population. Unrest in France over the past decade has been attributed to these feelings.[15] It is likely that this helps ISIL recruiting and support.

Furthermore, many majority-Muslim countries remain very concerned with their internal security, as the threats posed by ISIL

(and other radical groups, such as al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab) are real at home. While most of these countries have taken overt actions against ISIL, they must also weigh domestic political concerns.

Several regions have ISIL affiliates, and many unorganized individuals around the world have pledged loyalty to the group. Indeed, the United States ranked behind only Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iraq in the number of ISIL supporters on Twitter as of 2015, with Egypt next.[16] Thus, ISIL's appeal is not confined just to the regions it controls in Syria and Iraq. But should it lose those areas, and hence a claim to be the caliphate, that might erode its credibility and appeal in other regions.

Global Context

Globally, the threat posed by ISIL is universal in character though not in manifestation. That is, according to ISIL's approach and statements, all are either with it or fall under its condemnation, although some are preferentially targeted over others. Furthermore, some are more prone to attacks by "lone wolf" operators because of their specific, internal circumstances.

Yet ISIL poses neither an existential nor a grave threat to most countries that do not border it, or even to many of the countries that do. For the United States (after the San Bernardino, California, attack), and perhaps even for France and Belgium, the fact and character of efforts to counter ISIL are choices, not necessities, in the calculus of national security threats (although the efforts may be necessary politically). ISIL, like some other terrorist organizations, aims to create political dilemmas for its enemies and spur heavy military and law enforcement expenditures alongside the human losses. However, trend lines in ISIL's growth and influence are germane. Recent reports about its growing influence are impor-

tant, but without trends that provide a basis for what that growth means, the reports are not terribly helpful.[17]

Despite this, the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and other nations have made it clear that they view ISIL as a threat that must be eliminated. Public opinion likely supports more-aggressive action and may drive political and military decisions.

Understanding ISIL in Context: Principal Characteristics and Drivers of the Problem

Solutions should be based on end states that are well defined, that are achievable, and that protect U.S. interests better than the status quo does. Based on the previous discussion outlining what ISIL is and the regional context that permits it to survive, we seek to develop viable end states. We do this in part by asking several questions and providing preliminary answers to them. We then use these answers to propose end states that meet these criteria.

Is ISIL the Problem or a Manifestation of the Problem?

If ISIL is the problem, as much of the political and pundit rhetoric seems to assume, then any one of several countries could destroy it militarily. However, the reality is more complex. In fact, ISIL is both the problem and a manifestation of the problem.

First, ISIL is the manifestation of several wider issues that collectively make its existence possible: divisions within Sunni Islam about Islamic practice, relations with non-Muslims and other Islamic sects, and means of political participation that empower Sunnis; divisions within the Sunni Salafi-jihadi movement over methods and timing; Sunni reaction to Shi'a dominance in Iraq; and collapse of state control in Syria and parts of Iraq. Second, ISIL is a problem in itself because it holds territory in Iraq and

Syria (and parts of Libya and possibly Egypt) that affords it a safe haven for operations both in the Middle East and abroad, a base for training and developing militants, and the real credibility that comes with its claim to be the caliphate—which is enormously important. ISIL also has a well-honed propaganda apparatus capable of production in several languages that acts as a force multiplier. Even when the organization is pushed back militarily, it can claim that it is expanding globally through affiliates, draw in outside recruits by "proving" that it is the fulfillment of Islamic prophecy, and convincingly write off setbacks. Finally, if ISIL disappeared tomorrow, its ideology or one very like it would undoubtedly spawn successor organizations. However, they would not be as powerful—at least initially—and would lack the credibility ISIL has built over a dozen years.

As a result, eliminating ISIL's control of territory would remove important elements of both its power and credibility, and thus its ability to influence through propaganda. Doing so also would deflate the group's ability to provide sanctuary, train jihadists, and influence populations through the roles played by states (e.g.,

ISIL is a problem in itself because it holds territory in Iraq and Syria (and parts of Libya and possibly Egypt) that affords it a safe haven for operations both in the Middle East and abroad, a base for training and developing militants, and the real credibility that comes with its claim to be the caliphate—which is enormously important.

education, security, and social and religious events). However, it would not remove the threat that ISIL or its successors pose as an insurgent or terror organization.

What Internal Factors Are Critical? *Why* Is ISIL Successful? What Are the Sources of Its Ability to Recruit and Motivate?

Some of the answers to these questions require an understanding of ISIL's mind-set and that of the people to whom it is appealing. These mind-sets are logical but based on a significantly different understanding of such basic facts as what people are, what their obligations are, and how they should interact in modern societies.[18] That said, some of the considerations are quite similar to those of modern societies.

The first and perhaps primary reason that ISIL is successful is that it has strong leadership with relatively focused goals and a clear message grounded in a selective reading of the foundational texts of Islam. This appeals to a deeply religious culture whose true adherents are more concerned with doing the will of God and earning admittance into heaven than with obtaining worldly success.[19] This disposition and the propaganda that flows from it appeal to like-minded Muslims—or others seeking the same level of certainty—who have bought or are willing to buy into the Salafi theology. This is a compelling message that resonates with those who are prepared to accept it, and it will continue to be so unless key elements of it are called into question.

ISIL's message is made that much stronger by the credentials of those delivering it—in particular, genealogy from the time of AQI and ISI and survival from fighting the Western coalition in Iraq, the Iraqi regime, and Iraqi Shi'a militias. These leaders of ISIL have walked the walk. Additionally, their credibility is strengthened by

their objective—to create a caliphate that is operationally similar to what Muhammad's immediate successors did 1,400 years ago and make ISIL's "authentic" brand of Islam universal. ISIL's leaders have, in effect, taken the next step beyond al-Qaeda—and done so with boldness and, until recently, success.

Well-planned propaganda and media presence reinforce these themes and build on the message that the caliphate comes via Muhammad from God, that al-Baghdadi is the natural successor, and that salvation at the day of judgment depends on adherence to the caliphate's dictates. An accompanying theme that is part and parcel with the fundamental message of salvation is that greater Syria (al-Sham) is the place where the battles between Muslim sects and the final battle between good and evil will play out. ISIL dismisses counterarguments from Islamic theology as erroneous later developments that contradict what God and his prophet wanted.[20]

To protect its message and secure territory, ISIL is willing to ruthlessly suppress dissent, using well-conceived Islamic justifications for doing so. The group's brutality is not, in its members' view, arbitrary or excessive, according to the seventh-century jurisprudence they base their judgments on—derived, as they believe, directly from the judgments of Muhammad and his direct successors (although this is not universally accepted among scholars of Islam). Therefore, what most of modern society sees as arbitrary and inhuman, ISIL and its adherents see as just and logical.

Finally, and more mundanely, ISIL has a bureaucratic structure inherited from ISI that continues to function. This, too, is based on Islamic precedent.

Countering the religious elements of this message is challenging. Western propaganda will not likely succeed in this, although Muslim leaders and scholars might and have begun to try (even several prominent jihadi scholars have posed counterarguments). What modern societies can do is change some of the physical facts that lend credence to ISIL's message; in particular, they should both destroy ISIL's ability to control territory and kill those who claim divine assistance. The importance of these facts to ISIL's appeal should be understood and their implications taken seriously.

What External Factors Are Critical? *Why Has ISIL Succeeded Where AQI Failed?*

These questions are important not only for understanding how ISIL differs from its predecessors (if it does) but also for understanding what must be done differently to eliminate the major threats from it.

In 2010, ISI remnants were left relatively unmolested in northern Iraq after U.S. forces departed, so their destruction was not complete. The Nouri al-Maliki government blatantly favored the Shi'a population, alienating Sunni leaders who had helped against ISI and causing many Iraqi Sunnis to look for solutions to their political situation after U.S. occupation. At the same time, opposition to Assad in Syria mounted, with protests and an incipient armed resistance. Syria's relatively porous border with northern Iraq became even more so. Both ISI, then an al-Qaeda affiliate, and al-Qaeda's core wanted a role in changes in the Arab world, and ISI set up the Nusra Front, which later decided to stay with al-Qaeda when ISI and al-Qaeda split. Both cases merely added to the armed factions fighting Assad and increased the size of lawless areas, which provided space for ISI to regroup and become ISIL.

At the same time, heavy involvement of Lebanese Hezbollah and some Iraqi Shi'a militias in Syria increased sectarian fears and tensions. And because destroying Shi'a Islam was one of

al-Zarqawi's and AQI's original goals—and remains a core element of ISIL's endeavors—ISIL had even more motivation to become involved in Syria.

The political and geographic situation in Iraq and Syria provided the conditions for fighters to flow into the region. With a civil war, it became increasingly difficult for Syria to control large parts of its borders. The de facto absence of border controls with Iraq, the looseness of the Turkish border, and the complexity introduced by refugee flows complicated border monitoring. All of this enabled the flow of fighters into Syria.

Several other external factors contributed to creating the space for ISI to regroup and morph into ISIL. For example, uncertainty among Western powers about how to address the aftermath of the Arab Spring prevented a united opposition front against either Assad or ISIL from emerging. Furthermore, when U.S. troops killed Osama bin Laden in May 2011, al-Qaeda's leadership role among Salafi jihadists eroded, creating a vacuum into which ISIL could step. The collapse of Muammar Gaddafi's government in Libya in August 2011 opened up part of the North African coast for illicit activities by ISIL and others, and turmoil over leadership in Egypt turned attention from the building Sinai militancy. Finally, increased Russian involvement has added to anti-foreign sentiment in the region.

Some of these external factors are unlikely to change soon. For example, borders will remain unsecure, and ISIL probably will remain important in the Salafi-jihadi movement. However, other factors could change to create a positive effect. The U.S. effort to form a coalition of all states that want to eliminate ISIL is a good first start, and Iraqi forces' increasing willingness to fight ISIL in Iraq is another positive development to watch.[21] In addition, any

efforts that reduce ISIL's claim to control territory are critical. Yet there are still significant challenges in fixing some of the external factors: In particular, the goals of the key players (e.g., the disposition of the Assad regime) are not and will not be aligned, and there is deep distrust among many of the actors.

What Constraints Affect Adequate Responses?

This question cannot be answered completely before defined, achievable end states are articulated. Nevertheless, many key constraints that will affect any effort to diminish and eliminate ISIL are clear.

In addition to the complications noted above, several additional challenges constrain actions. For instance, lingering anti-Western sentiment from the Iraq War has caused many Iraqis—who are critical to successfully countering ISIL—to distrust the United States, and the mixed goals of various opposition factions in Syria complicate the search for viable partners. Moreover, the fluid loyalties of many of the players—including supporters of Assad, Sunni supporters, non-Alawi minorities, and opponents who desire political change, not violence—make identifying reliable local partners even more difficult.[22] And, ultimately, the region's challenges are more widespread than just those related to ISIL.

When considering potential courses of action to combat ISIL, Turkey's policies are of critical importance, and its position is both central and enlightening. Given Turkey's military strength and proximity, it has the ability to quickly eliminate ISIL's hold on areas of Iraq and Syria, and it is arguably one of the countries most threatened by ISIL infiltration. Indeed, Turkey suffered terrorist attacks in 2016 for which ISIL likely is responsible. Yet it has permitted ISIL fighters and weapons to flow through Turkish borders

in the past to facilitate anti-Assad activities and only began in 2016 to seal its border more securely against the group.[23] Without Turkey's cooperation or at least acquiescence, any efforts to address ISIL will be more challenging.

The central role that Kurdish forces have taken in the fight against ISIL also results in challenges relating to Turkey. Given its long-term struggles with its Kurdish minority, Turkey would all but certainly consider the establishment of anything that resembles an autonomous Kurdish entity within Syria unacceptable. Ankara could view such an entity, together with the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq, as setting a precedent that conflicts with its interests. This limits the ability to use one of the most-effective counterweights to ISIL in the region.

Another key set of allies in the fight against ISIL should be the Gulf States, because al-Baghdadi's declaration of himself as Caliph Ibrahim directly threatens the states politically and their leaders personally. Yet the Gulf States' actions in fighting ISIL have been less clearly helpful, their governments hold Sunni Salafi sentiments, and many of their citizens support ISIL. Saudi Arabia, for example, has supported other jihadist groups in Syria against Assad.[24]

Israel has stayed out of the conflict but is increasingly alarmed. Some Israeli commentators have become belligerent against ISIL. Plus, Palestinians are restive and being wooed by extremists. If the Palestinians somehow become linked with ISIL—although this is unlikely, given Hamas's lineage from the Muslim Brotherhood and the Palestinian Authority's lineage from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (groups that ISIL sees as apostates)—the political challenges of the Arab-Israeli conflict could cloud the Muslim world's willingness to side with the West in taking on ISIL.

Another key set of allies in the fight against ISIL should be the Gulf States, because al-Baghdadi's declaration of himself as Caliph Ibrahim directly threatens the states politically and their leaders personally. Yet the Gulf States' actions in fighting ISIL have been less clearly helpful, their governments hold Sunni Salafi sentiments, and many of their citizens support ISIL.

These overarching regional issues—including, among others, sectarian contests, the Arab-Israeli contest, and ineffective governments and economies—create conditions that facilitate extremist behaviors and organizations; these constraints are mostly political. Efforts to end the Syrian civil war and thereby create a broader coalition of anti-ISIL forces continue, and succeeding in that endeavor would be helpful to combating ISIL and its influence in the region. Getting major regional nations, and Turkey in particular, to actively oppose ISIL would also be tremendously helpful.

Defining End States

What does success look like in the battle to counter ISIL? We have already noted that it is unlikely that the group's ideology can be eliminated and that even if some combination of forces eliminates its control of territory, it will persist as a danger in some context. If the past 14 years of conflict against terrorists and insurgents

have taught the United States and its partners anything, it should be to not promise results that cannot be achieved in a reasonable amount of time.

If completely eliminating ISIL or a follow-on organization with similar ideology and goals is not a reasonable outcome in the short or medium term, lessening the group's ability to threaten its neighbors, the United States, and other Western countries with terror is a necessary one. ISIL does not pose a traditional military, diplomatic, or economic threat to the United States; therefore, while recognizing the more-direct threats the group poses to Iraq, Syria, parts of Africa, and perhaps other regions, we concentrate on its ability to motivate terror. Fomenting terror requires the ability to attract adherents to ISIL's ideology and motivate them to act. We will call that ability *propaganda*. We propose that reducing the effects of ISIL's propaganda is possible and should be the initial focus of U.S. strategy. Doing so all but requires eliminating the group's control of territory and, practically, calls for a plan for what would follow.

The discussion earlier in this report argues that one of ISIL's major advantages in its efforts to export terror is its credibility with a class of Muslims that, though small, is dedicated and dangerous.

> *To assert the right to [Muslims'] loyalties, the caliph must occupy and administer territory. Eliminating ISIL's hold on territory would significantly diminish not only its credibility but also its ability to attack its neighbors and the other advantages that stem from territorial control.*

Diminishing ISIL's credibility with those supporters is particularly important when one notes that the recent events in France, Belgium, and the United States seem to indicate that the ISIL elements likely to have the most success in attacking the West may be legal residents or citizens of the countries attacked, not foreign jihadi fighters traveling from Syria or Iraq to the West (several attackers in Europe, however, were trained in ISIL territory, according to media accounts of the Belgian investigation).[25] Safeguards against such attacks require more than good border control and immigration policies; no amount of border screening can identify and prevent threats from jihadis already resident in a Western country. The amount of police and intelligence work needed to find them and prevent attacks will be controversial. Furthermore, this credibility gives credence to ISIL's propaganda and draws recruits and resources in other parts of the world where it has a defined physical presence (not just Syria and Iraq).

Damaging ISIL's credibility is therefore critical to lessening its ability to generate home-grown attacks and attract recruits and resources. The most concrete source of ISIL's credibility is its claim to be a caliphate, which engenders its practical, doctrinal, and theological claim on the loyalty of Muslims (even though the vast majority do not recognize this claim). To assert the right to their loyalties, the caliph must occupy and administer territory. Eliminating ISIL's hold on territory would significantly diminish not only its credibility but also its ability to attack its neighbors and the other advantages that stem from territorial control.[26]

Similarly, if the veracity of other aspects of ISIL's messages could be effectively challenged, its credibility would be badly damaged. Western countries cannot effectively do this with words, but they can with actions. Specifically, the parts of ISIL's ideology that

rely on facts on the ground can be challenged by changing those facts. Two important instances seem clear. First, as already noted, removing ISIL's control of territory and thus its claim to be the caliphate would eliminate an aspect of its credibility, thus diminishing the potency of its propaganda. Second, because ISIL asserts that it will prevail in the battle of Armageddon at Dabiq with the appearance of the Mahdi, a defeat there would all but necessarily eviscerate its credibility (although, no doubt, tortured explanations for such a defeat would follow). This apocalyptic narrative was also a pitfall for the late ISI leaders. But even if the group presents a candidate as the purported Mahdi, the Mahdi's demise almost certainly would destroy the group's morale, as happened with the Saudi rebels who attacked Mecca in 1979.[27] Given the relative disparity between ISIL and anti-ISIL forces, such a defeat would be all but guaranteed.

Once ISIL's ability to harm the United States and its friends by motivating terror attacks is diminished through eliminating the group's claim to the caliphate and by demonstrating that other aspects of its narrative are false, follow-on efforts will be needed to secure the territory ISIL holds and alleviate the suffering of the people there. A framework for discussing what follows recognizes that there are four levels of existence for ISIL: a state or proto-state, an insurgent group, a terrorist group, or extinction. Moving ISIL progressively down this ladder of existence represents progress, and reaching each rung on that ladder is a goal, if not an end in itself. With each change in ISIL's state, new ends will need to be developed. But the first—removing its control of territory—is clear and achievable.

However, it will avail little to rout ISIL if something better does not take its place. Without proper governance in the region, ISIL or something like it will continue as an insurgency or a ter-

rorist group and perhaps even recapture territory, claim to be the caliphate, and seek to reestablish credibility. The ideal solution is an indigenous force that is capable of holding ISIL-controlled territory once taken, is subordinate to civilian authorities capable of administering the territory, and can secure the cooperation of its population. Additionally, and importantly, a better solution includes action to address what is now widely recognized as ISIL's significant crimes against humanity, including genocide, in the areas that it controls.[28] Once competent governance is reestablished in areas currently governed by ISIL, a transitional justice process will be necessary to address grievances, broadly publicize ISIL's crimes, and hold those responsible accountable. If done well, this will also help to detract from ISIL's credibility.

In Iraq, the way forward is comparatively clear, if still quite difficult to traverse. The indigenous force is a combination of tribal and other militias and the Iraqi Army.[29] The civilian authority is some combination of local, provincial, possibly regional, and national government, with substantial authority devolved to the lower levels.

In Syria, there is no clear way forward. As long as all of ISIL's many local and regional enemies are more interested in fighting each other than it, there is little prospect of putting together an effective indigenous counter. This underscores the need to end the conflict between the anti-ISIL elements before the full weight of local and international forces can be turned against ISIL.[30]

Unfortunately, there is little prospect that these political forces will coalesce anytime soon and field an effective anti-ISIL fighting force.[31] The best that can be hoped for from the current peace process would be a lasting ceasefire combined with a road map toward a reconstituted Syrian state and government. How this would come

Absent some international oversight and enforcement mechanisms, such a ceasefire may quickly fall apart and the political process go off the road. This is particularly true because both ISIL and al-Nusra will reject any ceasefire and work to undermine it.

about in a manner satisfactory to all stakeholders capable of derailing the process is, at the moment, unclear. Absent some international oversight and enforcement mechanisms, such a ceasefire may quickly fall apart and the political process go off the road. This is particularly true because both ISIL and al-Nusra will reject any ceasefire and work to undermine it. Even if the ceasefire sticks and the Syrians progress toward a reconstituted Syrian state, it will be difficult to constitute an effective indigenous anti-ISIL force.

If an indigenous political solution and anti-ISIL force do not materialize, an alternative could be a broad international coalition—including both Russia and the United States, along with others already in the anti-ISIL coalition, including the regional Arab states—to take and hold Raqqa and the other ISIL population centers. These areas could be administered by an international authority pending agreement among the Syrian parties on the reconstructed state.[32]

Complicated as this series of steps is, the result would likely be better than the most immediately available alternative, which is a U.S.-led ground offensive involving a narrow coalition, undertaken in the midst of the wider Syrian civil war, and a subsequent U.S.-led occupation.

In sum, the main choices for defeating ISIL in Syria are as follows:

- Wait until there is a Syrian force capable of taking and holding ISIL-controlled territory in Syria. This is likely to take some time because it probably requires agreement between the Damascus regime and most of its opponents.
- Forge a broad international coalition, including backers of both the Syrian regime and its opponents, to displace ISIL. This requires consolidating the current cessation of hostilities.
- Forge a narrower, U.S.-led coalition to displace ISIL. This can be done more quickly, but it could leave the United States saddled with holding and administering this territory.

Planning for the Future

U.S. policymakers weighing options to accelerate ISIL's defeat must develop specific courses of action that address both ISIL and the regional security issues that would emerge after its fall. These courses of action should be distinct and represent major alternative approaches that attempt to delineate the roles—in use of diplomacy, economic levers, and force—of Washington, close U.S. partners, and other major parties, particularly Middle Eastern actors. All courses of action must have a good chance of significantly diminishing ISIL's credibility—and thus its ability to motivate terror in the United States and the homelands of its allies.

These distinct courses of action should accomplish the following:

- Map how an anti-ISIL coalition can be assembled and can move ISIL down the four rungs of its existence ladder (from state, to insurgency, to terrorist group, to extinction). The map should include distinct phases—that is, distinct objec-

tives and clear end states—and a plan for how the approach should change at each phase. The first of these phases would be eliminating ISIL's ability to claim that it is the caliphate (thus eliminating it as a proto-state) and damaging its ability to recruit and motivate terror attacks abroad.

- Recognize the importance of defeating not only ISIL's forces but also, even more importantly, its message. Also recognize the limited ability of most countries (and non-state actors) to challenge ISIL's propaganda with words, which underscores the value of proving its propaganda wrong with deeds (e.g., removing its control of territory and demonstrating that its apocalyptic message is false).

- Provide a framework for managing the process of returning the region to stability after the ISIL proto-state no longer controls territory (during the insurgency, terrorist group, and extinction levels of existence).

- Provide the U.S. President and Congress, as well as other international leaders, with real choices that take into account threats, national security risks, fiscal commitments, and domestic and international political considerations. These will, necessarily, involve different means, as well as different time-lines, for achieving objectives.

In this Perspective, we do not put forward distinct courses of action for U.S. policymakers; oceans of ink have already been spilled doing this. But we strongly believe that to be effective, any viable proposal must seriously address these fundamental consider-ations. Furthermore, these general principles serve as broad criteria against which to judge existing proposals.

Notes

[1] The organization's name transliterates from Arabic as al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi al-'Iraq wa al-Sham (abbreviated as Da'ish or DAESH). In the West, it is commonly referred to as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Sham (both abbreviated as ISIS), or simply as the Islamic State (IS). Arguments abound as to which is the most accurate translation, but here we refer to the group as ISIL.

[2] Since this Perspective was written in early 2016, ISIL has lost control of this territory, as well as other substantial areas of Iraq. No attempt has been made to update the document to account for these ongoing changes.

[3] For a detailed explanation of the historical and current attraction of apocalyptic themes, see William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, New York: St. Martin's Press, e-book edition, 2015, pp. 25–35, 107–127; on Dabiq, see pp. 111–112.

[4] ISIL's creation of bureaucratic structures to collect and manage its revenues and to perform general governance has been key to its longevity from the time it was AQI. See Patrick B. Johnston, Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard J. Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick K. Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1192-DARPA, 2016.

[5] "Russia Announces Renewed Ceasefire in Besieged Syrian City of Aleppo," *Deutsche Welle*, June 16, 2016.

[6] For a discussion of some of these tensions and ideas for meeting them, see James Dobbins, Jeffrey Martini, and Philip Gordon, *A Peace Plan for Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-182-RC, 2015. See also Samer Abboud, "Syria War: What You Need to Know About the Ceasefire," Al Jazeera, February 28, 2016.

[7] For the U.S. estimate, see, for example, Jim Sciutto, Jamie Crawford, and Chelsea J. Carter, "ISIS Can 'Muster' Between 20,000 and 31,500 Fighters, CIA Says," CNN, September 12, 2014. For a report on the Russian estimate of fighters in Iraq and Syria, see Sam Prince, "How Many Militants Are Fighting for ISIS?" *Heavy*, November 11, 2015. It is not clear how many of these are committed ISIL adherents and how many are opportunists.

[8] Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, New York, December 2015, p. 4.

[9] James R. Clapper, "Remarks as Delivered by the Honorable James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence," opening statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Worldwide Threat Assessment hearing, Washington, D.C., February 9, 2016a. The prepared statement had possibly updated figures of 36,500 and 6,600, respectively (see James R. Clapper, *Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, Senate Armed Services Committee*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 9, 2016b).

[10] Andrew Blake, "Pentagon: ISIS Suffering from Money Shortage, Low Morale," *Washington Times*, April 27, 2016. ISIL documents also reflect the downturn (see Aymenn Al-Tamimi, "A Caliphate Under Strain: The Documentary Evidence," *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, N.Y., April 2016, pp. 1–8). Johnston and colleagues (2016, pp. 150–151) note that salaries under ISIL's predecessor were not generous despite risks.

[11] Patrick Wintour and Shaun Walker, "Vladimir Putin Orders Russian Forces to Begin Withdrawal from Syria," *Guardian*, March 15, 2015; and Michael Birnbaum, "Weeks After 'Pullout' from Syria, Russian Military Is as Busy as Ever," *Washington Post*, April 12, 2016.

[12] Linda Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1290-OSD, 2016, pp. 18, 58–59, 65.

[13] See Operation Inherent Resolve, "Coalition," web page, undated.

[14] See, for example, the interview with Professor Bernard Haykel in Jack Jenkins, "What *The Atlantic* Left Out About ISIS According to Their Own Expert," *ThinkProgress*, February 20, 2015.

[15] For example, many Muslim immigrants have been able to live only in France's most run-down urban areas (see Soeren Kern, "French Suburbs Becoming 'Separate Islamic Societies,'" Gatestone Institute, October 10, 2011).

[16] J. M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, Center for Middle East Policy, Analysis Paper No. 20, March 2015.

[17] "USA: Intelligence Report, Commissioned by White House, Predicts ISIS Will Expand," Daily Beast, December 8, 2015.

[18] See Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015.

[19] For a compelling exposition of this way of looking at al-Qaeda and, to a real degree, ISIL, see Michael Scheuer, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America*, Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006.

[20] Note that "later developments" or "innovations" that change the message of the Koran and Sunna are great evils in Salafi theology, which ISIL leaders use to declare as apostates those who espouse such changes. In addition, ISIL leaders conveniently avoid a particular line of thinking about the apocalypse in which the Antichrist emerges between Iraq and Syria.

[21] Iraq's successes in recapturing Ramadi in December 2015 and Falluja in June 2016 are positive, but significant obstacles to military cohesion and capacity remain. See Robinson, 2016, pp. 25–34.

[22] Robinson, 2016, pp. 34–36.

[23] Rikar Hussein, "Turkish-Syrian Border Pocket Is Heart of Fight Against IS," Voice of America, April 20, 2016.

[24] Daniel Benjamin, "The King and ISIS," *Foreign Policy*, September 10, 2015.

[25] Rukmini Callimachi, "How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe's Gaze," *New York Times*, March 29, 2016.

[26] This was starting to happen in 2016. According to an unclassified Pentagon briefing, as of April 2016, ISIL had lost 45 percent of the territory it held in August 2014 (U.S. Department of Defense, "Iraq and Syria: ISIL's Areas of Influence, August 2014 Through April 2016," 2016).

[27] Yaroslav Trofimov, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine and the Birth of Al Qaeda*, New York: Doubleday, 2007, p. 214.

[28] The United Nations, European Union, and United States have all recognized this. See, for example, Nick Cumming-Bruce, "ISIS Committed Genocide Against Yazidis in Syria and Iraq, U.N. Panel Says," *New York Times*, June 16, 2016.

[29] Shi'a sectarian militias likely will be involved in retaking areas currently controlled by ISIL, given the religio-political landscape of Iraq. However, Iraqis' fear of these militias was a major contributing factor to ISIL gaining a foothold in Iraq in the first place, so their involvement in the pacification and governance of ISIL-held areas of Iraq would not be helpful.

[30] For a discussion of the numerous anti-Assad and anti-ISIL forces in Syria, including jihadist groups fighting ISIL, see Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

[31] In this Perspective, we refrain from selecting a particular type of political coalescence, because this would require a prolonged discussion of modalities that is outside the scope of this effort. Rather, we limit ourselves to general principles, not specific solutions, to make clear the requirements for achieving an acceptable end state.

[32] For discussions of the key contributions that partnerships can make, as well as the complexities of forging and maintaining such coalitions in Iraq and Syria, see Robinson, 2016; and Ilan Goldenberg, Nicholas A. Heras, and Paul Scharre, *Defeating the Islamic State: A Bottom-Up Approach,* Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2016.

References

Abboud, Samer, "Syria War: What You Need to Know About the Ceasefire," Al Jazeera, February 28, 2016. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/
syria-war-ceasefire-160228063752872.html

Benjamin, Daniel, "The King and ISIS," *Foreign Policy*, September 10, 2015. As of September 20, 2016:
http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/10/the-king-and-isis-saudi-arabia-egypt-iraq/

Berger, J. M., and Jonathon Morgan, *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, Center for Middle East Policy, Analysis Paper No. 20, March 2015. As of September 20, 2016:
https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/
isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf

Birnbaum, Michael, "Weeks After 'Pullout' from Syria, Russian Military Is as Busy as Ever," *Washington Post*, April 12, 2016. As of September 20, 2016:
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/
weeks-after-pullout-from-syria-russian-military-is-as-busy-as-ever/2016/04/11/
d150a004-fd77-11e5-a569-2c9e819c14e4_story.html

Blake, Andrew, "Pentagon: ISIS Suffering from Money Shortage, Low Morale," *Washington Times*, April 27, 2016. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/apr/27/
islamic-state-suffering-from-money-shortage-low-mo/

Callimachi, Rukmini, "How ISIS Built the Machinery of Terror Under Europe's Gaze," *New York Times*, March 29, 2016. As of March 29, 2016:
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/29/world/europe/
isis-attacks-paris-brussels.html

Clapper, James R., "Remarks as Delivered by the Honorable James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence," opening statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Worldwide Threat Assessment hearing, Washington, D.C., February 9, 2016a. As of September 20, 2016:
https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/
2016-02-09SASC_open_threat_hearing_transcript.pdf

———, *Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community, Senate Armed Services Committee*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 9, 2016b.

Cumming-Bruce, Nick, "ISIS Committed Genocide Against Yazidis in Syria and Iraq, U.N. Panel Says," *New York Times*, June 16, 2016. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/world/middleeast/
isis-genocide-yazidi-un.html?_r=0

Dobbins, James, Jeffrey Martini, and Philip Gordon, *A Peace Plan for Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-182-RC, 2015. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE182.html

Goldenberg, Ilan, Nicholas A. Heras, and Paul Scharre, *Defeating the Islamic State: A Bottom-Up Approach,* Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, 2016.

Hussein, Rikar "Turkish-Syrian Border Pocket Is Heart of Fight Against IS," Voice of America, April 20, 2016. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.voanews.com/content/
turkey-syria-border-manbij-pocket-heart-islamic-state-fight/3294536.html

Jenkins, Jack, "What *The Atlantic* Left Out About ISIS According to Their Own Expert," *ThinkProgress*, February 20, 2015. As of March 1, 2017:
https://thinkprogress.org/what-the-atlantic-left-out-about-isis-according-to-their-own-expert-afd98cf1c134#.mvq3jk8fc

Johnston, Patrick B., Jacob N. Shapiro, Howard J. Shatz, Benjamin Bahney, Danielle F. Jung, Patrick K. Ryan, and Jonathan Wallace, *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1192-DARPA, 2016. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1192.html

Kern, Soeren, "French Suburbs Becoming 'Separate Islamic Societies,'" Gatestone Institute, October 10, 2011. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/2487/french-suburbs-islamic-societies

Lister, Charles R., *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

McCants, William, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, New York: St. Martin's Press, e-book edition, 2015.

Operation Inherent Resolve, "Coalition," web page, undated. As of March 1, 2017:
http://www.inherentresolve.mil/About-Us/Coalition/

Prince, Sam, "How Many Militants Are Fighting for ISIS?" *Heavy*, November 11, 2015. As of January 5, 2016:
http://heavy.com/news/2015/11/how-many-fighters-militants-jihadist-soldiers-are-in-isis-islamic-state-nationalities-where-do-they-come-from-numbers/

Robinson, Linda, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1290-OSD, 2016. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1290.html

"Russia Announces Renewed Ceasefire in Besieged Syrian City of Aleppo," *Deutsche Welle*, June 16, 2016. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.dw.com/en/russia-announces-renewed-ceasefire-in-besieged-syrian-city-of-aleppo/a-19332714

Scheuer, Michael, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America*, Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006.

Sciutto, Jim, Jamie Crawford, and Chelsea J. Carter, "ISIS Can 'Muster' Between 20,000 and 31,500 Fighters, CIA Says," CNN, September 12, 2014. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.cnn.com/2014/09/11/world/meast/isis-syria-iraq

Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, New York, December 2015.

al-Tamimi, Aymenn, "A Caliphate Under Strain: The Documentary Evidence," *CTC Sentinel*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, N.Y., April 2016, pp. 1–8.

Trofimov, Yaroslav, *The Siege of Mecca: The Forgotten Uprising in Islam's Holiest Shrine and the Birth of Al Qaeda*, New York: Doubleday, 2007.

U.S. Department of Defense, "Iraq and Syria: ISIL's Areas of Influence, August 2014 Through April 2016," 2016. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/features/2014/0814_iraq/docs/20160512_ISIL%20Areas%20of%20Influence_Aug%202014%20through%20Apr%202016%20Map.pdf

"USA: Intelligence Report, Commissioned by White House, Predicts ISIS Will Expand," Daily Beast, December 8, 2015.

Wintour, Patrick, and Shaun Walker, "Vladimir Putin Orders Russian Forces to Begin Withdrawal from Syria," *Guardian*, March 15, 2015. As of September 20, 2016:
http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/vladimir-putin-orders-withdrawal-russian-troops-syria

Wood, Graeme, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, March 2015.

About the Authors

Terrence K. Kelly is the director of the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center, which RAND operates for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. In addition to homeland security research and analysis, his RAND work addresses innovative strategies for using force in a new era, counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan, Department of Defense and Army strategy, and science, technology, and acquisition problems. Prior to joining RAND, he served for 20 years as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Army.

James Dobbins holds the Distinguished Chair on Security and Diplomacy at the RAND Corporation and is a former Assistant Secretary of State.

Barbara Sude is a RAND researcher on counterterrorism, political Islam, Middle East issues, and historical lessons on terrorism, insurgency, and counterinsurgency. Sude is also a former Central Intelligence Agency and National Counterterrorism Center senior al-Qaeda analyst and Middle East and Africa political analyst.

Ben Connable is a RAND international policy analyst, a retired Marine Corps intelligence officer, and an Arabic-speaking foreign area officer. He focuses on counterinsurgency and intelligence methodology and works on Middle East regional and other warfare issues in support of Department of Defense sponsors.

About This Perspective

www.rand.org

PE-200-A