The organisation calling itself the “Islamic State” (IS) was brought into the limelight in June 2014 through a series of conquests achieved in Northern and Central Iraqi provinces. The fall of Mosul, Iraq’s second largest city, exposed the momentum of the group and its proven ability to exploit its opponents’ weaknesses. Territorial gains in Iraq and Syria were followed by the “establishment” of a self-styled “caliphate” led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, presented by IS’s spokesman as “the imam [Muslim religious leader] and khalifah [Caliph] for the Muslims everywhere”.1 This report draws a comprehensive picture of IS and assesses its potential for development, while examining some of the main challenges associated with the implementation of the counter-strategy detailed by United States (U.S.) President Barack Obama in September 2014.

The first part of this report will explore the genesis, the structure and the resources of IS. Competition between IS and al-Qaeda (AQ) is a key to understanding the major fault line between Jihadist groups who are split over the issues of support and allegiance to render to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The second part of the report will put into perspective the funding and the governance capabilities of IS, the two essential prerequisites for the sustainability of IS’s activities and the prospective normalisation of its rule among communities under its influence and its control. It will also discuss the transnational process leading to the regionalisation and the globalisation of the threat. The final section of the report concludes by exploring stumbling blocks on the road to “defeat”. Forces of the anti-IS coalition face major obstacles, foremost among which are polarisation along religious lines, sectarian hatred and conflicting strategic perspectives.

---

Introduction

Born in the wake of the American-led intervention in Iraq, IS is the last metamorphosis of an organisation that has been active in Iraq for more than a decade. Its recent success have been closely associated with the leadership of Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq’s former Prime Minister, one of the country’s current Vice-Presidents and Secretary General of the Shia Islamic Dawa party, whom the U.S. initially supported before holding accountable for increasing tensions with Iraqi Sunnis and the resurgent strength of IS. State policies in relation to the Syrian civil war have also been put forward. The Russian and Iranian-backed Syrian regime has been accused of intentionally fuelling the rise of IS. A convergence of interests between the two has been observed, both fighting common enemies. Initial support brought to anti-Assad groups by some Sunni regional powers would have further benefited IS, combined with Western policies of non-intervention in Syria.

Current assessments of the threat are in stark contrast with past appraisals of IS’s forerunner, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which American officials described as “strategically defeated” in 2008. This assessment resulted from the confluence of specific factors, the possible repetition of which stimulates current debates over the anti-IS strategy. Between 2007 and 2008, Sunni tribal groups and fighters collaborated with U.S. forces against AQI, partly motivated by the latter’s indiscriminate violent and extremist ideology. Improved border control paid off, coupled with the decision of the then U.S. President George W. Bush to authorise the deployment of more than 20,000 additional troops in Iraq. These developments contributed to a substantial reduction of violence, but such a success was a temporary achievement. Seven years after this major episode, the State Department Spokesperson, Jen Psaki, referred to IS as “not only a threat to the stability of Iraq, but a threat to the entire region.”

---

Origins

The influences of two Islamist militants lie at the heart of IS’s genesis. The first is Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, founder of Jama’at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (JTWJ). Following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, this organisation became one of AQ’s branches under the name of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, better known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Al-Zarqawi’s failure to attract Sunni support and its systematic targeting of Shia Muslims drew criticism from al-Qaeda’s central leadership (AQC). Shortly before he was killed in a U.S. targeted killing, al-Zarqawi managed the creation of the Majlis Shura al-Mujahedin (MSM), an AQI-led insurgent coalition that was replaced by the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) in October 2006. His successor, Abu Ayyub al-Masri, pledged allegiance to Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, leader of ISI. Combined with the death of al-Zarqawi, this process formally ended the relationship of subordination that had originally linked AQI to AQ.

The second militant, current leader of IS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi or “Caliph Ibrahim”, took command of ISI at an auspicious time. Alongside al-Zarqawi’s activities, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was involved in the creation of Jamaat Jaysh Ahl al-Sunnah wa-l-Jamaah (JJASJ), which became part of ISI in 2006. His activities gained prominence with the killing of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi in April 2010, propelling him to leadership. This transition happened when ISI was regaining strength from the counter-insurgency campaign led against the group between 2007 and 2009. Concomitant with the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, the Syrian civil war provided new opportunities for the development of the organisation. In August 2011, Abu Muhammad al-Joulani, one of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s regional commanders, was sent to Eastern Syria to oversee the expansion of ISI. The provision of money and experts led to the creation of the Syrian offshoot Jabhat al-Nusra (JN), whose fight against the Syrian regime gained credibility and popularity among local populations and armed forces opposed to the regime of Bachar al-Assad.

The rivalry between IS and AQ is the epicentre of a schism within Jihadist movements. In April 2013 Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the evolution of ISI into the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), often translated


13 Abu Ayyub al-Masri was also killed in this joint US-Iraqi operation. See “Senior Iraqi al-Qaeda Leaders ‘Killed’”, BBC (19 April 2010), accessed 11 January 2015, available online at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8630213.stm


as the Levant (ISIL). This geographical reference includes Syria and encompasses neighbouring countries and territories. The creation of ISIS was based on a declaration of unity between ISI and JN, but the move was rejected by al-Joulani who pledged allegiance to Ayman al-Zawahiri, successor of Osama bin Laden and current leader of AQ. The latter condemned al-Baghdadi’s actions, who nevertheless refused to renounce his claims over JN. Al-Baghdadi’s will to reassert his authority over al-Joulani provides a partial explanation of the break, as competition with the parent organisation of global jihad appears to have played a key role. It has thus been argued that al-Baghdadi “was preparing to split from al-Qaeda” before 2011, at a time when ISI was already regaining strength in Iraq. Additionally, local power relationships were most probably involved. Fierce fighting between ISIS and Syrian armed factions were said to have influenced the final decision of AQ’s leaders to deny any remaining ties with ISIS, the name of which was changed into the Islamic State at the end of June 2014.

The Islamic State and Al-Qaeda

IS and AQ remain deeply divided, since both organisations consider each other’s leadership to be unfounded. Whereas the IS’s spokesman stated in April 2014 that AQ “today is no longer the [base] of Jihad”, AQ claims that al-Baghdadi broke an oath of allegiance he is said to have made in private to al-Zawahiri. Moreover, the strategic visions of the two movements differ markedly, in addition to a significant generational gap. Created in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the organisation founded by Osama bin Laden was historically focused on the struggle against the United States and its Western allies. By contrast, IS thrived during the 2003-2011 Iraq war. Its fight is primarily oriented against rival and enemy groups, dissenting Sunni Muslims, ethnic

---

19 Ibid.
25 Abu Muhammad al-Adnani ash-Shami, “This Is Not Our Methodology, nor Will it Ever Be”, al-Furqan Media Foundation (18 April 2014), accessed 28 January 2015, available online at http://justpaste.it/1adn3
27 Ibid.
and religious minorities, and forces of the anti-IS international coalition. The local and sectarian nature of some of these targets is a distinctive feature of the latter.

Sunni Islam is embraced by 85 to 90 per cent of Muslims, as opposed to the Shia sect, which is a minority in the Muslim world but is, nonetheless, a numerical and politically dominant force in Iran and Iraq. Both have different branches and doctrines. For Sunni Islam, the Salafi movement has been defined by Jacob Olidort, adjunct fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, as “a literalist Sunni theological and legal orientation”. The supporters of which “seek to adhere to the reports of Muhammad's words and deeds (sunna) and to avoid innovation (bid'a)”. Salafists are traditionally divided between Quietists and Jihadists, the latter faction referring to “those supporting the use of violence to establish Islamic States”, according to scholar Quintan Wiktorowicz. AQ and IS share Salafi-Jihadism as a common religious ideology, however, three stumbling blocks mark a rupture. The first divergence is related to the foundations of the caliphate. While AQ and JN’s leaders favour a progressive approach, al-Baghdadi and his followers believe in its immediate implementation by violent means. The second variation is an intransigence of religious and political beliefs, which makes IS hostile to any form of compromise. Excommunication or “takfirism” has thus been extensively used by IS to justify attacks on its enemies. Refusal of other groups to consider the organisation as a full-fledged state is an equally important cause. The third difference lies in the intense anti-Shia violence led by IS, both against local populations and governments. AQ does not

endorse systematic killings of Shia Muslims, although the organisation deems them to be guilty of “treason” against Islam.40

Structure

The structure of IS41 is the product of AQI’s pyramidal organisation42 and al-Baghdadi’s leadership. In the early 2000s the shared experience of being imprisoned helped build personal connections between Islamist and Baathist insurgent networks.43 This was relevant at Camp Bucca, an American-led detention facility where al-Baghdadi was detained alongside some of his future lieutenants in 2004.44 Built on pragmatic and ideological reasons, the alliance between these two factions is a key factor of IS’s success. Senior leaders were chosen for their unwavering loyalty to al-Baghdadi, whose authority is drawn from his alleged religious education and affiliation to the Prophet Muhammad’s Quraysh tribe.45 This illustrates a dual process of concentration and delegation of power, restricted to approximately twenty trusted individuals. Major decisions are undertaken by the Sharia Council, in charge of issues related to power succession, legislation, justice, ideology and religion. Administratively, 18 Iraqi and Syrian “provinces” have been delineated and divided into sectors and localities. These territorial units are headed by “governors” and officials along with delegates of key councils.

According to figures provided by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in September 2014, between 20,000 and 31,500 fighters were then involved on the ground.46 These individuals were trained, well-armed and reportedly paid.47 Their ideological commitment contrasts with the level of motivation of the Iraqi army which a U.S. official described in June 2014 as being in a state of “psychological collapse”.48 The resources of the group have a decisive impact on the building of alliances

---

44 Ibid.
with key local allies such as tribal groups and Sunni insurgent factions. Territorial conquest and the establishment of the caliphate have increased the flow of volunteers, favored by a policy of large-scale recruitment. The ideological appeal of IS is based on a set of religious references conveying the illusion of an "'Islamic' utopia" where any Muslim can bring his/her own contribution. This is coupled with an apocalyptic narrative according to which the Syrian town of Dabiq would be the epicentre of the final battle against the enemies of Islam.

**Paramilitary Expertise**

Elements of “surprise, mobility and shock” have been referred to as central features of armed operations led by IS in Iraq. Terrorist, insurgent and conventional tactics have been converged through the exclusive or concomitant use of suicide attacks, infiltration of urban centres and group offensives. Charles Lister, visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center, has thus distinguished between “mass casualty urban attacks” and “concerted campaign of attrition against military opponents’ capabilities and morale”. IS has shown strong capacities to establish itself as a key player among competing factions, to manage simultaneously different fronts and to adapt to a changing security environment. The transfer of human and material resources on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border has allowed the group to tighten its grip on the two countries. However, defending extended territories against a wide array of opponents is a challenging task. Counter-offensives are likely to benefit from the fragmentation of IS forces. By the same token, means of conventional warfare are easier to spot and to strike than the clandestine infrastructures of terrorist and insurgent organisations. Newly-acquired visibility has propelled IS to the forefront of the international Jihadist movement, but it has also made the organisation a more identifiable target for its enemies.

---


56 Ibid.


Media

The potential of online information sharing has been extensively harnessed by IS’s leaders, fighters, supporters and sympathisers for propaganda and recruitment purposes, as well as the coordination of paramilitary activities. IS’s communication strategy is based on the intensive and simultaneous exploitation of mainstream and smaller social media platforms. The microblogging service Twitter holds a leading position, with 46,000 pro-IS Twitter accounts identified in the last months of 2014. Hashhtags in relation to IS are skilfully utilised by Twitter users who express affinity with the organisation, thousands of whom have been mobilised in massive campaigns of retweets. As most prominent pro-IS accounts are regularly shut down, the organisation has been led to protect the Tweets of its primary accounts while relying on a dynamic and resilient network of low-level accounts. Various online contents include news and updates, PDF-format magazines as well as multilingual and high-quality propaganda videos. The elaborate staging of extreme brutality is a recurring feature, either fully shown or merely suggested. While pictures and videos of selective and indiscriminate killings allow IS to convey fear and resolve, violence tends to be removed from the portrait of daily life within the caliphate, in a clear effort to promote an attractive vision.

Fundings

Daily profits generated by oil sales, extortion, taxes and smuggling were reported to exceed USD 2 million in August 2014. The figure of USD 2 billion was mentioned at the same date to refer to the assumed value of IS’s cash and assets. Among a variety of income streams ranging from the sale of antiquities, government property/equipment...
to kidnapping and human trafficking.\textsuperscript{72} IS is leading a profitable oil-smuggling business, which used to be fed by an estimated production of 80,000 barrels/day during the summer of 2014.\textsuperscript{73} Targeted airstrikes and falling oil prices have gradually altered this successful business model,\textsuperscript{74} in addition to Turkish and Kurdish counter-offensives.\textsuperscript{75} However, with a daily production ranging around 20,000 barrels in February 2015,\textsuperscript{76} oil-smuggling operations retain substantial value, compounded by a widespread system of forced contributions applying to local businesses, farms, public transports and road traffic.\textsuperscript{77} Despite the uninterrupted provision of salaries by the Iraqi central government to civil servants who work in areas under IS’s control,\textsuperscript{78} leaders of the caliphate are confronted with challenging equations of self-sustainability and effective management. The organisation is caught between the costs of a substantial paramilitary apparatus and the administration of a disparate network of territories populated by approximately eight millions people.

Governance and the ‘state’

Methods of governance implemented within the caliphate are both an attempt to turn IS’s political and socio-economic ambitions into concrete reality and a prerequisite for its long-term implantation. According to Charlie C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds from the Institute for the Study of War, various initiatives include “religious, educational, judicial, security, humanitarian, and infrastructure projects”.\textsuperscript{79} Ideological “guidance” and material needs are covered by a wide range of administrative and public services relying on the pragmatic use of pre-existing structures of management.\textsuperscript{80} This comprehensive approach tends to provide Sunni populations – faced with local governments they widely regard to be repressive and sectarian – with a seemingly stable environment.\textsuperscript{81} The perceived legitimacy and the credibility of IS as a ruling entity is nevertheless fragile. Monopoly over resources and control exerted by force in war-torn areas are not sufficient to create a structured state entity, despite the provision


\textsuperscript{73} Kate Brannen, “Pentagon: Oil No Longer the Islamic State’s Main Source of Revenue”, Foreign Policy (3 February 2015), accessed 17 February 2015, available online at http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/03/pentagon-oil-no-longer-the-islamic-states-main-source-of-revenue/

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{76} Kate Brannen, “Pentagon: Oil No Longer the Islamic State’s Main Source of Revenue”, Foreign Policy (3 February 2015), accessed 17 February 2015, available online at http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/03/pentagon-oil-no-longer-the-islamic-states-main-source-of-revenue/


of daily order and assistance. Glaring flaws include a shortage of skilled labour\textsuperscript{82} as well as deteriorating conditions for the supply of basic products and services.\textsuperscript{83} As noted by Dr Andrew Philips, the consolidation of IS’s authority within territories that make up the caliphate is likely to be based on the development of fiscal and administrative structures, as well as the building of alliances with local power-holders.\textsuperscript{84} The organisation is thus compelled to increase its civilian presence, while sustaining its war efforts and avoiding the vicious circle of systematic and widespread repression. In spite of resilient political structures, such challenges will make it all the more difficult for the ‘caliphate project’\textsuperscript{85} to stand the test of time.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{83} Liz Sly, “The Islamic State is Failing at Being a State”, \textit{The Washington Post} (25 December 2014), accessed 20 February 2015, available online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-islamic-state-is-failing-at-being-a-state/2014/12/24/bfbf8962-8092-11e4-b936-f3afab0155a7_story.html
Regional and global expansion

The struggle for the defence of territorial gains and/or the control of new localities is originally rooted in Iraq and in Syria, where IS benefited from the convergence of situations of a power vacuum, political distrust and civil war. This does not preclude direct and proxy offensives in states of the wider Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The establishment of “provinces” in Libya and in the Sinai Peninsula as well as attacks led against Shia minorities in neighbouring countries are prominent examples of attempts at regional destabilization. Disparate Jihadist militants have expressed pledges of allegiance and obedience to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, many of whom have been accepted by the latter. These include defectors from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQPA); representatives of Libya and Sinai-based organisations; Nigeria’s Boko Haram leader; Pakistani and Afghan militants. The same goes for isolated individuals attempting to carry out acts of terrorism within their own national environments. Ideological affinities and/or publicity stunts do not imply organisational and operational links between IS and some of these groups, cells and individuals. Opportunism may dictate reference to the IS brand in a bid to attract resources, media attention and Jihadist credibility. Likewise, AQ is confronted with an increasing risk of internal division since the establishment of the caliphate, but dissidence have remained limited while sympathy for IS’s success has been expressed by al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), AQ’s most active affiliate, without public allegiance being made.

Confronted with a persistent and fragmented Jihadist threat, Southeast Asian countries are exposed to the contagion risk. Indonesian and Malaysian nationals fighting with IS were involved in the creation of a Malay-speaking paramilitary unit in August 2014. Filipino militants reportedly left for the Syrian conflict zone.
imitated by a “handful” of Singaporeans.95 Emerging and prospective issues associated with these individuals are threefold: (i) they could act as a potential focal point for local Jihadist groups and facilitate the resurgence of a regional militant network connected to IS and dedicated to the creation of an East Asian Islamic caliphate, at least rhetorically. Support for IS expressed by Indonesian Jihadist Aman Abdurrahman and Abu Bakr Bashir,96 two influential and currently imprisoned ideologues, bears witness to the potential reality of this scenario; (ii) IS’s online propaganda, including the staging of East Asian foreign fighters’ “achievements”, is likely to entice new recruits and to convince homeland-based sympathisers and supporters to take immediate action. Two teenagers were arrested in Singapore on terrorism-related charges in April and May 2015,97 while twenty-nine individuals suspected to be involved in two IS-related plots were arrested in Malaysia in April 2015 alone;98 and (iii) back in their home countries most committed foreign fighters could make full use of their contacts and paramilitary know-how, assuming they have regularly taken part in combat operations. The ‘prestige’ gained from direct involvement in the Syrian/Iraqi conflicts, combined with the refreshed activism of local Jihadist groups, around 20 of whom have reportedly pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi,99 increase the risk of terrorist attacks from or linked to returning East Asian militants.

**Foreign Fighters**

Syria and Iraq have been described by a 2015 report produced by United Nations (UN) experts as a “veritable international finishing school for extremists”,100 where the number of foreigners who joined Sunni militant groups is estimated by the UN to exceed 25,000 by April 2015.101 Among more than 80 countries,102 four MENA states (Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Morocco) and two Eurasian countries (Russia and France) stand out, as the high figures of nationals involved number 800 to 3,000 individuals per country.103 Recurrent features have been highlighted, including an average age between 18 and 29 years old,104 “humble

---

and unexpected origins as well as a high proportion of converts among Western foreign fighters. No single profile can be drawn between militants of a same country/region, let alone between individuals coming from different geographic areas. The decision to join the conflict may result from a combination of various push and pull factors ranging from humanitarian concerns to the search for comradeship and adventure. Recruitment processes are equally rooted in the interplay of different incentives which, in the case of Syria and Iraq, have been listed by Charlie Winter, Researcher at the Quilliam Foundation, as “charismatic recruiters coupled with very effective propaganda coupled with peer pressure.” An additional and unprecedented causal element lies in the strong resonance of the caliphate with individuals attracted by the Islamic reference it pretends to institutionalise and the ideal life it claims to offer.

Security challenges posed by returning foreign fighters, sympathisers and supporters of AQ/IS have led governments to adopt or to consider the implementation of a wide range of counter-measures. Law enforcement approaches include: (i) tightened intelligence controls; (ii) temporary confiscation of passports; (iii) suspension of citizenship or denaturalisation of dual citizens; (iv) re-entry ban; and (v) arrest and detention. Special exclusion orders applying to suspected Jihadists have thus been announced in November 2014 by British Prime Minister David Cameron. Restricted to two years, this measure would allow the return of suspects on British national territory only if they would assume the potential legal consequences resulting from their suspicious activities. By contrast, the Tunisian government has implemented an amnesty program aimed at “[a]ny Tunisian who does not have blood on his hands”, according to Tunisia’s interior ministry. Proactive repressive measures will bring required security responses, but it will not deter most determined individuals from joining the Syrian conflict zone and could even turn potential foreign fighters into home-grown terrorist plotters. To address the problem of violent radicalisation upstream, some prevention plans include counter-messaging initiatives and assistance brought to people suspected of wanting to join the Syrian conflict zone and their

families. Coupled with disengagement and de-radicalisation programmes for returnees, these initiatives address the crucial need for reintegration strategies. However, trusting “former” violent radicals, some of whom could have been involved in looting, rapes, torture, executions and massacres, is a challenging task, especially in West European societies where stigmatisation of foreign fighters is high.

Counter-strategy

Since the first U.S. airstrikes of what would later be named Operation Inherent Resolve were launched in August 2014, the fight against IS has become a multi-pronged effort involving an international coalition gathering more than 60 countries. Objectives set out by President Obama are “to degrade, and ultimately destroy” the organisation led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, without deploying combat troops in Iraq and in Syria. With a duration that John Kerry, U.S. Secretary of State, has estimated to take years and an average daily cost of military operations at USD 9.1 million in June 2015, the U.S. “comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy” is based on four axes: (i) carrying out “a systematic campaign of airstrikes” in Iraq and in Syria; (ii) training, providing intelligence and equipment to Iraqi and Kurdish forces as well as military assistance to the Syrian opposition; (iii) making use of counter-terrorist measures and international cooperation in key areas such as funding, intelligence, ideology and foreign fighters; and (iv) providing humanitarian assistance to civilians displaced by IS.

Iraq

IS capitalised on feelings of distrust, injustice and alienation shared by many Iraqi Sunnis towards Shia-led governments. As a result, strong emphasis has been placed by the U.S. on inclusive Iraqi policies. Prime Minister of Iraq Haider al-Abadi has a similar political and religious background as Nouri al-Maliki, but his first months in office generated promising results. This includes the conclusion of an oil and military support-related agreement with authorities of the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and ministerial appointments of Sunni leaders.

120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
However, questions have been raised about the extent to which al-Abadi would be willing to work in favour of national reconciliation, and whether the level of support granted by the anti-IS coalition would allow him to further this aim. Despite progress in the creation of a National Guard which is expected to mobilise Sunni communities against IS, new amendments related to de-baathification and anti-terrorism laws have not been implemented at the dates of February and April 2015. Iraqi Sunnis consider these pieces of legislation to be tools of discrimination, which they firmly opposed during al-Maliki’s tenure. Gathered by the Iraqi Ministry of Interior into “Popular Mobilisation Units”, dozens of Iraqi Shia militias play a leading role against IS. These movements are considered by Al-Abadi to be an extension of his government, but their success could significantly undermine his fragile political legitimacy. Most of these groups have strong linkages with the Shia Iranian regime, which widens the gap between Iraq’s central government and its Sunni Arab neighbours. Reports of exactions carried out by Shia militias against Sunni populations increase sectarian hatred between the two main Iraqi religious communities. Conversely, many Sunni tribesmen joined IS before the June 2014 offensive, fuelling a state of distrust which equally undermines the prospect of anti-IS collaboration between Sunni tribal leaders and the Iraqi central government.

Syria and Iran

The U.S. excluded military cooperation with Shia-led Syrian and Iranian regimes, while keeping open channels of communication with Damascus and Tehran. Syrian President Bachar al-Assad has been accused of contributing to the rise of IS in Syria, both to weaken its opponents and to present itself as...
a legitimate and credible political alternative. Teheran plays an hyperactive role in Syria and in Iraq through the involvement of Hezbollah, a Shia Islamist-Lebanese organisation fighting alongside Assad forces. Iranian military units opposed to IS in Iraq and support brought to Syrian armed forces, Syrian/Iraqi Shia militias and Iraqi Kurdish military forces. Some Western military voices were reported to believe in the necessity of collaborating with the Syrian army against IS. As emphasised by Mark Urban, BBC diplomatic and defense editor, Iraq and Iran “would be delighted at such a development”. This nonetheless goes against the stance of major Sunni U.S. allies that explicitly favour the ouster of Bachar al-Assad and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, are firmly opposed to the expansion of Iranian influence. However, (i) airstrikes led by the anti-IS coalition are directed against the major challenger to the Syrian regime, which does not prevent the latter from pursuing its own air operations; (ii) it tends to divert international attention from Syrian military activities; and (iii) it could imperil progress towards a political transition in Syria, which is a declared objective of U.S. foreign policy.

**Turkey**

A key member of the Atlantic Alliance and the anti-IS coalition, Turkey has been accused of welcoming anti-Assad opponents without distinction and providing support to IS and JN. Ankara has been called to intensify...
its action against aspiring foreign fighters,\textsuperscript{151} many of which enter Turkish national territory before crossing the 560-mile Turkish-Syrian border. The establishment of a formal buffer zone and a no-fly zone in Syria would help Turkey to secure its Southern border and to regulate new flows of Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers,\textsuperscript{152} the total of those based in Turkey is expected to reach 1.7 million in 2015.\textsuperscript{153} This would also wipe out Syrian air military capabilities and deal a severe blow to Syrian Kurds’ claims for self-government, as the premises of an autonomous Syrian Kurdistan\textsuperscript{154} could act as a source of inspiration for the Kurdish population living in Turkey. However, both measures have been excluded by the Obama administration,\textsuperscript{155} despite mixed signals from U.S. officials.\textsuperscript{156} The refusal of Turkish authorities to allow the U.S. to use its Incirlik airbase for the purpose of conducting airstrikes against IS is an additional bone of contention.\textsuperscript{157} Ankara fears that destroying IS would empower the Syrian regime\textsuperscript{158} while further exposing Turkey to the risk of terrorist attacks. The difficulty of harmonising Turkish domestic constraints and the priorities of the coalition is further compounded by the links between the Syrian Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), a major ally of the coalition on the ground, and the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK),\textsuperscript{159} an organisation against which Turkey has been engaged in a decades-long conflict over the issues of independence and autonomy for Turkish Kurds. Turkey’s president Recep Tayip Erdoğan equated the PKK with IS,\textsuperscript{160} in a tense context of peace process between the former’s leadership and the Turkish government.\textsuperscript{161} 

### Allies and Military Action

Anti-IS ground forces involve Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Iraqi Kurdish military forces or Peshmerga, both being trained and equipped by coalition forces. Iraqi Shia militias have overshadowed the role of the ISF in the fight against IS. These sectarian-
based movements act as an emergency solution. However, the influence exerted by Iran on most of these powerful groups and their growing independence\textsuperscript{162} are likely to be fatal to President Obama’s Iraq policy. Greater involvement of Shia militias in the Western Iraqi province of Anbar, overwhelmingly Sunni-populated, could further alienate Sunni populations and give credit to IS’s self-declared status of defender of Sunnis against Iraqi and Iranian Shia forces. However, cases of collaboration among Iraq’s Shia-dominated military, Shia militias and Sunni tribes have been noted on several occasions,\textsuperscript{163} providing hope for the creation of an Iraqi cross-sectarian force opposed to IS. Deeply divided, Sunni tribes are in a cardinal position of support provider. Their collaboration is actively sought by IS, either voluntarily or coerced, and by the U.S. and the Iraqi central government.\textsuperscript{164} In addition to support brought by the coalition to the YPG in Northern Syria, several dozen “moderate” Syrian armed opposition groups are backed by the U.S., including factions of the highly fragmented FSA.\textsuperscript{165} A central question is to determine whether these disparate “boots on the ground”, the empowerment of which is a distinguishing feature of the anti-IS campaign, will succeed in convincing Sunni populations that the caliphate is not a potential answer to the eruption of sectarian violence in Iraq and the rule of Bachar al-Assad in Syria.

Following a request for air support from the Iraqi government\textsuperscript{166} and the decision of the U.S. President to intervene on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border, more than 4,100 airstrikes\textsuperscript{167} have been launched by the U.S. and its allies in Iraq and Syria between mid-August 2014 and early June 2015, damaging or destroying 7,655 targets as of 22 June 2015, according to assessments of the Pentagon.\textsuperscript{168} U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Anthony Blinken reported that more than 10,000 fighters of IS had been killed between September 2014 and June 2015.\textsuperscript{169} The organisation is said by the Pentagon to have lost 25 to 30 per cent of its territories in Iraq between September 2014 and April 2015, while its territorial implantation would have remained “largely unchanged”


\textsuperscript{169} John Irish and Louise Ireland, “U.S. Says 10,000 Islamic State Militants Killed in Nine-Month Campaign”, Reuters (3 June 2015), accessed 4 June 2015, available online at http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/03/us-mideast-crisis-blinken-idUSKBN0OJ0I620150603
in Syria. Apart from the liberation of the Syrian and Iraqi cities of Kobane, Tal Abyad and Tikrit, no major urban success has been achieved by anti-IS forces. The loss of Ramadi in May 2015 cruelly exposed the vulnerabilities of the coalition and its allies on the ground. By contrast, the organisation led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has demonstrated adaptive skills by concealing its movements and the resources at its disposal. It is likely to benefit from discontent generated by airstrikes among Syrian militants and rebels, many of whom are supportive of JN and believe the latter to be another target of the U.S. air campaign. A long-term and sustained war effort could significantly erode IS’s paramilitary capabilities and drive it back to a state of semi-clandestinity, should a massive mobilisation of Sunni tribal groups and fighters be repeated. More crucially, the reestablishment of local structures of governance in liberated towns and villages would ensure the long-term sustainability of the coalition’s gains on the ground.

Key Challenges

The show of regional unity between Middle Eastern states is being put to the test by acute divisions over military and political-religious motives. After three months of involvement, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) temporarily suspended its participation in airstrikes, reportedly on concerns over the security of its pilots and dissatisfaction with the lack of support brought about by the coalition to Iraqi Sunni tribes. Similar fault lines seem to have been expressed by Prince Turki al-Faisal, former Director of the Saudi General Intelligence Presidency (GIP), who underlined the perceived disorganisation of airstrikes and an alleged lack of intelligence-sharing between Arab members of the coalition and Iraq, which as he emphasised, did not request air support from Gulf states coalition members. Tension between Arab Sunni states are equally strong, as Qatar’s support to militant Islamist groups in Syria and the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist movement which the Saudi regime and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) consider to be a terrorist organisation, has significantly increased regional antagonisms.

The IS threat emphasises the challenge of overcoming sectarian lines in Iraq by reconciling different identities and aspirations. Decades of Saddam Hussein’s Sunni-dominated regime, years of sectarian attacks from Sunni insurgent groups and the recent success of IS have not disposed the Iraqi Shia populations to compromises.
with Iraqi Sunnis. However, the latter themselves are divided on the appropriateness and the implementation of a federal option that would give them more self-determination, according to a Kurdish media report. Similarly, Iraqi Kurds, who represent the second most important ethnic group in Iraq, do not seem likely to fulfill their long-standing aspiration for independence. Their leader Massoud Barzani stated in July 2014 that a referendum on this issue was “a matter of months”. Recent gains of territories and push for greater autonomy appear to give weight to this proposal, but it does not follow that regional authorities could face the substantial political and economic costs of a sovereign Kurdistan, even less that regional and international powers would remain passive if this scenario were to become a reality.

Despite anti-IS local forces’ knowledge of the ground and, in the case of the Peshmergas, decades of experience in irregular warfare, major military obstacles remain. Between 2003 and 2011, about USD 25 billion dollars were spent by the U.S. on the creation of a new Iraqi army. Sectarianism and politicisation, corruption and disorganisation have been put forward to explain a gradual process of decline and debacle. Strong emphasis is being placed by the Obama administration on the training and the arming of Iraqi forces opposed to IS. 3,550 non-combatant U.S. troops have thus been/are being deployed in Iraq at the date of June 2015. 7,000 Iraqi soldiers have been trained and another 4,000 is anticipated. However, the genesis of a strong national defence force primarily depends on the easing of Iraq’s inter-religious and ethnic tensions rather than training sessions and the sending of additional U.S. weapons and equipment, important quantities of


177 “Iraq’s Sunnis Divided Over Need for Their Own Federal Region”, Rudaw (16 May 2013), accessed 23 March 2015, available online at http://rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/16052013


181 Ibid.


which have already been lost to IS.\textsuperscript{187} While collaboration between Baghdad and Iraqi Sunni forces is strongly encouraged by the U.S., the latter has left this responsibility to the Iraqi central government,\textsuperscript{188} reportedly without substantial results achieved.\textsuperscript{189} On the Syrian front, 15,000 “moderate” Syrian opposition fighters are to take part in a three-year train-and-equip programme involving the U.S., Turkey, Jordan, Qatar and Saudi Arabia.\textsuperscript{190} The coalition will not be able to exert full control over a proxy force whose political and religious aspirations as well as organisational and operational characteristics remain uncertain,\textsuperscript{191} especially in a context of opposing views over the roles it would be led to play in relation to the different actors involved in the Syrian civil war. The U.S. and Turkey have not expressed a common position on the anti-Assad activities that this “moderate” division would be likely to carry out, the possibility of which, however, has been refuted by the Obama administration\textsuperscript{192} but openly supported by the Turkish government.\textsuperscript{193}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Focusing on the meteoric rise to fame of IS would be misguided. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi leads a heterogeneous organisation that depends on fragile local alliances and is simultaneously attacked from different sides. Substantial material and financial resources make IS an unprecedented non-state armed force, however, most of IS’s prominent assets could easily be interpreted as significant weaknesses. Foreign fighters may provide the organisation with a source of renewable manpower, while the most experienced individuals, military and media expertise. However, their visibility among Syrian and Iraqi populations, as well as significant cultural gaps\textsuperscript{194} are likely to increase a feeling of “foreign occupation”,\textsuperscript{195} as a former resident of Raqqa described it. This could further undermine IS’s implantation. By contrast, other powerful non-state actors whose reported crimes receive much less media exposure have gradually normalised their presence and increased their political clout, including JN and Iraqi Shia militias.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{189} Hugh Naylor, “Fall of Ramadi Reflects Failure of Iraq’s Strategy Against ISIS, Analysts Say”, The Washington Post (19 May 2015), accessed 12 June 2015, available online at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/fall-of-ramadi-reflects-failure-of-iraqs-strategy-against-islamic-state-analysts-say/2015/05/19/1dc45a5a-fda3-11e4-8c77-bf274685e1df_story.html
\item \textsuperscript{192} Phil Stewart, “U.S. Training of Syria Rebel Fighters Expands to Turkey; Source”, Reuters (28 May 2015), accessed 15 June 2015, available online at http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/28/us-mideast-crisis-usa-training-idUSKBN0D1AF20150528
\item \textsuperscript{194} Interview of Peter S. Neumann, Karen Leigh, Syria Deeply (29 August 2014), accessed 10 April 2015, available online at http://www.syriadeeply.org/articles/2014/08/6020/european-jihadi-fighters-reuse-profile-promotion/
\end{itemize}
Complex battle lines sustain the resilience of IS in Syria, which keeps feeding the presence of the group in Iraq. Tackling the organisation on a sectoral basis, without addressing interconnected dynamics of Syrian sub-conflicts, is a highly questionable expedient, both from a moral and from a strategic point of view. Should the objective of “destruction” be militarily attained by members of the anti-IS coalition and the actors it supports on the ground, it does not follow that the potential appeal of a resurging caliphate would disappear, nor would it mean that other Iraqi and Syria-based movements would not try to follow in the footsteps of their predecessor. In a region experiencing massive upheavals, IS epitomises the intensity of issues encountered and the difficulties of going beyond ad hoc responses. Healing the open wounds of sectarianism is a first aid measure which, however, is similar to treating a symptom rather than acting upon the structural conditions affecting the spread of the disease. If not addressed properly, the latter will undoubtedly give rise to new “caliphates”.
About the Author

Romain Quivooij is an Associate Research Fellow with the Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU). He obtained his Master of Arts in International Conflict Studies from King’s College London. Prior to joining CENS, Romain worked for the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development and the General Staff of the French Armed Forces. He was also an intern at the Institute of Strategic Research of the French Military School and the Emerging Security Threats programme of the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research. His research interests include radicalisation and de-radicalisation processes; online extremism; radical Islam and armed insurgent movements; counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency.
About the Centre of Excellence for National Security

The Centre of Excellence for National Security (CENS) is a research unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Established on 1 April 2006, CENS raison d’être is to raise the intellectual capital invested in strategising national security. To do so, CENS is devoted to rigorous policy-relevant analysis across a range of national security issues.

CENS is multinational in composition, comprising both Singaporeans and foreign analysts who are specialists in various aspects of national and homeland security affairs. Besides fulltime analysts, CENS further boosts its research capacity and keeps abreast of cutting edge global trends in national security research by maintaining and encouraging a steady stream of visiting fellows.

About the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies

The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) is a professional graduate school of international affairs at the Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. RSIS’ mission is to develop a community of scholars and policy analysts at the forefront of security studies and international affairs. Its core functions are research, graduate education and networking. It produces cutting-edge research on Asia Pacific Security, Multilateralism and Regionalism, Conflict Studies, Non-Traditional Security, International Political Economy, and Country and Region Studies. RSIS’ activities are aimed at assisting policymakers to develop comprehensive approaches to strategic thinking on issues related to security and stability in the Asia Pacific.

For more information about RSIS, please visit www.rsis.edu.sg.