# Center on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups:

## ISIS: The Terrorist Group That Would Be a State

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## Editors' Introduction

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It is important to note three critical caveats to this case study. First, the opinions found in this case study are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of the Department of Defense, the Naval War College, or CIWAG. Second, while every effort was made to correct any factual errors in this work, the author is ultimately responsible for the content of this case study.

Third, the study questions presented in all CIWAG case studies are written to provoke discussion on a wide variety of topics, including strategic, operational, and tactical matters, as well as ethical and moral questions confronted by operators in the battlefield. The point is to make these case studies part of an evolving and adaptive curriculum that fulfills the needs of students preparing to meet the challenges of the post-9/11 world and to show them the dilemmas that real people have faced in high-pressure situations.

Finally, in addition to a range of teaching questions that are intended to serve as the foundation for classroom discussion, students conducting further research will find the extensive bibliography at the end of the case helpful. Compiled by the case study author and by CIWAG researchers at the Naval War College, the bibliography is a selection of the best books and articles on a range of related topics. We hope you find it useful and look forward to hearing your feedback on the cases and suggestions for how you can contribute to CIWAG's mission here at the Naval War College.

## Author Biography

**Michael W. S. Ryan** is a senior fellow at the Jamestown Foundation and an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute, both in Washington, D.C. Formerly, he served as a senior executive in the U.S. departments of state and defense and as vice president of the Millennium Challenge Corporation and the Middle East Institute. He studied Arabic in Egypt and received his Ph.D. from Harvard University. Dr. Ryan is author of *Decoding Al-Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America*, published by Columbia University Press (2013). His current research focus is jihadist ideology, doctrine, and strategy.

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# I. ISIS: Its Evolution and Influences

No lasting resolution to the ISIS threat in Syria and Iraq will be feasible until viable political solutions are found for both countries. At the time of the writing of this case study, the U.S. has proposed no such solution. It has given priority to addressing the security challenge but has not yet settled on an overarching strategy for either country. Instead, the U.S. and its allies have put in place a series of military responses to local threats and have taken advantage of targets of opportunity in both countries using coalition airstrikes. In Syria, the U.S. has launched the occasional U.S. Special Forces mission. Additionally, the U.S. has provided military training and some equipment to the government of Iraq and has responded to requests for airstrikes in support of specific Iraqi military missions.

This case study presents a net assessment of ISIS: its strengths and weaknesses. The conclusion will propose some recommendations for degrading ISIS, both militarily and ideologically. Clearly, ISIS is a fluid topic, subject to change; please note that information in this case study is current as of August 2015.

It is beyond the scope of this case study to propose a political resolution to the political crises in Syria and Iraq, which have been a breeding ground for the group. Instead, the case study will address tactical recommendations for defeating ISIS at the military level and will suggest a strategic approach to countering the ideological challenge that ISIS poses to the region and beyond.

A net assessment is descriptive, not prescriptive. Developed over time within the U.S. Department of Defense, a net assessment has been described as a practice or methodology based on asking questions from a variety of distinctive perspectives.[1] It focuses on how the enemy operates and who the enemy is. It tries to understand how the enemy thinks about the U.S. in order to anticipate its strategy, if not its individual actions. To conduct a net assessment of ISIS, one needs to look at the strategic interactions of its component parts, its internal bureaucratic behavior, and the multifaceted nature of its strategy.

## A. What's in a Name? From Tawhid w' al-Jihad to ISIS

ISIS developed its strategic approach within the modern jihadist tradition, which al Qaeda violently introduced to the United States with a series of escalating attacks culminating in the attacks of September 11, 2001. However, as an adaptive, learning organization, ISIS departed from al Qaeda's strategy by taking advantage of its best thinking about jihadist lessons as codified by Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, who is a major influence on the ISIS group's military doctrine. In addition, ISIS has used a strategic plan for establishing an Islamic emirate, as presented in broad strokes by another al Qaeda strategist with the pseudonym Abu Bakr Naji. ISIS also has learned from U.S. operations, especially from the use of Sunni tribes during the successful "surge" in Iraq, which came close to destroying al Qaeda in Iraq. Lessons learned from U.S. operations were the basis of the successful rebirth of al Qaeda in Iraq under a new name and organization, now called ISIS, and following a new strategy.

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[1] The basis for the perspective on net assessment is based on Paul Bracken, "Net Assessment: A Practical Guide," *Parameters* (spring 2006): 90-100.

### i. Al-Zarqawi: Founder, Tawhid w' al-Jihad

On June 8, 2006, in a remote area in the vicinity of Baquba, north of Baghdad, American F-16 aircraft targeted a jihadist "safe house" with two 500-pound bombs, causing extensive damage and killing its most infamous inhabitant, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi. Major General William Caldwell, U.S. military spokesmen in Iraq, stated that Iraqi police arrived first on the scene, followed by U.S. Special Forces. The killing of the Iraqi jihadist followed intelligence information about the presence of one of al-Zarqawi's known associates, Sheik Abd al-Rahman; tips received from Iraqi residents in the surrounding area led to the successful operation. Troops had been on the ground watching for al-Zarqawi. Major General Caldwell further stated that Rahman "was brought to our attention by somebody within the network of Zarqawi's."[2] In fact, the successful operation came after Jordanian authorities arrested members of al-Zarqawi's network and, more importantly, after many Iraqi fellow insurgents had grown to loathe their bloody comrade-in-arms enough to act as informants.

Al-Zarqawi's death was the culmination of an American search for one of the most ruthless Salafi jihadist leaders, who had an American bounty on his head of $25 million, an amount equal to the reward offered for Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri. The terrorist leader had been responsible for the killing of a U.N. envoy, numerous assassinations in Iraq and Jordan, countless killings of noncombatants, bombings of mosques and Islamic shrines, and shocking video beheadings. It was to be hoped that his death, praised by his many enemies, would lead to a weakened al Qaeda effort in Iraq. President George W. Bush, however, sounded a sober note while praising the operation: "We can expect the sectarian violence to continue. Yet, the ideology of terror has lost one of its most visible and aggressive leaders and it provides an opportunity for the new government to turn the tide in the country."[3]

Because so many conflicting reports exist on a man who has become mythic, establishing the facts of al-Zarqawi's life is problematic. What is told about him, however, shows a pattern that is important for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the ISIS group: a lost young Muslim without a traditional Islamic religious foundation who becomes a zealous adherent of a radical jihadist group to find salvation through violence against the established order. In effect, the wayward young man becomes a fearless fighter against everyone outside his group, but the very zeal that gives him his strength is also difficult to control and alienates the population he needs in order to succeed.

The man known by the jihadi *nom de guerre* Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi was born into poverty in the Jordanian town of Zarqa as Ahmad Fadil Nazal al-Khalayleh circa October 1966. Despite his humble circumstances, he is reported to have belonged to a prominent Bedouin tribe, the Bani Hassan. Like many young men who later become strict Salafi jihadis, al-Zarqawi in his younger years did not show the influence of Islamic morals. He dropped

[2] "U.S. Military: Al-Zarqawi Was Alive After Bombing," June 9, 2006, www.cnn.com.

[3] "Bush: Al-Zarqawi Operation a 'Remarkable Achievement,'" June 7, 2006, www.cnn.com.

out of school, drank alcohol heavily, sported tattoos, and engaged in general rowdiness. He was a taciturn, semi-literate, petty thief and gangster.[4] According to some accounts, when he was only 15, al-Zarqawi participated in the violent robbery of a relative's home, resulting in that relative's death. People of Zarqa remember him as a bully, a thug, and even a pimp.[5]

Whether to escape Jordan or because of the lure of adventure, al-Zarqawi travelled to Afghanistan for the first time in 1989. He may have had a religious motivation, but the Soviet Union had withdrawn from Afghanistan, leaving only other Muslims to fight. One who knew al-Zarqawi remembers him as an utterly fearless fighter who seemed to put himself in the midst of the most dangerous situations:

> He wasn't very religious during that time. In fact, he'd only "returned" to Islam three months before coming to Afghanistan. It was the Tablighi Jamaat [a proselytizing missionary group spread across the Muslim world] who convinced him—he had thirty-seven criminal cases against him by then—that it was time to cleanse himself.[6]

Afghanistan was a formative influence for al-Zarqawi. He claimed that the jihadist icon Abdullah Azzam was a great influence, but perhaps the most important event in the formation of his ideology was his meeting with fellow Jordanian and one of the most influential ideologues of Salafi jihadism, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi. Al-Maqdisi is the author of many jihadist books and treatises, including the influential jihadist tract *Millet Ibrahim* (The Religion of Abraham). Al-Maqdisi is important not only because he was al-Zarqawi's foundational tutor but also because of his later role as a critic of his pupil and the ISIS group his student founded.[7]

Al-Zarqawi remained in Afghanistan until 1992, when he returned to Jordan, supported intellectually by al-Maqdisi and a handful of other jihadists to invigorate a Jordanian jihadist group that opposed the monarchy and democracy while calling for the killing of Jews and Christians. It was here the term *Tawhid* (monotheism) first appeared as a name he favored as a sort of precursor to his group, which exploded onto the scene after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. At some point al-Maqdisi and al-Zarqawi changed the name of the group from Tawhid to Bayat Imam (Allegiance to the Imam). Reportedly, al-Zarqawi was jailed in Jordan in 1993 for weapons possession and remained incarcerated with al-Maqdisi and other opposition elements until a general amnesty in 1999 freed him.

Prison was an important school for the young jihadist. He made significant contacts, and became a feared leader. His jihadist group grew in prison and on the streets outside as a kind of religiously sanctioned criminal gang. In 2000 he fled again to Afghanistan, now the

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[4] Lawrence Joffe, "Obituary: Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi," June 8, 2006, www.theguardian.com.
[5] Mary Anne Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi," *The Atlantic*, web ed., June 8, 2006.
[6] Ibid.

[7] For the relationship between al-Zarqawi and al-Maqdisi, see Joas Wagemakers, *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 215-222.

leader of Jama'at al-Tawhid w' al-Jihad (The Group for Monotheism and Jihad). For the first time as a leader, he met Osama bin Laden, who was apparently repelled by the crude brawler, more talented with a knife than he was articulate. One hears that bin Laden did not trust al-Zarqawi because of potential infiltration of his group by the famed Jordanian intelligence apparatus, but hoped to use him in some capacity, a motivation no doubt shared by al-Zarqawi himself. This time in Afghanistan, al-Zarqawi ran his own training camp near the Iranian border, which was separate from al Qaeda although it received funds from bin Laden's organization, probably on the recommendation of the military chief, the Egyptian Sayf al-Adel. Al-Zarqawi did not pledge allegiance to bin Laden in Afghanistan.[8]

With the fall of the Taliban and the dispersal of al Qaeda and its followers following a quick and effective campaign by U.S. forces and their Afghan allies, al-Zarqawi made his way to Iran before migrating in 2002 to the Kurdish area of Iraq. There, he teamed up with a small Kurdish jihadist group, Ansar al-Islam (Partisans of Islam), and prepared for the expected American invasion.[9] Now a full-blown jihadi leader with considerable battle experience and violent charisma, al-Zarqawi started to build his Jama'at al-Tawhid w' al-Jihad into the scourge it would become after the 2003 U.S. invasion. He targeted the international community, the United Nations, foreign contractors, American forces, and especially the Shia community. A harbinger of ISIS, al-Zarqawi's group specialized in the new media with videos of lurid beheadings, constant Internet communications, and hyper violent sectarian killings featuring gruesome methods like using electric drills against skulls. He attacked mosques, sacred shrines, and public gatherings of all kinds. His message and methods such as suicide bombing inflated his capabilities in the imaginations of many, including U.S. officials. In fact, however, of the five groups of insurgents against American forces and the successor government to Saddam Hussein, al-Zarqawi's was the smallest and arguably the weakest. While his group was composed of some Iraqis and foreign fighters, the other insurgent groups included Iraqis from Saddam's regime, various nationalists, tribes, and local jihadist groups. Whether or not the U.S. inflated al-Zarqawi's importance, his place in the jihadist pantheon would be fixed by his death, and he would become the mythic hero for the organizations that followed in his line.[10]

Al-Zarqawi's group was a successful magnet for foreign jihadi fighters. By 2004, the insurgency in Iraq had deprived al Qaeda's ill-fated insurgency in Saudi Arabia (begun in 2003) of the recruits bin Laden expected to be available for his highest-priority effort, overthrowing the Saudi monarchy. Saudi jihadists and their preachers wanted to fight Americans, who had pulled out of the kingdom just weeks before the launch of al Qaeda's insurgency. If a jihadi wanted to fight Americans, he

[8] Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi."

[9] Peter L. Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict Between America and al Qaeda* (New York: The Free Press, 2011), pp. 160-164.

[10] Ahmad S. Hashim, "From al Qaeda Affiliate to the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate: The Evolution of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)," policy report, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore, December 2014.

went to Iraq. By 2004, the al Qaeda effort in Saudi Arabia was already on the road to defeat, so bin Laden and al-Zawahiri negotiated with al-Zarqawi the terms of affiliation with al Qaeda. The Tawhid group became the commander of the al Qaeda organization in the "land of the two rivers," the jihadist name for Iraq. In the West, the organization was simply called al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Despite his pledge to bin Laden, al-Zarqawi was fully independent and did not follow direction from either bin Laden or al-Zawahiri, who became increasingly concerned about his indiscriminate violence against other Muslims as a course that would inevitably backfire. Referring to the videos of beheadings, al-Zawahiri presciently advised, "Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim population who love and support you will never find palatable are the scenes of slaughtering the [Muslim] hostages."[11]

It is important to view al-Zarqawi's career as a model on multiple levels for the Islamic State group. Again and again, one can perceive the mafia-like criminal enterprise beneath the extremist religious pretensions. Time and again, ISIS uses religion to justify violent attacks against noncombatants, which most Muslims find inexcusable, while the apparatus for terrorism is funded by bank robberies, looting of artifacts, the slave market, kidnapping, and extortion, as well as smuggling and trafficking of all kinds, including petroleum, antiquities, and even people. The inventive use of social media, publicizing atrocities resembling what nineteenth-century anarchists called the "propaganda of the deed" to attract recruits to the movement, and the preference for the knife over the gun or sword for wanton executions are all traits of al-Zarqawi, a man who was more comfortable with the knife than with the Kalashnikov. So it should not be surprising that after his 2006 death in an American airstrike, his organization maintained many of his traits and tactics, including the penchant for changing the name of his organization when circumstances warranted.

### ii. From Al Qaeda in Iraq to the Islamic State in Iraq to ISIS

In January 2006, AQI formed what was called the Mujahedeen Shura (advice) Council. Through it, the group hoped to draw in local jihadist groups, which were estranged from al-Zarqawi's indiscriminate violence and violation of tribal customs. The council was not effective. After al-Zarqawi's death, AQI became the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) in mid-October, a designation that went beyond anything al Qaeda had claimed for itself and to which a number of local jihadist groups and other insurgents objected. The new name in effect declared the transnational Salafi jihadist group the core of a state to replace Iraq and demoted other factions of the insurgency to supporters of the new state.

AQI's leadership had become blurred even before ISI was declared. The new leader, whose existence was questioned by many observers, was Abu Omar al-Baghdadi. The more likely leader was a man with the *nom de guerre* Abu Hamza al-Muhajir. Some argued that both names were aliases for an Egyptian, Abu Ayyub al-Masry, who was close to al-Zawahiri.[12] In any case, both Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and Abu Hamza

[11] Quoted in Bergen, *The Longest War*, p. 167.

[12] Eben Kaplan, "Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, Zarqawi's Mysterious Successor (aka Abu Ayub al-Masri)," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, June 13, 2006.

al-Muhajir apparently were killed during a joint raid by Iraqi and American forces on April 18, 2010. The general decapitation operations continued across Iraq. In June 2010, the U.S. commander in Iraq, General Ray Odierno, told a Pentagon news conference that 80% of ISI leaders had been killed or captured.[13]

However, at the nadir of ISI's fortunes in June 2010, a new and apparently much more effective leader emerged—Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was soon to become known to his followers as Caliph Ibrahim. Unlike al-Zarqawi and al Qaeda's top leadership, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was not only an experienced field jihadi but also claimed to have received a religious education, with the equivalent of a Ph.D. in Islamic law. He had been captured by American forces in 2004 and interned in Camp Bucca, but was released in less than a year because he was not considered important enough or dangerous enough to keep in custody. Although ISI was significantly weakened by 2010, its foreign leadership had been replaced with Iraqis like al-Baghdadi.

He was born Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri near Samarra, Iraq, in 1971. Most of al-Baghdadi's biography, however, should be seen as more propaganda than history; ISI spokesmen and clerics carefully crafted his biography to match the preferred characteristics of a caliph. Thus, he was described as a descendent of the Prophet Mohammad, a member of the Prophet's tribe, the Quraysh, and both a man of religion and a leader in battle. If propaganda and organization may be considered al-Baghdadi's greatest strengths as a leader, his clandestine nature is no doubt his greatest survival skill.

Al-Baghdadi and his closest circle planned a comeback strategy that could be rolled out as U.S. forces pulled out of combat and then left Iraq. In 2011, two significant events occurred: the anticipated withdrawal of American forces from Iraq and the unanticipated full-scale insurrection against Bashar al-Assad in Syria in the context of the Arab Spring. Still nominally affiliated with al Qaeda, al-Baghdadi funded and sent Abu Muhammad al-Jolani into Syria in August 2011 to set up an organization that became operational long before it emerged as Jabhat al-Nusra in January 2012 in Aleppo.[14]

Al-Jolani was a Syrian who took his time to set up a credible insurgent organization viewed by other rebels as both effective and authentically Syrian. He hid his allegiance to al Qaeda and ISI. It appears that he was following a strategy championed by al-Zawahiri, very much Mao's or Che Guevara's strategy of seeking local support for guerrilla warfare against a strong central government, perceived as tyrannical. This was not new to al Qaeda and belonged as much to bin Laden as it does to al-Zawahiri, but it was more successful than al Qaeda's previous attempts in Saudi Arabia or North Africa. Moreover, it had the advantage initially of falling outside of American concern. How did all that change?

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had been part of AQI and ISI, quietly learning and organizing. He had likely never been important enough to pledge allegiance

[13] "U.S. Says 80% of al Qaeda Leaders in Iraq Removed," June 4, 2010, www.bbc.co.uk.

[14] Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside The Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015).

to al-Zawahiri, although his allegiance had been assumed and he had no reason to break with the organization. He also either felt no need to ask permission or at least thought it unwise to when, in April 2013, he declared that he had formed the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) as a single state.

He must have felt strongly prepared with arrangements with tribal groups in Iraq and the solid support he had within ISI leadership and rank and file. He was fulfilling not only al-Zawahiri's call for an Islamic emirate in the heart of Muslim lands but also al-Zarqawi's visions of the rebirth of Imad al-Din al-Zangi's emirate. This stretched from Mosul to Aleppo and marked the "turning point in favor of the Islam" during the Second Crusade.[15] In addition, as the propagandist-in-chief, al-Baghdadi saw the utility of the popular prophesies calling for an Armageddon in an area north of Aleppo called Dabiq and the associations with the hero Saladin, who defeated the Christians and overturned the Shia caliphate in Egypt.

The wildly successful al-Jolani did not want to be merged into the new organization and appealed to al-Zawahiri for help. In June 2013, al-Zawahiri called for ISI to fight in Iraq and Jabhat al-Nusra to fight in Syria, without merging. After all, there was no need to merge when both were part of the umbrella of al Qaeda. When al-Baghdadi rejected al-Zawahiri's unenforceable decision, the al Qaeda chief in October 2013 formally declared ISI, now ISIS, to be separate from al Qaeda in every sense.[16]

ISIS, however, refused to be disbanded. Using traditional guerrilla tactics coupled to semi-conventional army tactics, it became the most successful jihadist group in Syria and set about setting up a proto-state with its capital in al-Raqqa. ISIS mainly avoided Syrian regular forces, which were slowly grinding down the Syrian insurgents in a costly war of attrition. ISIS fought only when it could win, and that was mostly against other jihadist groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra. After securing its base in Syria, ISIS focused its attention on Iraq in June 2014.

The newly energized group reactivated old networks within major cities and surrounding areas in the majority-Sunni provinces and proceeded with a jihadist version of blitzkrieg. The ultimate prize was strategically and historically significant Mosul, which fell to ISIS on June 10, 2014. About 800 to 1,000 ISIS fighters took the city of two million people when Iraqi forces comprising two divisions of approximately 30,000 soldiers fled after initial skirmishes.[17] In the following days, ISIS went on to capture a number of strategic Sunni towns, such as Tikrit, and the oil refinery town of Baiji. Soon, most of the so-called Sunni triangle was under attack or under ISIS control.

The lightning campaign was so successful that on the first day of Ramadan (June 28), the spokesman for ISIS declared that the *Khilafah* (caliphate) had been revived under the

[15] See Philip K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, 10th ed. rev. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p.644 ff.

[16] Hashim, "From al Qaeda Affiliate to the Rise of the Islamic Caliphate."

[17] "Iraq Army Capitulates to ISIS Militants in Four Cities," June 11, 2014, www.theguardian.com.

Caliph Ibrahim, the Commander of the Faithful, previously known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[18] The Sykes-Picot era borders between Syria and Iraq were erased and the Islamic State was born, bearing the slogan "Remaining and Expanding."

### Discussion Questions

1. When al-Baghdadi sent Abu Muhammad al-Jolani to Syria and funded his startup organization, this organization initially fell outside of American concern. What steps might be taken to help focus on and prevent similar startups?

2. How might the U.S. and its allies have better exploited the emerging split between al-Baghdadi (ISIS) and al-Jolani (al-Nusra)?

3. By killing al-Zarqawi, the U.S. severely weakened the capabilities of al Qaeda in Iraq, yet only a few years later, al-Baghdadi was able to revive AQI and radically expand its size and influence under the label of IS. What factors account for this dramatic success?

4. The "surge" in Iraq came close to destroying AQI. What might have been some cost-effective steps the U.S. could have taken to finish the job?

5. ISIS has destroyed the Sykes-Picot border between Syria and Iraq, established by France and Great Britain after World War I. Can the borders ever be redrawn as they once were? Would a different configuration be achievable today? If so, what?

[18] "Khilafah Declared," *Dabiq: The Return of Khilafah* 1 (June-July 2014): 6-9.

## B. Analytical Framework: Jihadist Strategy and Social Movement Theory

There is no doubt that ISIS is heir to al Qaeda's legacy. ISIS has adopted al Qaeda's theory and doctrine of revolutionary war and the strategy and tactics derived from classical guerrilla warfare doctrine as practiced by Mao Tse Tung and other revolutionary guerrilla warfare theorists. In the late 1990s, a jihadist theorist who adopted the pseudonym Abu Ubayd al-Qurashi, and was later part of al Qaeda, defined revolution as:

> a comprehensive and fundamental change to the political order, social structure, economic ownership, and the standing social order. Revolution also means the attempt of a nongovernmental group to take control of the government in order to establish a new political social and economic structure.[19]

Both al Qaeda and ISIS are attempting such an overthrow of the existing order on a global basis. Both organizations not only intend to revive the ancient Islamic caliphate based on the model that existed in the seventh century; they also want to expand its geographic scope beyond all historic precedents. To answer the question of whether ISIS is Islamic or a perversion of Islam, one may say with confidence that ISIS, like al Qaeda, is pursuing a revolution within Islam first; after winning that war, both organizations intend to impose the

[19] See translation in Michael W. S. Ryan, *Decoding Al Qaeda's Strategy: The Deep Battle Against America* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 270

results of this revolution on the rest of the world. As one would expect, much of what makes ISIS the group it has become is identical to al Qaeda as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri conceived it.

Like the current al Qaeda organization, ISIS is influenced by two major jihadist authors, Abu Mus'ab al-Suri and Abu Bakr Naji. Al-Suri is best known for his magnum opus, *The Global Call to Islamic Resistance*, which documents modern jihadist history and makes recommendations for the future, including a theory of small-unit and individual terrorism, often referred to as lone-wolf terrorism by Western authorities. Pseudonymous Abu Bakr Naji, also a member of al Qaeda, wrote a important strategic manual, *The Administration of Savagery,* that both al Qaeda and ISIS are known to use to give recruits a broad overview of the strategy to create the modern Islamic emirates that will replace existing governments. Both authors/strategists provide extensive materials to aid understanding the similarities and differences between ISIS and al Qaeda, as well as their strengths and weaknesses. However, if the two groups' identities are shared to such a great extent, how does ISIS differ from al Qaeda?

To begin to answer this question, it is useful to examine ISIS in light of the elements of a template developed by Abu Mus'ab al-Suri based on his exhaustive analysis of historical jihadist organizations from an insider's perspective. He identified five prerequisites for a clandestine jihadist group:

1. *Manhaj* (program or methodology): How do they apply their belief structure to society? What is the concept and driving ideology to which its members adhere?
2. *Qiyadah* (leadership): Who are they? What are their connections to other forces hostile to democracy and the United States?
3. *Mukhattat* (strategy or road map): Are they following a recognizable pattern or strategic plan to achieve goals?
4. *Tamwil* (funding): What are their sources? How do they identify the means to achieve their goals?
5. *Bay'ah* (allegiance): Is their allegiance to a local or external individual, or to an external group?[20]

After examining ISIS by applying an insider's analysis, an outsider's view may be obtained by using concepts derived from social movement theory (SMT). SMT is not a single theory; rather, it is a broad term used to capture the various interdisciplinary approaches within social science to examine why and how social movements form, mobilize resources, frame issues, and use networks to affect a social or political outcome. Much of SMT is irrelevant to the study of ISIS and jihadism in general. However, scholars have used specific SMT concepts to study Islamic activism with some success.[21]

The three concept pairs that are most useful to the analysis of al Qaeda and ISIS are culture and framing; violence

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[20] For a discussion of al-Suri's analysis, see *ibid*., p. 242.

[21] For example, see Mohammed M. Hafez and Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Violence and Contention in the Egyptian Islamic Movement," Diane Singerman, "The Networked World of Islamist Social Movements," and Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, "Interests, Ideas, and Islamist Outreach in Egypt," in Quintan Wiktorowicz (ed.), *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2004).

and contention; and networks and alliances. Culture and framing is most useful for analysis of the ISIS group's successful propaganda and mobilization strategy. The use of violence in political contention is an important barometer of the level of violence used by ISIS to achieve its strategic goals of capturing and holding territory in the heart of traditional Muslim lands. Similarly, the distinction between networks and alliances can explain how ISIS and its components can form and break alliances at the strategic level while sharing the same networks with other groups at a tactical level, whether the networks involve criminal smuggling enterprises or shared guerrilla operations.

## Discussion Questions

1. How can al-Suri's five prerequisites for a clandestine jihadist group—program, leadership, strategy, funding, and allegiance—be used to analyze Islamic State's strengths and vulnerabilities?

2. Some analysts have referred to ISIS as generating a civil war within Islam. How does al-Qurashi's definition of revolution apply?

3. Is ISIS fomenting a civil war for leadership in a territory or establishing the basis for a revolution? Explain.

## II. How ISIS Adapts al Qaeda's Doctrine and Strategy of Guerrilla Warfare

Most accounts of ISIS military operations in Syria and Iraq tend to emphasize the lurid brutality shown to its victims rather than its less newsworthy tactics. In this context, ISIS appears to be quite different from al Qaeda, at least in theory. At the same time, a careful examination of ISIS operations reveals that its military and political doctrine comes from the documented experiences of decades of jihadist insurrections, as interpreted by al Qaeda ideologues. ISIS learned from these experiences vicariously and added its own formative lessons from its own losses to U.S. and allied forces in Iraq to create a new approach to creating its so-called Islamic state and caliphate.

### A. Guerilla Doctrine: Lessons Learned

In the autumn of 2001, Alan Cullison, on assignment from the *Wall Street Journal,* ventured into northern Afghanistan to write about the U.S.-assisted war against the Taliban. Cullison's historic trip almost ended in one of the steep passes through the Hindu Kush mountain range. The old pickup truck the journalist had rented lost its brakes on a steep hill, crashed into the back of a Northern Alliance fuel truck, and turned over onto its side to continue its skid. The baggage slid into the gorge. Miraculously, none of the passengers, including "a Japanese journalist, two Afghan interpreters, the driver, and a shoeless boy who had been riding on the roof and wiping dust from the windshield,"[22] were seriously injured. One of Cullison's interpreters, however, suffered a sharp blow to the ribs from what turned out to be the journalist's laptop, which was destroyed in the collision.

Finding himself in Kabul with other journalists covering what was the downfall of the Taliban regime without his laptop, Cullison soon wearied of dictating dispatches over his satellite phone and set out to find a new computer in a city in which that was a rare commodity. After a series of inquiries, the journalist finally found an enterprising thief, who had been watching the al Qaeda offices. Every day, Mohammad Atef, al Qaeda's military chief, entered the office building carrying a laptop computer. On the day before al Qaeda fled Kabul before the Northern Alliance and American entry into the city, the thief climbed over the wall surrounding the building and found the laptop and a desktop computer, which he took. Cullison turned the newly purchased computers over to U.S. authorities, who examined them before returning both. The laptop was curiously empty, but the desktop, which had belonged to Ayman al-Zawahiri, contained almost 1,000 documents dating to as early as 1997.

These documents included working papers, letters, business forms, checklists for interrogations, and a draft of al-Zawahiri's unpublished writings. One of the working papers, which seemed to be written for the al Qaeda leader rather than by him, was an untitled treatise on guerrilla warfare filed under the file name ALKAER in a folder entitled "security." A close examination of this untitled manuscript reveals that large

[22] Cullison, "Inside Al-Qaeda's Hard Drive," *The Atlantic*, September 2004. http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2004/09/inside-al-qaeda-s-hard-drive/303428/

sections are verbatim, unattributed quotes from the Arabic translation of American Robert Taber's book *The War of the Flea,* thus linking the thought of al Qaeda's top leadership to the study of twentieth-century left-wing guerrilla insurrections inspired by the writings and examples of revolutionary leaders like Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevara, and Vietnamese general Vo Nguyen Giap.

Although the manuscript found in al-Zawahiri's computer was anonymous, it is most likely the work of Abu Mus'ab al-Suri. The style of writing and presentation resembles his extensive published works; moreover, al-Suri taught Taber's book in lectures on guerrilla warfare in Peshawar and the training camps in Afghanistan, and refers to Taber's book as the best work on guerrilla warfare. Major al Qaeda strategists refer to it as well. The book can be found online in its Arabic translation as *The War of the Oppressed* with al-Suri's commentary in the footnotes. The word translated as "oppressed" in Arabic may also be translated literally as "those deemed to be weak"; thus, the war of the guerrilla is the war of those who are deemed to be weak, like the insignificant flea, but who are actually a deadly force.

One of the strengths of Taber's book that al-Suri seems to have absorbed is that it documents what makes revolutionary wars succeed and what makes them fail. Al-Suri spent years analyzing why jihadist insurrections generally failed, and his studies on Algeria and Syria, as well as his 2004 *Call to Global Islamic Resistance,* emphasize the importance of learning from past mistakes.[23] Al-Suri believed that jihadists following the Muslim Brotherhood model had not studied previous examples of jihadist struggles to learn from their mistakes as well as their rare successes. His commentary has been influential in al Qaeda's thinking from its earliest days until today, and this work can be considered to have guided Syrian rebels against Bashar al-Assad. Al-Suri influenced al-Zarqawi and should be seen as a major influence on ISIS.

The following description of the stages of guerrilla warfare is from this case study author's translation of introductory material of the ALKAER document, before introducing examples from Taber's book.

### First Stage: Attrition

The first stage of guerrilla warfare is described as composed of classic hit-and-run tactics used by guerrillas in insurrections, in preparation for the larger struggle to come. The mujahedeen's aim here to weaken the central government's hold on the periphery. The ALKAER document describes this stage as the equivalent of Mao's metaphor of the "war of the flea" in which the weak flea, by means of its escalating numbers and numerous bites, first drives the powerful but helpless dog mad, and eventually kills it. The most important component of this stage, however, is political activity and propaganda to gain the support of the population.

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[23] For more on the significance of Taber's book to al-Suri and other jihadi strategists see Ryan, *Decoding al Qaeda's Strategy*; for an in-depth study of al-Suri's life and thought, see Brynjar Lia, *Architect of Global Jihad: The Life of al Qaeda Strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). See also Andrew Black, "Al-Suri's Adaptation of Fourth-Generation Warfare Doctrine," *Terrorism Monitor* 4, no. 8 (September 26, 2006).

### Second Stage: Equilibrium

"Equilibrium" is the somewhat misleading term that describes the evolution of a guerrilla war (or war of resistance) into a stage in which the mujahedeen have acquired heavy weapons and begin to form more conventional or semi-conventional forces. These forces are strong enough to attack larger enemy forces, well-defended military installations to which government forces have withdrawn, and even cities. Meanwhile, guerrilla attacks continue as before, and political/propaganda operations continue or increase.

### Third Stage: Decision

Stage three is characterized by a decisive battle or series of battles leading to the total defeat of the government and the surrender or flight of government forces. The ALKAER document points out that this stage is almost never reached because governments tend to collapse and their forces surrender before the decisive battle.

In addition to presenting this brief description of the three stages of guerrilla warfare, the ALKAER author continues to demonstrate that the correct approach to this type of warfare is not academic and is not as tidy as the description would suggest. The author of the document points out that the concept may succeed in one land and not in another: the experience of one people with insurrection is not necessarily transferable to another people or another country. Geography, economics, and even the population's susceptibility to ideology vary from country to country. The watchword for success is flexibility and the ability to adapt to local circumstances in executing a strategic plan, a lesson that ISIS has clearly learned and one that has allowed it to have more success in a short period of time.

The influence of al Qaeda's thinking on ISIS can be seen in the adaptation of Mao's doctrine that guerrillas must be prepared to trade space for time. ISIS generally is ready to surrender one place in order to retreat and gain time to regroup, rebuild, and attack again in another place. This approach has the net effect of hurting its enemy's morale and confidence at the same time as it builds morale among ISIS troops. The ALKAER document clearly states this concept:

> We need to gain time to obtain new guerrilla units and supporters; and we need to gain time to obtain the people's trust. We need to gain time to attack the regime politically—politics before military as the saying goes—the mere existence of a guerrilla in a district in itself is a victory and challenges the regime. Therefore, we sacrifice space to obtain time.[24]

The three-stage guerrilla war described in ALKAER shows the strong influence of Mao and Che Guevara.[25] It is representative of the three-stage descriptions of jihadist warfare in major al Qaeda writers on the subject, which ISIS adapted for its strategy in Syria and

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[24] The author of this case study translated the above passage from the unpublished ALKAER.DOC, pp. 2-4; he received comments from a native speaker who wishes to remain anonymous.

[25] To see another example of an al Qaeda leader's view of three-stage guerrilla warfare espoused by Mao, see Norman Cigar, *Al-Qa'ida's Doctrine for Insurgency: 'Abd Al-'Aziz Al-Muqrin's "A Practical Course for Guerrilla War"* (Washington, DC: Potomac, 2009).

Iraq. **The importance of gaining time to produce the political outcome ISIS desires cannot be overstated.** To cite just one circumstance, one can see that ISIS generally uses its guerrilla strategy and tactics to gain time and break the momentum of the political military narrative against it. One can see this in periods when ISIS has lost significant battles like Kobane in Syria or Tikrit in Iraq. To counter the coalition narrative after losing Tikrit to the Iraqi government (aided by American air power), for example, ISIS moved on another axis to achieve a surprise success and drove Iraqi forces out of Ramadi. To achieve this, it relied on suicide bombers in explosive-laden trucks and small groups of hardened guerrilla fighters to rout an arguably more powerful force, in greater numbers and with superior equipment. While ISIS may not have expected to be able to hold Ramadi indefinitely, it changed the narrative of losing to coalition forces and gained time to rebuild morale and recruit more forces.

To develop a greater understanding of ISIS's doctrine for insurgency, it is helpful to examine another of al-Suri's works that analyzes lessons he learned from the Muslim Brotherhood's previous insurgency in Syria.

### i. Al-Suri's Lessons Learned from Syria

As a young man, al-Suri participated in the Muslim Brotherhood's insurrection in Syria, which ended in failure in 1982. He established his bona fides as a jihadist strategist with his lengthy history of the insurgency, published in 1991 as *The Islamic Jihadist Revolution in Syria*. Part of that history was published as a separate manual entitled "Observations on the Jihadist Experience in Syria,"[26] which he used for training jihadists. Al-Suri detailed what he called seventeen bitter lessons from the failed insurgency and the one positive lesson from the jihadist perspective: namely, that an organization could mobilize a Muslim population under the Muslim banner, even against great odds. However, mobilizing the population without a great deal of preparation was a betrayal of that population by the jihadist leadership.

The major failure by the Muslim Brotherhood was the lack of a strategic concept and plan for victory against the regular and irregular forces of a Middle Eastern praetorian state. Not having an overarching concept led to all the bitter lessons that al-Suri judged to be why the insurrection failed. For example, without an overarching narrative and strategic plan, leaders cannot explain their ideology and objectives to their foot soldiers; they cannot transform Salafi preachers into jihadists; and consequently they are unable to devise a powerful internal and external propaganda program, without which any guerrilla war is bound to fail. Al-Suri also believed that a successful revolution, which is what Salafi jihadists seek, must learn from previous lessons.

It is clear that both ISIS and al Qaeda have addressed these mistakes. Both have a strategic concept that works for them, although ISIS has been able to leapfrog al Qaeda in propaganda. Another interesting observation is that the Muslim Brotherhood was thought to have accepted too many recruits when the Syrian regime pressed them militarily,

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[26] For a further analysis of al-Suri's observations, see Ryan, *Decoding Al Qaeda's Strategy*, pp. 198-199.

and that this allowed the regime's intelligence services to infiltrate the group to gain tactical and strategic intelligence. Clearly both ISIS and al Qaeda have well-conceived vetting programs and keep their inner circles small. Furthermore, both ISIS and al Qaeda execute accused spies on a regular basis as a warning to others.

A good indication of why the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has done relatively poorly, relative to either al Qaeda or ISIS, in the current uprising against the Syrian government is that they have not learned from al-Suri's observations. For example, the FSA's political leadership is outside the theater of operations; they depend on external states for support; they deal regularly with neighboring regimes; and of course they are devoid of any discernible ideology. Also, it is unclear what they would do if, contrary to expectations, they were to succeed against the Syrian government. Both al Qaeda and ISIS have been able to engage religious leaders successfully, and both have been able to forge alliances with powerful local tribes, even though these alliances could well be fragile in the longer term.

There are lessons outlined by al-Suri that ISIS has addressed better than al Qaeda. For example, al-Suri warned against engaging in a long war of attrition with the central government. So far, ISIS has generally avoided long set battles and sieges against either the Syrian or the Iraqi governments, whereas al Qaeda has engaged in sieges. The glaring exception for ISIS was their disastrous attempt to take over the Kurdish town of Kobane, which ended in defeat by a combination of Kurdish ground forces and American air strikes on January 26, 2015, after months of heavy fighting. On the other hand, al Qaeda initially had a superior capability to mount terrorist attacks outside of Syria and Iraq as a jihadist version of deterrence, especially against Europeans and the U.S., although ISIS is working to improve its capabilities in this area.

The greatest failure of both ISIS and al Qaeda in their efforts in Syria and potentially in Iraq is the lack of unity among the various jihadist movements. The constant warfare among competing groups inevitably weakens the effort in Syria. One could argue that ISIS and al Qaeda engage in a periodic war of attrition against one another, which is greatly to the advantage of the Assad regime. Despite the ISIS group's success with tribal groups, success depends on the tribes seeing ISIS as a better bet than either Damascus or Baghdad. Over time, tribal groups could see ISIS as a bad choice, but that would require more than ISIS blunders; it would require central governments to change their policies and overcome deep-rooted animus and lack of trust on the part of the tribes.

Finally, despite their minor successes, neither ISIS nor al Qaeda has been able to win over or neutralize the Kurds in either Syria or Iraq. The net effect of this failure is that both jihadist groups have serious and able fighters threatening their flanks. The Kurds are not enough to overcome ISIS, but ISIS can never quite achieve its goals as long as determined, hostile Kurdish Peshmerga forces threaten the consolidation of ISIS gains.

### ii. Al-Suri's *Call to Global Islamic Resistance* Model

> The weakness was not in the methods of the organizations or in the organizations [themselves] in a general sense. On the contrary, it was the changing times and the givens of the new reality after 1990 that made these methods obsolete. I used a metaphor to

> clarify what I mean in some of [my] lectures in Afghanistan and I will return to it here.
>
> So, [imagine] you have an electric machine that is excellent, powerful and outstanding! But it works only on an old electric system of 110 volts; then, as happened in our countries, there is a complete changeover of electric power providers to 220 volts.
>
> Then, what happens if you were to insist on using it? The machine will be consumed by fire; your electric system will be destroyed and perhaps you will be electrocuted in the bargain! It goes without saying that the weakness is not with the machine itself, for it is flawless and perfect for its time, but the surrounding new circumstances made it obsolete. Its natural place became a museum in a corner of a vault as a relic from the past. And your love of it, your beautiful memories with it, and the fact that it is a legacy from your parents will not change the reality at all.[27]

Abu Mus'ab al-Suri used the metaphor above in his last major work, *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, less than a year before Pakistani authorities captured him in 2005. He intended this work to be his encyclopedic legacy of jihadist history and doctrine for future jihadists to study. He had been a jihadist for his entire adult life, starting with the Muslim Brotherhood insurrection in Syria until his sojourn with Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which ended in his flight from Afghanistan after the American overthrow of the Taliban government. He had written histories of the major jihadist activities, including works on Syria, Algeria, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Central Asia. He became convinced that a jihadist insurrection based in one country, such as Egypt or Algeria, could not succeed after the U.S. emerged as the single global superpower after the fall of the Soviet Union. A jihadist insurrection based on a regional approach had a better chance; however, the only real hope for jihadists involved a globally networked effort. Al-Suri had great respect for the power of the modern U.S. military; he did not believe American forces, bolstered by their system of global alliances, could be defeated by traditional clandestine organizations anywhere.

For years, Al-Suri urged jihadists to think in terms of a system rather than an organization. In his *Call to Global Islamic Resistance*, he described an ideal model for such a system of jihad, which he recognized would need to be adjusted to changing world conditions, just as the old single-country clandestine organization had to be abandoned in the face of the American-led coalition of modern allies. Al-Suri recommended a system in which jihadists would unite under a global model with three components, which he referred to as circles: (1) a clandestine central leadership circle; (2) a coordination circle, which would be a collection of "open front" regional jihadist insurrections; and (3) a "call" circle, composed of individual and small-cell terrorism behind enemy lines. These enemy lines could be Europe, the U.S., or anywhere Muslims felt compelled to contribute to global resistance to the

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[27] Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, *Call to Global Islamic Resistance (Da'wah al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyyah al-Alamiyyah),* Part 2 (n.p.: December 2004), p. 1359; translated in Ryan, *Decoding Al Qaeda's Strategy* (2013), p. 223

modern world order as jihadists, their only allegiance to the jihadist resistance.

The system that most resembles al-Suri's model today is al Qaeda's, led by al-Suri's old friend and leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. The central circle is the clandestine al Qaeda Central, based in South Asia. The coordination circle approximates al Qaeda's system of affiliates and associated groups. Finally, the call circle approximates the small cells and individual jihadists often referred to in the U.S. as lone-wolf terrorists. However, a "lone wolf" is not what al-Suri had in mind. In fact, his model was based on lone-wolf jihadists, but he thought that such random acts had no political or systematic effect. His system was meant to coordinate the activities of small-cell terrorists with the policies of the central circle. This coordination was to be carried out by what we refer to as affiliates, al-Suri's coordination circle. For security reasons, the coordination circle would need to minimize its contact with the isolated call cells. This contact at a maximum would involve initial funding and training by what al-Suri called a builder cell. At a minimum, the call cell would have no contact of any kind with the rest of the circle and would fund itself and train itself using materials provided on the Internet. One need only think of the role of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in providing inspirational and instructional materials online for the Boston Marathon bombers in 2013 or, reportedly, initial funding for the Paris conspirators who attacked the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine offices on January 7, 2015. We should expect, however, that in many cells there would also be an initial facilitator who pushes individuals into radicalization but is not personally an attacker, and may in fact commit no acts that would allow criminal prosecution.

The other system that resembles al-Suri's model is the ISIS group's self-styled caliphate. This has a semi-clandestine center surrounding the self-proclaimed *khalifa* (caliph); a series of provinces, similar to affiliates, in Libya, Algeria, and the Sinai, for example; and growing indications of the presence of lone-wolf terrorists in the U.S. and Europe. By using al-Suri's template as a guide to the basic requirements of a jihadist group, one can see how ISIS distinguished itself from al Qaeda and previous groups.

## Discussion Questions

1. The untitled paper found in al-Zawahiri's laptop—most likely al-Suri's work—describes three stages of guerrilla warfare. What steps could a government take to keep the first stage of guerrilla warfare (attrition through hit-and-run tactics used by the guerrillas) from devolving into the second stage (equilibrium between the mujahedeen and government forces)?

2. Al-Suri's jihadist global model has three components: (1) a clandestine central leadership circle; (2) a coordination circle of regional jihadist insurrections; and (3) a "call" circle of individual and small-cell terrorism behind enemy lines. In what ways do al Qaeda and the Islamic State follow this model? In what ways do they diverge from this model?

3. Develop a counterstrategy to attack the three key components of al-Suri's model outlined above.

4. How important is the role of politics for a government facing guerrilla warfare? What kind of political messages have worked in the past? What differences, if any, should there be between political messaging during a conflict with jihadists versus political messaging against a more familiar left-wing insurgency?

5. Setting the differences in their ideologies aside, how would you compare the ISIS group's conduct of war with Mao's wars against Japan and Nationalist Chinese forces, or any other left-wing insurrection with which you are familiar?

## B. Guerilla Doctrine: Al-Suri's Template and ISIS

The first building block of a jihadist organization is what al-Suri, like other jihadists, calls a *manhaj*, which is a program, methodology, or guiding ideology around which the members convene. Al-Zawahiri has always claimed that al Qaeda follows the *manhaj al-nubuwah,* or the prophetic program, which attempts to return Islam to the seventh-century governance of the first followers of the Prophet Mohammad, which the al Qaeda leader calls the "Rightly Guided Caliphate." This is exactly the *manhaj* that ISIS claims to follow, but with a key difference: For al-Zawahiri, the caliphate was a goal located somewhere in the undefined future and al Qaeda was considered an organization within the larger jihadist movement; for al-Baghdadi, on the other hand, the caliphate exists now, and he governs it as the Caliph Ibrahim.

Al-Baghdadi emphasizes the concept of community (*jama'ah*) and claims that leadership embraces both the political and religious aspects of life. Al Qaeda never claimed to be a religious organization; its leadership claimed to combine political and military leadership in Osama bin Laden, and now in Ayman al-Zawahiri, as the vanguard of the jihadist movement. One can conclude, then, that although both groups use the same words for their *manhaj*, ISIS claims to have achieved al Qaeda's goal and therefore to have supplanted al Qaeda as the leader—not just of the jihadist movement but of all Muslims, a breathtaking leap. It is difficult to see how the two groups can reunite without one of them abandoning its reason for existence.

The second building block is leadership, which includes a paramount leader to whom its members pledge allegiance (*bay'ah*), as well as an advisory council, other councils such as military and religious councils, and an administrative body. Both al Qaeda and ISIS have clearly identified structures that resemble this description, but again, ISIS has insisted that it has the elements of a state with territory and governing departments such as a consumer affairs council, an education council, and so on.

The third necessary building block is the strategic plan or roadmap that allows a jihadist organization to meet its offensive and defensive goals. Al Qaeda and ISIS share the general roadmap for creating an Islamic emirate, written in 2004 by al Qaeda strategist Abu Bakr Naji. Naji does not provide a recipe for jihadist groups to follow; instead he emphasizes that he is providing a strategic outline in broad strokes. Only a field commander can devise a strategy for a particular area based on geographic, demographic, and economic circumstances of the target area. His work, *The Administration of Savagery*, was used as a training manual for recruits, which is exactly how ISIS uses it. (See **II.c. Guerrilla Strategy: *The Administration of Savagery* as Operational Guide**.) This strategy is based on creating or taking advantage of areas in the countryside or a city that have fallen into chaos in order to drive out government troops and impose a proto-state, which Naji calls the administration of savagery. In a large countryside such as Yemen or remote areas in Syria and Iraq, a number of such

liberated areas may be created, expanded, and consolidated. There may be specific strategic plans for special circumstances as well.

ISIS devised a plan it called *Khutah Istratijiyyah li Ta'ziz al-Mawqif al-Siyasy li 'l-Dawlah al-Islamiyyah fi al-Iraq* (Strategic Plan to Strengthen the Political Position of the Islamic State in Iraq) in 2009/2010 after ISI had been decimated by a combination of attacks by American troops and the Iraqi tribal Awakening Councils (the *Sahwah*) during 2007-2008. Anticipating American troop withdrawals, it proposed to create alliances with Sunni tribes, similar to the *Sahwah* groups supported by the Americans, except this time to attack Shia communities in Iraq and central government forces and installations, which would be dominated by Shia factions. Once ISIS established itself in Syria, it followed this basic plan there as well. These well-conceived strategic approaches has given both al Qaeda and ISIS a significant advantage over other groups in Syria. On balance, ISIS has been more consistent than al Qaeda and has been able to keep the strategic upper hand and usually, but not always, comes out the winner in local tactical situations.

The fourth building block outlined by al-Suri is *tamwil* (funding). Al Qaeda and the ISIS group's funding sources are very similar, although ISIS has been much more successful in self-funding. In the past, both groups have relied on funding from oil-rich Gulf countries, not directly, but from wealthy patrons. This funding has been replaced for the most part by criminal enterprises involving smuggling, human trafficking, robbing banks, and taking war booty.[28] Perhaps because the ISIS group's founder began his career as an enterprising criminal while al Qaeda's founder was a businessman of sorts, ISIS has always had an advantage in funding from criminal enterprises like smuggling petroleum products. Since declaring itself to be the caliphate, ISIS has outstripped al Qaeda and every other jihadist group in funding itself exclusively through criminal enterprises, taxes, and fees in areas it controls.

According to the general consensus of the Western analytical community, ISIS is the richest jihadist organization, with revenues of US$2 billion to $2.5 billion per year, according to one estimate, although its expenses are much higher than that.[29] We may well assume that ISIS prioritizes its funding for operations and keeping tribal allies faithful, but it is also fair to conclude that it desperately needs large revenue streams to continue to operate at current levels.

As with al Qaeda, the U.S. government, working with its allies, has targeted the ISIS group's sources of revenue. For example, ISIS funds itself in part through the sale of antiquities of all kinds.[30] The U.S. Department of State has a program

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[28] As a result of the devastating U.S. air campaign against its central leadership, funding for al Qaeda occurs now in its affiliates. Al Qaeda Central can offer advice and guidance, but is not a source of funding.

[29] See Murad Batal al-Shishani, "The Political Economy of Islamic State and Its Financial Resources for War," *Terrorism Monitor* 12, no. 24 (December 19, 2014).

[30] See Amr Al-Azm, Salam Al-Kuntar, and Brian I. Daniels, "ISIS' Antiquities Sideline," *New York Times*, September 2, 2014; and Simon Cox, "The Men Who Smuggle the Loot That Funds IS," February 17, 2015, www.bbc.com.

to combat this source of funding, but it needs more support and a higher profile. Similarly, tightening up enforcement on smuggling, while extremely difficult, is not impossible and could have a significant effect on ISIS revenues. The most lucrative target revenue stream for ISIS in October 2014 was based on petroleum products. At that time, the U.S. Treasury Department estimated that the group's revenue from petroleum in Syria and Iraq amounted to US$1 million to $2 million per day. By December 2014, however, the revenue had tapered off significantly because of U.S. and coalition military activities.[31] On February 3, 2015, the spokesman for the Pentagon announced that "oil revenue is no longer the lead source of [ISIS's] income in dollars."[32] U.S. officials have not specified the amount of the cut, but if the international coalition could cut petroleum refining and smuggling by ISIS only by half, we could see a drop in annual revenues to ISIS on the order of US$15 million to $30 million per month.

These and other criminal activities are all known problems; efforts already exist and programs are in place to address them. Prioritizing and resourcing these programs across the spectrum of ISIS funding could pay large dividends. In addition, traditional counterinsurgency training and security assistance for local military and security elements in Iraq will continue to be necessary to ensure that local forces can eventually replace coalition forces in attacking revenue streams to ISIS.

The last of al-Suri's building blocks for a clandestine jihadist organization is the pledge of allegiance (*bay'ah*). Both organizations use the *bay'ah* to its leaders as an organizing principle. The *bay'ah* is an ancient Islamic ritual in which an individual personally swears a religiously binding pledge of fealty and obedience to a Muslim leader. In practice, this means that individuals become members of a jihadist group by pledging *bay'ah* to its leader, whom they are now bound to obey. If this leader then pledges allegiance to the leader of another group, all the pledged members of the original group are also bound to follow the leader of the other group. This system of pledges of allegiance produces a jihadist network with centralized guidance and decentralized execution, which became the hallmark of al Qaeda operations. The ISIS group's achievements on the battlefield and in propaganda has led to greater success in acquiring such pledges of allegiance from individuals and groups in, for example, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, al Qaeda still has strong allies and is expanding in South Asia to include India.

Al-Suri argued that a jihadist enterprise must adapt to circumstances. ISIS has demonstrated that it is a learning organization. Al-Suri also argued for years that jihadists should work for a global system and not an organization (*tanzim*). ISIS has stated that it is not a *tanzim* but a state. Whether it can be as adaptable as a state with a population and territory to defend remains to be seen. Destruction of the ISIS group's so-called state in Syria and Iraq likely also means destroying the carefully constructed ISIS system. On the other hand, al Qaeda currently appears to be an adaptable system composed of local organizations, any of which could be destroyed without destroying the system as a whole.

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[31] Jay Solomon, "ISIS's Oil Revenue Is Falling, Administration Says," *Washington Wire,* December 15, 2014, http://blogs.wsj.com.
[32] "Pentagon: Oil Is No Longer ISIS' Main Source of Income," February 5, 2015, http://english.alarabiya.net.

### Discussion Questions

1. Using al-Suri's analytical template for clandestine jihadist organizations, do you think that ISIS or al Qaeda will pose a greater threat to U.S. interests in the long run?

2. With al-Suri's template in mind, how would you recommend the U.S. government decrease the likelihood of a strategic alliance between al Qaeda elements in Syria and ISIS at some point in the future?

3. The U.S. government devised a sophisticated network to attack funding sources for al Qaeda. What steps would you recommend to reduce funding for ISIS?

4. Is ISIS more like a clandestine organization or more like a state? Explain.

## C. Guerrilla Strategy: *The Administration of Savagery* as Operational Guide

In his influential book, *Knights Under the Prophet's Banner* (circa 2001), Ayman al-Zawahiri demonstrates that knowledge of classic guerrilla warfare as practiced by ISIS and al Qaeda existed within the Salafi jihadist movement as early as the 1970s in Egyptian circles.[33] In 1974, nine years after the publication of Robert Taber's classic account of guerrilla warfare, a young man named Yahya Hashim came to al-Zawahiri for advice and support. Hashim was a deputy prosecutor who had turned against the Egyptian regime on religious principles and had converted to the "jihadist movement." He was especially concerned about the fate of some young officers who were engaged in a revolt in the Military Technical College. Hashim had become obsessed with the issue, following details of the case in great detail, and beginning to consider armed confrontation with the Egyptian regime via guerilla warfare. He raised this idea with al-Zawahiri, who wrote, "I did not agree and told him that the nature of the country was not suitable for this kind of warfare. Then I gave him a book about guerrilla warfare."

The young man apparently did not learn from al-Zawahiri's book. Gripped with idea of starting a guerrilla war, he shared his plan with some of his brothers. His idea was to get the officers out of jail and begin operations in the mountains near the desert in Minya Governorate, on the west bank of the Nile, about 150 miles south of Cairo. The plan was discovered, and Hashim fled to the mountains with a number of military officers. The mayor of a nearby community became suspicious of the group and informed security officials, who went after the would-be guerrillas in force. When the rebel group ran out of ammunition, the security forces seized them and Hashim was killed in the action. Al-Zawahiri praises him as a hero of the jihadist movement against the government, but remarks that the conditions favoring success for guerrilla warfare simply did not exist.

Like al Qaeda, ISIS is known to use Abu Bakr Naji's *The Administration of Savagery* to give new recruits the big picture about the strategy and tactics favored by the group they have just joined. Like al-Zawahiri, Naji is a proponent of the Salafi jihadist

[33] This vignette is based on the account Ayman al-Zawahiri gave in his book *Fursan Tahta Rayah al-Nabi* (Knights Under the Prophet's Banner), 1st ed. (N.p.: Al-Sahab Publishers, n.d.), chapter 4 (pagination varies in Arabic editions), http://www.tawhed.ws/a?a=3i806qpo.

movement and wrote his book as a universal guide to jihadist revolution and the creation of an Islamic emirate. Naji presents the ideal conditions for jihad to define priority states and refers his readers to studies performed by al-Suri. He uses the term "administration of savagery" to refer to the goal of setting up proto-governments in liberated areas, and gives five ideal conditions to establish these areas:

- Geographic depth and topography favorable to guerrilla operations
- Weak government unable to control peripheries or densely populated internal areas
- The nature of the people; lack of social cohesion allowing polarization
- Availability of weapons distributed among the people
- Presence of a strong and expanding jihadist movement and preachers

It is clear that Nilotic Egypt is missing several of these characteristics. Most of the country's population is confined to a thin fertile strip along the Nile. While political divisions are apparent, there still exists a high degree of social cohesion among the people and a strong identity as Egyptians. In post–Arab Spring conditions, the area is awash with weapons, but the strong central Egyptian government is able to uncover insurgent cells as they form. The Sinai, however, has much more favorable terrain for guerrillas and shows much less social cohesion. But even here, the strong central government tends to grind down the opposition, although it is hampered by lack of recent experience in counterinsurgency and a military still equipped and trained primarily for conventional warfare. The insurgency in the Sinai began as an al Qaeda enterprise calling itself Ansar Bait al-Maqdis in 2011, which increased its activity after the fall of the Morsi government in 2013. It gained much more international prominence, however, after the group pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and the insurgency was subsumed within ISIS as an Islamic State province in the Sinai, sometimes referred to as Wilayat Sina.

Abu Bakr Naji's book proposes a three-stage guerrilla strategy that mirrors the three-stage strategy found on al-Zawahiri's hard disk in Kabul and echoes the strategy proposed by the foremost strategists and practitioners of the jihadist movement. Naji's formulation is more colorful:

1. Damage and exhaustion;
2. "Administration of savagery" in liberated areas;
3. Creation of Islamic state by consolidating liberated areas.

ISIS deviated from this strategy by jumping ahead to declare itself the caliphate for all Muslims instead of stopping at an Islamic emirate. This declaration increased its ability to recruit significantly more members, but also poses problems with other jihadist groups because ISIS did not seek a consensus before moving to this end state.

When Mao Tse-tung proposed a strategy for guerrilla warfare, he felt compelled to justify using the word "strategy" to describe a tactic in warfare that was traditionally a tool of a conventional army, following a conventional strategy. Mao claimed, however, that when a territory is vast like China, guerrilla warfare "knocks at the gates of strategy."[34] In Mao's terms, guerrilla

[34] Mao Tse-Tung, *The Art of War: Special Edition*, trans. by Foreign Language Press, Peking (El Paso, Texas: El Paso Norte Press, 2005), pp. 115 -117.

warfare becomes strategic in the case of a vast but weak state, China, fighting a small but powerful country, Japan, that occupies extended areas in a protracted war. In the third decisive stage of Mao's strategy, however, conventional warfare returns and becomes primary.

In the concept of jihadists like ISIS, the Muslim *Umma* is vast but weak and is occupied by foreign powers or their client apostate states.[35] The three-stage strategy also requires conventional or at least semi-conventional forces in the third stage of consolidating liberated areas. However, as ISIS has implemented its war, the third stage may come when it "liberates" a rural area or cities such as al-Raqqa in Syria or Mosul in Iraq, or even sections within cities. The three-stage strategy is then a constant as ISIS moves from area to area, driving other forces out and whenever possible setting up its primitive government within the surrounding sea of chaos. Having no heavy industry of its own, it arms its semi-conventional forces from the arms left abandoned by its opponent.

ISIS uses guerrilla tactics throughout its campaign in Syria and Iraq. It attacks weak, isolated units for the most part and avoids stronger forces. When it attacks an isolated army installation or other fortified area, it often succeeds by using suicide bombers in the initial assault. In video after video, ISIS shows a smiling jihadist making a short speech in a large truck filled with explosives; and then, sometimes using aerial photography, ISIS shows the progress of the truck against a target until it explodes. Later, it films guerrillas in small units moving through the installation or town mopping up local forces. It avoids attrition of its own forces except when it believes it can prevail in a high-value target such as Kobane. In areas such as Baghdad, ISIS uses terrorist attacks to keep its enemy occupied, in hopes of exhausting and demoralizing their forces.

Mosul and al-Raqqa have become new safe havens and symbols of success. In both areas, but especially in Mosul, one can see the effects of criminal networks that apparently existed during al-Zarqawi's time, when his cadres extorted money and in some cases acted as contract killers. ISIS today advertises its execution of freelance robbers and drug dealers as evidence of its intent to protect the people and provide security, the bare minimum requirement to set up Naji's administration of savagery.

As ISIS has consolidated its hold on cities and villages, it has used tribal alliances and former Baathist military to provide local governance and act, in Clausewitz's term *levée en masse*, as an armed populace to oppose any encroachment by outside conventional forces or militias. Naji had advised jihadists with urban backgrounds to study tribal customs in sociological studies to allow them to deal effectively with tribes; and he had anticipated that some members of the central government could be persuaded to join the jihadist cause, much as the former military and political cadres of Saddam Hussein's government did after the U.S. invasion.

Naji had another important message: that ordinary Muslim people could not be relied on and were reluctant to join a jihadist operation because they were

[35] The Arabic word *Umma* means "community." In jihadist literature, "the Umma" refers to the virtual community of all Muslims worldwide. The ultimate goal of modern jihadist groups such as ISIS is to unite this virtual community into an actual political community under the universal Shari'ah or Islamic law.

more concerned about their daily affairs or had been co-opted by the central government. He argued that jihadists needed to use polarization to mobilize a Muslim population. In his concept, one could polarize a community by using money to gain support, especially with tribes. ISIS has certainly used this tactic. But the main means of polarization in Syria and Iraq, where al-Zarqawi made great use of it, is the Sunni-Shia divide and sectarian warfare. In other areas such as the Sinai or Libya where this sectarian division does not apply, ISIS, and al Qaeda before it, uses other polarizing issues such as factional disputes in Libya or resentment of Sinai's traditional residents against the government in Nilotic Egypt. Without polarization in an area, the ISIS group's strategy would falter. The use of terrorism and videos of violence against enemies are powerful tools in its polarizing campaigns.

The U.S. and the coalition of nations against ISIS have the traditional military and political tools to weaken the group by understanding its strategy and tactics in detail and devising means to counter them. The most difficult issue to address, however, is polarization. The U.S. has taken the first major step to address polarization in Iraq by pressing for a more inclusive government, but Syria is still elusive. If progress in Iraq is slow and uncertain, in Syria it has not even begun. The air campaign is an extremely powerful (but not sufficient) military tool and can demonstrate that ISIS is less powerful than its propaganda would have us believe. However, addressing polarization can only occur in the context of a political solution that has not been described in great enough detail for Iraq and has not been articulated at all in Syria. The convincing description of political goals needs to accompany anticipated military success to avoid having any such success becoming temporary.

The importance for ISIS of *The Administration of Savagery,* and the reason that this group still uses it in training new recruits and as a guide for regional commanders, may be because the book distills the essence of jihadist strategic thinking on insurgency up until its completion in late 2004.[36] Its lessons are cast as universal truths based on what the author calls "universal laws" of war and politics. These laws naturally describe guerrilla doctrine and tactics that were as true for al Qaeda as they were for Mao, in the author's view. The book also represents bin Laden's and al-Zawahiri's view that the United States can be driven out of the Middle East because it acts on self-interest, not principle. According to this view, if jihadists could demonstrate that the cost of staying in the region is too high in blood and treasure, the U.S. would leave the greater Middle East, and modern jihadists could then create a new empire using modern military tactics and an ancient plan of government.

Part of the cost of staying could be addressed by guerilla strategy, terrorism tactics, and brutality, which ISIS has always emphasized. Another aspect, according to Naji, is that seizing energy resources in the Middle East and North Africa would give jihadists the economic power to create the caliphate and cripple Western economies, especially the American system. Al Qaeda consistently failed to seize energy assets in the Arabian Peninsula; however, ISIS has made seizing oilfields a priority in Syria and Iraq and has succeeded to the extent that it strengthened its finances beyond any other jihadist group. Its threat to Saudi Arabia is in part to carry out bin Laden's and al-Zawahiri's greater plan.

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[36] See Ryan, *Decoding Al Qaeda's Strategy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 148.

## Discussion Questions

1. Al-Suri's definition of the ideal conditions for jihadists seems to describe conditions in both Syria and Iraq at the present time. How could the U.S. government devise a cost-effective strategy and tactics to weaken the conditions that help jihadists?

2. The jihadists' strategy is to increase the costs, in terms of both blood and treasure, of the U.S. presence in the region, thereby forcing Americans to leave the greater Middle East and allowing jihadists to fill the political vacuum. In what ways can the U.S. attack this strategy?

3. How does the ISIS group's use of brutality and terrorism line up with other insurgencies with which you are familiar? Does the level of brutality matter to the outcome ISIS seeks?

4. What steps might the U.S. take (without occupying territory) to help diminish sectarian polarization in Syria and Iraq?

## III. ISIS Group's Successful Mobilization Tactics

A crucial part of the success of ISIS in Iraq and Syria is the group's ability to continuously refresh its ranks of fighters despite heavy losses against other jihadist groups, the Kurds, the U.S.-led coalition air campaign, and regional governments. Recruiting foreign fighters to augment the ranks of local recruits is a key element of ISIS mobilization. By February 2015, U.S. officials estimated that as many as 20,000 recruits from perhaps 90 countries had joined the group.[37] The total ISIS fighting force from all sources in Syria and Iraq has been estimated to be as low as 30,000 and as high as 100,000. The estimate for all security forces, including police, could be as high as 200,000.[38]

The ISIS mobilization success so far has been based on its ability to use social media adroitly, but behind this success is a carefully constructed narrative of a foundational myth, the promise of apocalyptic victory against all enemies in the long run, and the myth of a welcoming home for all Muslim recruits in the immediate term. **Before attempting to construct a counter narrative, we must first understand its content.** The ISIS group's magazine *Dabiq* reliably reflects the group's policy and propaganda and is one also of the most accessible vehicles for its messages. Examining ISIS media content, especially *Dabiq,* reveals its key messages and its potential target audiences, the "what" of its mobilization effort.

In addition, selected Social Movement Theory concepts, best known for use in analyzing political movements in Western societies, provide analysts with tools to understand "how" ISIS mobilizes support for its political and military program.

### A. Communication Strategy

> The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify—by Allah's permission—until it burns the crusader Armies in Dabiq.

ISIS has attributed this inspirational saying to its founder Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, and it appears in every issue of the magazine *Dabiq*. *Dabiq*'s first issue explains that its name comes from the place name of an area in the northern countryside of Aleppo, which was mentioned in a *hadith* (a reported saying of the Prophet Muhammad): "The [last] Hour will not be established until the Romans land at al-A'maq or Dabiq. Then an army from al-Madinah of the best people on the earth at that time will leave for them." *Dabiq* continues the hadith as it describes an epic battle called "Malahim" in Arabic and "Armageddon" in English. The battle will be between the Muslim forces led by the Mahdi, but it will not occur until the Prophet Isa (Jesus) descends on Damascus to confront a demonic "deceiver" who is leading the people astray. His appearance signals the beginning of the end times, which open with an epic battle in which Muslims triumph over Christian forces and culminate in the glorious end times, which represent not necessarily an end but the beginning of an indefinite period

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[37] Robert Windrem, "ISIS by the Numbers: Foreign Fighter Total Keeps Growing," NBC News, February 28, 2015.

[38] See Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "How Many Fighters Does the Islamic State Really Have?," February 9, 2015, http://warontherocks.com. Gartenstein-Ross includes high and low estimates from numerous sources to conclude that official U.S. estimates of 20,000 to 31,500 fighters in ISIS are low.

during which the entire world will be Muslim.[39]

This story used by ISIS is very old and is at the heart of popular Muslim Apocalyptic tradition. Scholars sometimes refer to this tradition as the *A'maq* cycle,[40] after a series of valleys in northern Syria. Dabiq is now a small town of approximately 3,000 people, but some believe it will be the scene of the ultimate confrontation between Muslims and Christians before the last Hour. This imaginative setting is romantic and open to interpretation. Numerous books have been written about the signs of the end times and are best sellers in some parts of the Middle East.

ISIS has chosen a tradition that may be found in one of the major collections of hadiths, the *Sahih Muslim*.[41] Like all sibylline utterances, its interpretation is malleable and may fit a variety of circumstances. For example, Western troops landing in Syria would allow ISIS to call for jihad based on a hadith that anyone with access to the Internet or Islamic books could find. The hadith's interpretation connects the lands stretching from the city of Medina in Saudi Arabia in the south, through Iraq and Syria, to the borders of Turkey in the north. Other traditions connect this area in imagination to the black banners of Khorasan and the founder of ISIS, Abu Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, who came from Afghanistan (Khorasan) through Iran to Iraq, to found a proto-state that would stretch from to Iraq to Syria. To a new convert to Islam, these founding myths may be embellished to give a romantic purpose and meaning to a life full of struggles, which like all romantic quests, is full of suffering before the goal is reached.

Al-Suri in his *Call to Global Islamic Resistance* cemented this romantic quest to the jihadist tradition side by side with his military theories of jihad, devoting the end of his long book to a catalog and analysis of apocalyptic hadiths.[42] While some of these dealt with the black banner of Khorasan and the army of jihadists led by the Mahdi flooding out of the east to conquer all before them before taking Jerusalem, and were featured in some of al Qaeda's recruitment efforts, the apocalyptic tradition was never in the forefront for Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri. Now, however, ISIS is embracing it in a powerful message to its potential recruits wherever they are.

### i. ISIS and the Apocalypse

If the apocalyptic material is ancient, the ISIS group's method of delivering it is thoroughly modern and shaped to make the message suit the group's policies and recruitment efforts. ISIS has excelled in videos and glossy magazines with high production values, including professional editing of videos and high-resolution cameras for still shots. If the message is 80 percent of the struggle, it should not be surprising that ISIS takes great care in coordinating its messages and overlapping methods of delivery. The use of social media ensures that

[39] The story of Dabiq appears in greater detail in *Dabiq: The Return of Khilafah* 1 (June-July 2014).
[40] For an analysis of the ancient A'maq cycle, see David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), pp. 49-54.
[41] The hadith cited by ISIS may be found in the standard compilation of hadith, the *Sahih Muslim,* chapter 40, no. 6924.

[42] For an analysis and references to the apocalyptic tradition in al-Suri's work, see Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Apocalypse in Islam,* trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Berkeley: University of California Press 2011), pp. 184-193.

target audiences will be reached by a method that suits their circumstances. If a target population does not have ready access to computers, content targeted at smartphones offers an alternative. Where Facebook is popular, that is the chosen platform for messaging. If the smartphone is the preferred device, as it is with younger audiences, especially for recruitment, Twitter and even personal messaging are the delivery of choice. In short, all methods of delivery are available for general propaganda.

For example, the announcement of the "return" of the caliphate was handled in very carefully orchestrated fashion, including multiple languages and all available electronic forums. Online, one could read the announcement of the caliphate and its new caliph delivered by the ISIS spokesman; and then on popular commercial video platforms, one could watch a video of the inaugural speech by the new self-styled caliph in the historic mosque in Mosul. A few days later, the first issue of *Dabiq* began appearing on selected websites, and it included quotes from the new caliph about various policies that first appeared on Twitter. Generally, commercial enterprises like Twitter and YouTube will remove such postings for violating content policies, but once posted they take on a life of their own on the Internet and can be found on a variety of public and private websites and blogs.

### ii. ISIS Messaging

ISIS messaging may be lurid and overwhelming, as in the beheading videos, or it may be subtle and intended for specific audiences. For example, the first issue of *Dabiq* devoted an article to establishing that leadership means both religious and political leadership for ISIS. The article's title, "The Concept of *Imamah* (Leadership) Is From the *Millah* (Path) of Ibrahim" contains some allusions that resemble "dog whistles," or phrases with special significance to specific audiences (just as dog whistles are pitched outside the range of human hearing, where only dogs can hear them—and be trained to respond to them). For example, the statement that leadership is derived from the path or way of Ibrahim (Arabic for the Prophet Abraham) could simply mean that leadership derives from a Salafi jihadist concept of Islam, because that is what "Millah Ibrahim" means to jihadists. On the other hand, the path of Ibrahim could also allude to the other significant event announced in the magazine: the seizure of religious and political power by the new Caliph Ibrahim.

The embedded dog whistle is more obscure; *Millah Ibrahim* is the title of an important book by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, a famous jihadist religious authority and former mentor of al-Zarqawi. Al-Maqdisi turned against al-Zarqawi because of the latter's excessive and brutal violence and became an outspoken critic of ISIS. Citing this book is signaling to other jihadists, especially in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, that ISIS is claiming to have accomplished what al-Maqdisi had only spoken about. Furthermore, *Dabiq*'s apocalyptic messaging context would appeal to extremists in Saudi Arabia, who admire al-Maqdisi's works, tend toward a millenarian concept of history, and agree with his harsh criticism of the Saudi government.

*Dabiq* contains other important indications of the ISIS group's policies. For example, in describing the strategy of founder al-Zarqawi, the authors of *Dabiq* introduce the transliterated Arabic words *nikayah* (damage/terrorism), *tawahhush* (savagery or chaos), and *tamkin* (establishing the proto-state). These are ordinary words but are used as terms of

art as the three stages of jihad in *The Administration of Savagery*. The magazine also describes deals with tribal councils, part of a strategy developed by ISIS in its written plan for a comeback in Iraq in anticipation of the withdrawal of American forces, and mimics the American approach to Awakening Councils among the tribes in Iraq to decimate al Qaeda in Iraq. In the context of this strategy attributed to al-Zarqawi, ISIS outlines a five-stage roadmap it will follow to expand its proto-state. The first two stages constitute the recruitment and absorption of individuals or groups into the ISIS structure, while the last three stages echo the three-stage cycle of guerrilla warfare described by Naji and al-Suri.[43]

The first stage is the call for recruits to travel (*hijrah*) to ISIS-held areas in Syria/Iraq or other battlefields. The second stage is to join (*jama'ah*) the group and be trained and absorbed. The third stage is to engage in destabilizing the central government with terrorism and guerrilla warfare. The fourth stage is the establishment of the proto-state after government forces are withdrawn or defeated—"the administration of savagery." The final stage is the establishment of an Islamic emirate or, in the case of Syria/Iraq, the self-declared caliphate.

This sequence makes sense only if one considers that the expansion of the caliphate requires additional local and foreign recruits to be guided through the five-stage path. In Syria and Iraq, the process is mature and ISIS is fighting to survive, but in Egypt or Libya, to cite two active examples, the groups pledging allegiance to Caliph Ibrahim are in the beginning stages of the process. Anywhere ISIS exists, the stream of recruits is required to replenish its losses in its continuous armed struggle to establish its rule over new areas, consolidate those areas with previous conquests, and then continue to expand. Essentially unopposed, ISIS forces expanded rapidly in northern Iraq, subduing village after village and setting up a primitive government under its own version of Islamic law. In Syria, however, ISIS was able to consolidate its rule in al-Raqqa and increase government services to the point where it can claim to have a number of government services one would expect in a city. The most dramatic consolidation of power was between contiguous areas in Iraq and Syria after Mosul fell to ISIS forces when central government forces fled. The areas under ISIS control, however, are not static. The greatest challenge for ISIS so far has been Kurdish forces in both Syria and Iraq supported by U.S. air assets, which have managed to defeat ISIS forces and drive it out of a number of previously occupied areas. Without a strong propaganda campaign to replenish its ranks, ISIS could not sustain its momentum or continue to hold areas it has taken by force.

Space does not permit cataloging all the allusions and messages in the first issue of *Dabiq*, let alone all the messages in the following issues. Each page is carefully written and dense with messages framed for a variety of audiences that ISIS intends to reach, both friends and enemies. Even a casual reading of *Dabiq* demonstrates what one would expect from any jihadist group, that is, the holy places in Saudi

[43] ISIS is known to distribute Naji's book to regional commanders and rank-and-file recruits. See Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015), p. 40-41. In his book, Naji recommends other jihadist authors, most notably Abu Mus'ab al-Suri.

Arabia and Jerusalem are high mission priorities. A careful reading shows that, like al Qaeda, the ISIS group's doctrine follows in the Egyptian revolutionary intellectual tradition of Sayyid Qutb and Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj. This tradition places the modern concept of jihad as an individual obligation at the center of Islamic doctrine; considers all Muslims except for Salafi jihadists to be apostate; and downgrades Jews and Christians to the status of implacable enemies that are not part of the Abrahamic tradition.

### Discussion Questions

1. Much of the ISIS group's political propaganda involves the use of Islamic symbols and popular beliefs. How can the U.S. and its coalition allies counter this propaganda (for example, the use of the concept of the Apocalypse) without making matters worse? What would be the effect of ignoring this part of ISIS propaganda?

2. How important are Kurdish forces in the battle against ISIS in Iraq and Syria? Should the U.S. arm the Kurds directly, even if the governments of Iraq and Turkey object? In other words, how would you make the tradeoff between military gains against ISIS versus political complications with allies?

3. What elements would you include in an information war against ISIS?

## B. Mobilization: Social Movement Theory Concepts Applied to ISIS

Several concept pairs developed in Social Movement Theory complement the contextual analysis of ISIS's general propaganda and its targeted usage of social media for recruitment. These concepts are useful tools in assessing an organization's approach to mobilizing political forces behind its programs and provide the frameworks for questions concerning how an organization is successful in terms of its strengths and vulnerabilities. The first pair is *culture and framing*, in which organizations frame all issues in terms of the culture of the group it intends to influence. Framing can also be used to convert target populations to a political culture mobilized for action. Over time, how an organization frames issues becomes the political brand of that organization. The second concept pair is *violence and contention*. The interplay of violence and contention[44] in the political realm defines how and when violence becomes the chosen form of political contention. The last concept pair to be considered is *network and alliances*. Here, the key is the distinction between the two and the identification of when collaboration within a network is permitted under revolutionary Salafi jihadism, when an alliance is not permitted.

### i. Culture and Framing

Perhaps the strongest aspect of the ISIS group's mobilization strategy is its ability to frame its messages consistently and with cross-references across multiple social media platforms. However, as Quintan Wiktorowicz argues in his groundbreaking book *Islamic Activism*, "One of the most critical dimensions of

[44] "Contention" is used in this case study as shorthand for political contention, including the various tools available to social movements to oppose the ruling system in a particular country or region. Social movements usually have a repertoire of tools for political contention, such as trade unions, political parties, and so on. The jihadist movement generally insists that rationally organized violence must be its major political tool and rejects any other form of democratically acceptable contention as a path to its goals.

the framing process for movement mobilization is frame resonance."[45] Like other Islamist recruiting efforts, ISIS frames messages with different cultural resonance for different audiences. And like other extremist groups before it, ISIS recruiters target individuals and groups with tailored appeals, purely political appeals, appeals to victimhood, religious appeals, appeals that offer a new identity, and apocalyptic appeals. The major overarching frames include the following:

- Salafi jihadist answer to world problems (true Islam)
- Fulfillment of end-times prophesies (apocalyptic adventure)
- Answer to unjust U.S. and its client tyrants (caliphate as powerful winner)
- Benign community of believers (paradise for lost millennials)
- Avenger of racial and ethnic humiliation (revenge and rebirth for victims)
- Best bet to survive (protector in war theaters)

ISIS framing exercises will change with changing events. The vocabulary and symbols will vary with audience. These appeals may be single source or mixtures such as *Dabiq* offers. What is new and a distinctive competitive advantage for ISIS is its ability to match the medium to the preferences of the target audience—in other words, it chooses the medium and message that resonates best with the target audience. In the case of recruitment, the framing may begin with a general framing on radical websites and Facebook using themes such as the alleged victimization of Muslims in wars the U.S. or its allies have fought. A general appeal using the usual framing of events in Iraq, Syria, or other areas with a majority Muslim population may be part of a broad radicalization effort. The appeal may be sharpened by Twitter offerings in English that target a young audience in a specific country. Finally, if individuals self-identify with specific concerns, ISIS operatives may target them with personal messages to their phones or email accounts to continue the radicalization process. These might be totally political in nature or may have a religious cast. Where conditions permit, recruiters may offer these messages in person in a way that may be protected by laws allowing freedom of speech. If the message is religious, the target will be someone who may identify as a Muslim but does not know much about Islam beyond clichés.

The distinctive framing used by ISIS, which is different from all other radical groups currently, is its self-identification as the caliphate for all Muslims. One of its most powerful appeals to lost souls is its representation of its Syrian capital, al-Raqqa, as a peaceful community of believers where every race and ethnicity is treated with respect and given a purpose in a loving community of believers. This image remains powerful despite al-Raqqa's grim reality.

### ii. Violence and Contention

> So until we return to the correct state of Islamic affairs, it's upon us all to work together to eradicate the principle of "free choice," and to not deceive the people in an attempt to seek their pleasure, neither by calling to "free choice" directly, nor by alluding to it indirectly. Rather, we must confront them with the fact that they've turned away from the religion,

[45] Quintan Wiktorowicz, ed., *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Approach* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 16.

> while we hold onto it, grasping its purity, its clarity, its comprehensiveness, without any blemishes due to shirk [idolatry], misguidance or heresy, and that we're completely ready to stand in the face of anyone who attempts to divert us from our commitment to making the religion of Allah triumphant over all other religions, and that we will continue to fight the people of deviation and misguidance until we die trying to make the religion triumphant.[46]

In most political movements, the key question is how political contention is managed. The usual assumption is that denying any political space for opposition creates the conditions in which political violence is more likely. Furthermore, indiscriminate suppression of dissent is generally viewed as a mobilizing force for those who would engage in revolutionary activities. Some clandestine organizations in the Middle East and North Africa, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, inhabit a space that allows the pragmatic choice of violence or nonviolence depending on the circumstances. It is misleading to assert, however, that any Islamist group is inherently nonviolent. While Salafi jihadists are at the extreme of Islamist identity, there is no Gandhi or Martin Luther King in Islamist ranks. Jihadists argue that violence is always necessary in dealing with political foes. Occasionally, a Salafi jihadist will argue that violence must be avoided to prevent damage or destruction to the jihadist movement as a whole or in a particular country. In general, however, those making such statements generally make them in jail or after being released. The question for Salafi jihadists is not whether they will resort to violence—but against whom, when, and how.

The quote above indicates an answer to the first two questions. ISIS is a modern totalitarian political movement based on a deviant Islamic analysis. It is a radical form of *takfir* (declaring someone to be an infidel) that is applied to all except those who accept the new caliphate. Therefore, violence is directed against anyone or any group that disagrees with the group's ideology. Similarly, the timing of violence against those who disagree is always until all dissent is crushed. It is an eternal war until the end times. The first ones who must be killed or converted are those who say they are Muslims but reject the truth that ISIS claims to be bringing to the world. The "Flood" alluded to in the theme of issue 2 of *Dabiq* is the great Flood that destroyed the entire world except for the Prophet Noah (called *Nuh* in Islam).

The ISIS group's practice of killing civilians and captive soldiers seems arbitrary and barbaric when viewed from the outside. Such violence is correctly recognized as primarily a terror tool and a recruiting vehicle. By killing those who resist, ISIS intends to encourage others to submit, an ancient practice that has precedents in Alexander the Great's conquests, Caesar's wars, and the Mongol invasion of the Middle East. However, when ISIS kills soldiers after they surrender or kills noncombatants, they discriminate between Sunnis, who are given a chance to repent and pledge allegiance to al-Baghdadi, and Shia, who are executed. Shia are always framed as "rejectionists," while Sunni are "apostates." ISIS thus denies that it kills indiscriminately.

[46] *Dabiq: The Flood*, no. 2 ( July 2014), p. 11.

Many question whether ISIS is more violent than al Qaeda or a greater threat to the U.S. In fact, most signature atrocities such as videos recording ritualized beheadings belong as much to al Qaeda's repertoire as to ISIS. Al Qaeda has beheaded Western civilians on camera clandestinely in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, to cite two examples. The leadership of al Qaeda thought these worked against its brand, but it is still possible to find video beheadings claiming to be by al Qaeda's Jabhat Nusra in Syria today. Al Qaeda also has used suicide bombers against civilians in a number of countries. Certainly, al Qaeda, like ISIS, has been responsible for the deaths of more Muslims than non-Muslims in their numerous terror campaigns throughout the world.

The more interesting comparison is between ISIS and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in Algeria during the 1990s. GIA developed into one of the most radical and violent jihadist groups in modern times, although its scope was local rather than transnational or global. In escalating waves of violence marked by the massacre of civilians, GIA eventually claimed that essentially all Algerians, except for their own members, were infidels meriting death. Even al Qaeda strategists al-Suri and Naji referred to the GIA as "deviant." Professor Mohammad M. Hafez has argued that GIA's anti-civilian violence in Algeria was "the outcome of an ill-fated convergence of three variables—indiscriminate repression, exclusive organization, and antisystem ideologies."[47] Hafez argued that the Algerian government, after a military coup that thwarted the legal election of an Islamist government and the defeat of the founding secular regime, resorted to indiscriminate violence to repress the protesting Islamist factions. This in turn allowed GIA, which was a marginal but highly exclusive and secretive group, to increase its membership, powered by powerful anti-government framing. GIA eventually lost the support of a terrified populace and fell to the militarized government. It was this example that al-Zawahiri had in mind when he counseled al-Zarqawi against anti-Shia violence and why al Qaeda today is taking a stand against video beheadings. But GIA did not have the ISIS group's powerful media tools.[48]

In the face of other jihadist opposition, ISIS has turned video beheadings and even live burnings to its advantage, at least in the short term. What most people see as barbaric, a subset of radicalized individuals sees as heroic acts of revenge and a sign of power against arrogant enemies. This short-term strength, however, may turn into a long-term vulnerability—but only if the U.S. and its allies can mount an effective counter narrative that rivals the effectiveness of ISIS propaganda. Otherwise, culturally framed violence will continue to be a significant tool in the ISIS arsenal.

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[47] Mohammed M. Hafez, "From Marginalization to Massacres: A Political Process Explanation of GIA Violence in Algeria," in Wiktorowicz ed., *Islamic Activism* (2004), p.53.

[48] GIA also lacked many other competitive advantages that ISIS possesses. For example, it focused mainly on Algeria and did not have a wide appeal that would gain it regional support. Also, Algeria does not have the sectarian polarization that ISIS has been able to use to its advantage in Syria and Iraq. Thus the hyperviolence that ISIS uses can be framed as discriminating, whereas GIA was seen to be indiscriminate in its violence. Perhaps the most important advantage for ISIS, however, is its strategic approach based on lessons learned from previous jihadist insurgencies.

### iii. Networks and Alliances

The Islamic State has an extensive history of building relations with the tribes within its borders in an effort to strengthen the ranks of the Muslims, unite them under one imam, and work together towards the establishment of the prophetic Khilafah. Its practice of attending tribal forums, addressing the concerns of the tribal leaders, and accepting their *bay'ah* is regularly met with success.

> Last month, following instructions from the head of Public Relations in Wilayat Halab [Governorate of Aleppo], the *wilayah*'s head of Tribal Affairs attended a meeting with the following tribal representatives ... [49]

Clandestine groups, especially jihadist ones, operate within a shadow network that includes not only allies but also other groups that collaborate because of specific mutual advantage. When at its weakest point in 2009/2010 in Iraq, ISIS forged a strategy to strengthen its political position, at the core of that strategy was the recognition that the group's treatment of Sunni tribes had created the circumstances in which the tribal leaders were ready to ally with the U.S. to destroy AQI. Winning over the Sunni tribes in Iraq was a large part of the ISIS reemergence in Iraq. Similarly, in Syria, gaining the cooperation of tribal groups is at the strategic core of the ISIS group's tactical success.[50]

In the above quote, ISIS demonstrates how it succeeds with tribes by using a Syrian example, but the same scenario played itself out in Iraq as well. After the withdrawal of American forces, the Maliki government's mistreatment of the Sunni tribes created a universal hostility among their ranks. ISIS needed to transform resentment, which could be passive, into active resistance. ISIS went about this transformation by both using political arguments and providing tangible rewards. The tangible rewards were delivered in the context of their proto-government, which is the equivalent of Naji's *Administration of Savagery* in areas from which central government forces had been withdrawn in Iraq and Syria. These tangible benefits are succinctly described in *Dabiq*:

- Returning property to owners
- Investing millions of dollars in local services
- Providing security and stability
- Ensuring the availability of food and commodities in local markets
- Reducing crime rate

ISIS also reported what it expected from the tribes around Aleppo in return. It requested that tribal elders collect the religious tax (*zakat*) and prepare lists of orphans and widows who would benefit from the tax. Next, it asked the elders to "encourage" youth to join its military forces and turn in any weapon acquired either from the Assad regime or the Free Syrian Army. Finally, ISIS told the elders that any of its members who had borne arms against ISIS could repent;

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[49] *Dabiq: The Return of Khilafah* 1 (June-July 2014): 12.

[50] See Murad Batal al-Shishani, "The Islamic State's Strategic and Tactical Plan for Iraq," *Terrorism Monitor* 12, no. 16 (August 8, 2014); Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, ch. 13, "Shakedown of the Sheikhs: ISIS Co-opts the Tribes "in *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015); for the ISIS account of its relationship with the Sunni tribes in Syria, see "Halab Tribal Assemblies," in *Dabiq: The Return of Khilafah* (June/July 2014): 13-14.

ominously, their repentance must occur before ISIS captured them.

Recounting the meeting in Syria and other meetings, ISIS listed the names of those tribes attending. However, *Dabiq* becomes vague when recounting the number of tribal leaders that pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi and ISIS. The clear implication is that ISIS is accepting tribes' buying into the ISIS network and collaborating without actually becoming part of it. One could say that the relationship is more than a network but less than an alliance, especially since ISIS has substituted *wilayat* (governorates or provinces) for allies. Naji wrote about "faith-based bonds of loyalty" as a substitute for tribal loyalty, which he envied.[51] This may be the model for ISIS seeking pledges of allegiance or *bay'ah* as a substitute for tribal bonds. In following this path, however, ISIS is vulnerable to tribal backlash and ultimately revolt under the same conditions that would allow such a course.

We have discussed how ISIS relies on criminal networks and in many ways itself constitutes a criminal network of smugglers and extortionists. In addition to using criminal networks logistically, ISIS appears to contract out killing. For example, on one occasion when Kurdish forces in Iraq allowed reporters to interview captured ISIS killers, it became clear that the men were paid killers, not ISIS soldiers. The men referred to ISIS in the third person, using the pejorative term *Dae'sh*[52] casually, as though it were the most ordinary way to refer to the group, although use of that term would be avoided by any ISIS member, even under duress. ISIS also networks with other hostile jihadist organizations with which it is in a state of perpetual war. Such networking is based on pragmatism and is the field commander's prerogative. When al Qaeda groups in Syria occasionally collaborate with local ISIS forces in military operations, such collaboration does not signify that the two parent groups are considering reuniting. Unless the official spokesman announces a rapprochement or truce, any local accommodations should be considered normal pragmatic field decisions without wider political ramifications.

To counter the ISIS group's mobilization strategy requires collaboration between Muslim-majority countries and the U.S. and its Western allies. ISIS has shown its resilience as a social movement and a revolutionary concept, so the collaboration against it must be long term. The U.S. cannot effectively counter the specifically religious aspects of the ISIS narrative because only Muslim authorities have any credibility in that arena. That is not to say that the U.S. government should not collaborate with private Muslim-American organizations, especially in anti-radicalization programs in Muslim communities. However, addressing issues such as the end-times narrative requires a deep knowledge of Islamic texts and traditions. Funding translations from Arabic is one important aspect of this struggle. While Western public figures often state that Middle Eastern Muslims must do more to counter radical statements, many Arabic voices are in fact raised but go unnoticed because of language barriers. The West

[51] See Ryan, *Decoding al Qaeda's Strategy*, pp. 183-185.

[52] *Dae'sh* is the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham, which avoids the use of "Islamic" in the group's title and has a slighting sound when pronounced with a sneer but otherwise is meaningless.

should at least match the ISIS group's translation efforts into major European languages. Otherwise, the ISIS narrative goes unchallenged in, for example, English-, French-, and German-speaking countries.

Much of what the U.S. can do involves avoiding playing into the mobilization narrative and inadvertently feeding it. The most famous example is President George W. Bush's use of "crusade" to describe American military actions. To avoid such gaffes, a great deal more effort needs to be placed on understanding the jihadist ideology. Much progress has been made, but much more effort is required.

The importance of criminal networks to ISIS and al Qaeda argues for vigorous cooperation among coalition law enforcement agencies to disrupt these networks. Attacking crime in general will not help because the category is too broad, but putting organizations and individuals on notice that the international community will give high priority to arresting and prosecuting individuals who receive goods smuggled by ISIS operatives would be a significant positive step.

## Discussion Questions

1. ISIS uses "culture and framing" in much of its public dialogue via terms and arguments that resonate with the culture of its target audiences to criticize its enemies, including the United States. How could the U.S. frame ISIS attacks on historical and religious landmarks that are much loved by local populations in ways that would resonate in the greater Middle East? What would be the military's role, if any, in this messaging? Can you think of other issues that would be more effective to reframe?

2. What factors contribute to the success of ISIS on social media? What countermeasures are available to mitigate that success?

3. ISIS uses networks of Sunni Arab tribes in Syria and Iraq to prosecute its war against the region. Much of its work with tribes was inspired by the successful U.S. strategy against al Qaeda insurgents during the "Surge" in Iraq. From your experience, could the U.S. replicate its work with Sunni tribes in present day Iraq and Syria without a large military footprint? Explain.

# IV. Conclusion: Net Assessment of ISIS Strengths and Weaknesses With Recommendations

As suggested earlier, this case study is intended to be a preliminary net assessment of the ISIS group's strengths and weaknesses. To be useful, such a net assessment must take into account a relatively long time frame, which current trends suggest. What follows are conclusions gained from this assessment, with preliminary recommendations based on current research.

## A. The Enemy's Strengths

One of the greatest failures of the U.S. approach to ISIS mirrors a shortcoming with al Qaeda—namely, a failure to identify precisely who the enemy is and describe it in the terms it describes itself. This failure of concept stems from an attitude that is often heard in private conversation but not written down. Too often, analysis of ISIS and al Qaeda fails to recognize the importance of the written word to these groups. Both ISIS and al Qaeda are modern, adaptive learning organizations in spite of the primitive society they espouse, and their strategists and practitioners take great care in the written and spoken word. They produce written primers for recruits in grand strategy as well as strategic critiques of their own operations.

ISIS follows in al Qaeda's footsteps by having multifaceted strategies based on lessons learned from past failures and successes. We know that ISIS's military strategy begins from a model that would be recognized by Mao, Che Guevara, or General Giap. It is a strategy that hopes to defeat the most powerful global military by using a political strategy aimed at convincing the U.S. that staying the course in the Middle East will be too costly in lives, treasure, and international prestige. And it intends to defeat local powers by a version of Clausewitz's *levée en masse* using a mobilization strategy based on effective religiously-based propaganda, tangible rewards, and fearsome punishment. It has focused on the local themes that have always appealed to some groups within the Muslim majority of the greater Middle East, including reestablishing a powerful caliphate, driving out foreign powers, protecting the sacred places of Islam, controlling the region's natural energy resources, and, finally, producing a righteous version of social justice by overthrowing all authoritarian regimes. ISIS also enjoys the reputation of being the richest jihadist organization at present, capable of persuading citizens of some 80 countries to travel to join its struggle. In both Iraq and Syria, ISIS has managed to forge powerful relationships with Sunni tribes with grievances against Shia Muslim-majority governments.

ISIS is part of a social movement that describes itself as the leader of the global Salafi jihadist community, similar to al Qaeda's claim to be the vanguard of the Salafi jihadist movement. ISIS is attempting to become a mass unified social movement by demonstrating almost miraculous success in a short period of time in Iraq and Syria. It also has aspirations to support insurrections in the Arabian Peninsula, beginning with Saudi Arabia. Further afield, it has seeded nascent groups in the Sinai, Libya, Algeria, and the Af/Pak region. In addition, the well-established Boko Haram group has pledged allegiance to ISIS.

## B. The Enemy's Weaknesses

Despite its quick success, ISIS is not militarily strong in a conventional sense. It has no defense against American and coalition airstrikes. It has not been successful over the long run against determined Kurdish ground forces in

either Iraq or Syria. Its rapid initial success is based on a superior guerrilla strategy coupled to its ability to terrorize its opposition; this initial success must be sustained, but holding territory is proving more difficult over the long run. Similarly, over the long run ISIS will need to continue to generate large amounts of revenue to sustain its operations. It will inevitably give priority to its military operations, which will raise discontent among its subject Sunni population who accede to ISIS not out of love, but because of grievances against the Shia. However, it appears unlikely that ISIS will be able to generate the revenue it needs. American "strategic patience" in its air campaign is paying dividends by reducing ISIS revenues from petroleum smuggling and other criminal enterprises. Furthermore, its enemies among the Gulf nations have taken steps to stem donations from private sources.

One of the strategic hinge issues is the internal war among local jihadist groups. While ISIS has emerged as the most powerful group in terms of resources and ability to draw new members, it is weakened by its unwillingness to achieve a meaningful detente with al Qaeda and other jihadist groups despite its claim to the caliphate. ISIS would be strengthened by such a detente, but it seems highly unlikely in the short or long term. The barbaric public atrocities that have somehow inspired foreigners to travel to join ISIS have, at the same time, undermined its brand in the Middle East with the vast majority of Muslims in the most powerful countries. Finally, to succeed, ISIS needs to live up to its slogan "remaining and expanding." If it can be contained or rolled back in the territories it occupies, it could lose its advantage of being seen as a winner worthy of fear, if not respect.

## C. Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on information provided in this case study. Where direct U.S. military involvement is suggested, this is always intended to be a limited, mission-specific involvement such as the use of temporary direct action by Special Forces or air strikes. Such recommendations should not be understood to mean a massive involvement of conventional forces at the level of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan or Iraq.

### i. Counterterrorism Recommendations

On balance, the competition between al Qaeda and ISIS is a zero-sum game: the U.S. cannot degrade one without strengthening the other. However, the counterterrorism and police measures used against ISIS can be adapted to degrade al Qaeda as well. For example, measures taken against an ISIS smuggling network would also affect al Qaeda capabilities. To address the ancient issue of smuggling requires the use of all the tools at the U.S. coalition's disposal in the areas of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and counter narrative. Importantly, American operations need to be executed in the context of a clear strategy, including publicly articulated and resourced goals and objectives. As it is unrealistic to expect to stop all smuggling into and out of Syria and Iraq, any anti-smuggling effort would need to discriminate between high-priority and low-priority targets. For example, coalition forces and intelligence assets could decide to target high-value operations such as smuggling of people, arms, petroleum products, and historical artifacts. The U.S. also would need to give clear warnings that individuals engaging in such smuggling are considered to be members of ISIS, not innocent civilians.

U.S. counterterrorism resources include police, intelligence agencies, and the military. These efforts are both domestic and foreign and include a coalition of allies. In a successful campaign against ISIS, allied efforts are crucial, particularly in countries where jihadists rally to the ISIS banner. Fortunately, this coalition is already in place and, at one level or another, the U.S. works with countries sharing a counterterrorism interest. The U.S. can greatly strengthen counterterrorism efforts by providing technical assistance to our allies, especially in forensic science and intelligence, two fields in which American technology is paramount. The key to success is sharing information among components and resourcing the analysis of data. Each country in the coalition must be responsible for its own enforcement; problems will always arise around data that is not shared.

Counterinsurgency theory and practice has risen and fallen over the last decade. There has been controversy concerning whether al Qaeda and ISIS should be addressed as a counterterrorism or a counterinsurgency problem set. Despite the hot political aspects of this debate, a cold eye on the nature of ISIS and al Qaeda reveals that both organizations are promoters and participants in transnational insurgencies and use terrorism as a major weapon. To be effective in the current atmosphere, the U.S. can make headway in counterinsurgency by using military and intelligence means against perceived ISIS strengths. For ISIS, legitimacy is based on success. By thwarting success, the U.S. and its allies can degrade the group's brand and its legitimacy. To cite one example, ISIS financial strength allows it to fund groups like Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) in the Sinai. ABM has suffered severely under the Egyptian military campaign against it, but it has been able to improve its operations by declaring allegiance to ISIS. Being able to fund and arm groups like this is an important part of what gives ISIS legitimacy in the eyes of ABM members and other jihadist groups with ambitions of their own, whether in Libya, Algeria, or the Sahel.

Finally, a key component is the need to put the occasional ISIS success in context. For example, it is not enough to note that ISIS uses classic guerrilla warfare strategy that relies on the media and propaganda as much as on force of arms. The U.S. and its coalition allies need to use that knowledge to note that when ISIS forces lose ground in one area, their small-unit tactics using multiple suicide-vehicle-borne IEDs and their ability to move quickly allows them to mount successful surprise attacks. These attacks are "successful" if they manage to distract the media from recent coalition success on a wider scale and portray ISIS success as a change in momentum. Nevertheless, ISIS will not be able to hold the territory if coalition forces mount a determined counterattack.

From the beginning of its involvement, the U.S. has prioritized air strikes on economic targets within ISIS-held territory. Significantly increasing these strikes could over time degrade this source of legitimacy. Meanwhile all the local counterinsurgency efforts would remain the responsibility of local forces, ideally using subnational forces that possess a strong unity of purpose, with U.S. technical assistance and training. In locales such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, the U.S. may not be able to rely solely on local forces in the immediate and mid term. U.S. and coalition military forces tailored to the situation may need to be part of the military solution in such cases, whether through an air campaign or through ground forces at a level well below that of either the Iraq or Afghan wars.

### ii. Counter Narrative Recommendations

Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency programs need a counter narrative to transform operational success into political success. Like any effective political narrative, the anti-ISIS narrative must be composed of positive information about the coalition as well as negative information about ISIS. To be credible, both must be fact-based and consistent with the evidence. Posting accurate date online and using social media to lead individuals to that data could be powerful tools. However, such programs cannot be identified as a psychological operations campaign. They need to be part of an information campaign with high standards of accuracy and international credibility, delivered via all modern social media as well as traditional media. For example, if a nongovernmental group were to tabulate and update atrocities that ISIS itself claims, such a database could be an effective resource for journalists and others. The database would need to be timely and constantly available. While various NGOs and think tanks currently track ISIS activities that experts use piecemeal, creating an online clearinghouse for this work could be a useful first step for the U.S. government or a privately funded effort.

This approach could be difficult in its start-up phase. But without reliable public information, the counter narrative war on ISIS likely cannot be won—if winning means reducing the threat to the international order to acceptable levels by stopping the spread of jihadist cells across the globe and discrediting the ideology that spawns them.

One conclusion to be drawn from al-Suri's analysis of the lessons learned in the Muslim Brotherhood's failed Syrian insurrection is that the sensitive pressure points for a jihadist group like ISIS become clear. The greatest successes by ISIS in this regard suggest the potential for their greatest vulnerabilities to be exploited. For example, if the U.S. were to force ISIS into a war of attrition beginning with areas adjacent to or in Kurdish territories, essentially to achieve some strategic depth for the Kurds, we could damage more than the resultant military losses might suggest. Such an operation would begin to erode ISIS's propaganda advantage, attacking the basis of its consistent propaganda slogan of "remaining and expanding" by demonstrating that ISIS cannot expand into Kurdish-declared no-go zones. One could make the same case for Sunni Arab tribes in Iraq and Syria. To succeed in this effort, the U.S. would need to lead the coalition in significantly arming and training Kurdish forces and Sunni Arab tribes directly, based on best military estimates of requirements. Political objections to such a course by local governments constitute a serious obstacle to direct efforts with subnational groups; but for the U.S. to continue to heed such objections would be nothing less than giving up a powerful tool with a record of success.

The U.S. would also need to enhance its tactical air campaign considerably while maintaining its current strategic campaign against economic targets. As this program becomes successful, the U.S. could work with the Iraqi Army to pursue similar campaigns against geographically significant targets held or under attack by ISIS, before eventually turning to a campaign to retake Mosul. We could then simultaneously declare the creation of coalition expeditionary quick-strike units, including U.S. Special Forces and Marines, and proceed with quick temporary strikes inside Iraq and eventually Syria at strategic points. This would clearly demonstrate that ISIS is not a state and cannot protect the territory it now holds.

These military moves would not be meaningful without an accompanying and coordinated strategic narrative. The narrative would have two parts. In the first part, Muslim coalition partners (Egypt would need to be a part of this campaign) would start a sustained campaign against the Islamic pretentions and arguments broadcast by ISIS. This campaign would include technical religious arguments offered by recognized religious authorities. These arguments would not be difficult to construct, but they would need to be sustained and not abandoned when they become subject to counterattacks by ISIS and its jihadist sympathizers.

The second aspect of this counter narrative campaign would focus on the basic fallacy at the heart of the ISIS group's strategy, beginning with the strategic flaw of trying to hold territory in the center of Muslim lands without any allies, economy of its own, or strategic advantage. This campaign could also focus on the non-religious aspects of a state. Such attacks already exist in Arabic on Christian Arab websites and argue that the Islamic State is a state without borders, without recognition from any state, without the ability to defend itself, without an economy outside of criminal enterprises, without any foreign embassies, and so on. In short, the political counter narrative would need to be basic, straightforward, and relentless in all forms of media. The U.S. could lead this, but through a public-private partnership that would engage the creative energies of the private sector—coordinated and supported but not dictated by the government. Such a campaign would need to include Muslim-American groups and collaboration with Middle Eastern partners as much as feasible.

### iii. Final Recommendations

The most important task for U.S. planners is to focus on *how* ISIS is carrying out its doctrine and strategy, to identify *how* it is adapting to U.S. pressure, and *how* it views victory as an organization. Most of the elements needed to defeat ISIS are in place. The American military has spoken of "strategic patience" to explain the slow, some would say cautious, pace of operations. The coalition's emphasis on hitting economic targets is gradually paying dividends by first slowing and then significantly reducing the ISIS group's revenue from petroleum sales and other criminal activities. Local populations have on occasion indicated to reporters that they recognize and appreciate the coalition's focus on avoiding civilian casualties during airstrikes. Airstrikes against targets of opportunity in the open have reduced the ISIS group's ability to mass forces against vulnerable targets or reinforce its own units when they come under attack in Iraq.

In the endgame, the U.S. will need to reconsider its policy of not using forward spotters for precision airstrikes in cities and towns. When coalition fighters first struck targets in al-Raqqa, local residents reported that ISIS fighters fled the city. However, we should expect that after experiencing the coalition's policy of restraint, ISIS would continue to hide among the population in large cities, especially Mosul, to impede Iraqi or Kurdish forces. Placing U.S. Special Forces or Marines with allied ground forces would greatly assist clearing operations. The obvious problems with such a decision are the likelihood of American casualties and the perception that Americans and Iranian forces are fighting together against the Sunni population.

While American military involvement in Iraq and Syria is important to contain ISIS, it is insufficient to defeat ISIS or al Qaeda over the long run. Another key

part of coalition success is to continue to focus on first containing and then reversing ISIS, not only on the ground but also in its crucial advantage in communications and propaganda. The U.S. would reap benefits from continuing to target ISIS communications facilities and finding ways to wage cyber war against its online propaganda servers.

Even more important than attacking physical aspects of ISIS communications, the U.S. and its allied coalition need to develop a multi-tiered counter narrative. The U.S. may encourage Muslim-majority allies to consistently address the religious aspects of ISIS communications. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have a large role to play in this, and their efforts should be encouraged and supported technically. A joint fusion center to produce translations of statements and *fatwas* of major Muslim religious scholars or statements by recognized Islamic institutions would ensure that non-Arabic speakers hear rebuttals to the ISIS group's multilingual output. For its part, the U.S. response should be crafted as though it were a high-quality political or advertising campaign against a rival, using classic opposition research and reports that are factual and convincing, not polemical. Providing reports to the international press with fact-checked statistics on ISIS crimes, its destruction of mosques and beloved historical landmarks, its involvement in human trafficking, and so on could inform a widely dispersed population of events about which they are now unaware. Information confirmed and reported by local press sources would likely be more effective than statements by American officials.

While difficult, defeating ISIS militarily could well prove the easiest part of the struggle. Unless the U.S. and its partners also succeed in discrediting its ideology, we should expect current trends to continue until either the movement burns itself out or local populations somehow manage to destroy it—neither of which is guaranteed. The anti-ISIS coalition thus must fashion cost-effective strategies to contain ISIS militarily while working together to discredit its legitimacy. The overarching premise of the American response should be that ISIS is a long-term violent threat of a hostile transnational social movement, wrapped in a Salafi jihadist cover. Comparisons to historical movements, such as the Anarchist movement before World War I, could be used to show how transnational violence begets more violence and does not build healthy societies. History has shown that we should expect the ISIS/al Qaeda phenomenon to reconstitute itself under a new name and new leadership in the event we manage to destroy its current organization and top leadership. As long as their ideas remain credible and even appealing to some, the threat of anarchistic violence will remain.

## Discussion Questions

1. This case study lists some ISIS strengths and weaknesses. How would you characterize the ISIS group's greatest strengths and greatest weaknesses?

2. In your opinion, which of the recommendations in this case study are the most useful? Which are the least useful? What other countermeasures could the U.S. take against ISIS?

3. Should the U.S. continue to target al Qaeda forces in Syria? Explain.

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Solomon, Jay. "ISIS's Oil Revenue Is Falling, Administration Says." *Washington Wire* (December 15, 2014).

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## Further Reading

"Assessing the Strategic Threat From ISIS." Testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, by James F. Jeffrey of the Washington Institute (and former U.S. ambassador to Iraq), February 12, 2015.

Jeffrey identifies that IS is not just another violent radical Islamic extremist group but has seemingly global appeal in regards to recruitment, saying that its "nihilist worship of violence, control over much territory and six or more million people, conventional as well as nonconventional military capabilities, and appeal as a caliphate all render it unique and very difficult to combat." He points out that the weakness of the Middle East state system does not allow for a slow wait-and-see style campaign and that operations should be accelerated. He concludes by discussing the importance of political developments in the Middle East when considering fighting IS and that Iran cannot be allowed to gain a greater foothold in the region.

Berger, J.M. "The Metronome of Apocalyptic Time: Social Media as Carrier Wave for Millenarian Contagion." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (August 2015): 61-71.

In order to create a heightened sense of urgency that the end time is rapidly approaching (and in turn garner more recruits), IS uses social media at a rapid pace, especially Twitter. IS floods the Internet with countless tweets espousing their message; before or after any event or attack, their rhetoric usually increases rapidly. An individual who follows an IS member on Twitter or other social media platforms is exposed to countless pieces of propaganda from not only the user they follow but also all of their followers/contacts. This immersion tactic is paired with social contagion and temporal compression in order to spread their apocalyptical message in a countdown-like manner to push already immersed users to hurry up and join while there is still time.

Brennan, Margaret, "ISIS Cashing In on Selling Plundered Antiquities to Fund Terror," CBS News, September 29, 2015.

"[N]ewly discovered declassified documents show for the first time just how deeply ISIS relies on smuggling antiquities to fund its terror. Abu Sayyaf was the group's top antiquities dealer. Receipts also show him to be a careful record keeper. Treasury officials told us transactions totaled hundreds of millions of dollars."

Bunzel, Cole. "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State." *Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World: Analysis Paper* 19 (March, 2015):1-45. Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings.

Cole Bunzel begins by examining the ideologies of the group and its particular brand of jihadi Salafism (al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya). The history of IS's formation and development is detailed along with its split from AQ and its creation into a new entity. Bunzel then looks at the establishment of the "caliphate" by IS and the implications surrounding this. He concludes by providing a translation of the official creed and goals of IS.

"Countering ISIL's Financing." Testimony before the House Financial Services Committee by Patrick B. Johnston of the Rand Corporation, November 13, 2014.

In his testimony before U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Financial Services, Johnston points out the sources of IS's wealth and how it grew over the years. Next, he discusses the potential areas that IS could use this money on. The most likely areas of

spending consist of expanding territorial control in Syria and into Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Gaza and building an infrastructure and asserting its governance over already captured areas. It is recommended that in order to greatly impact IS's finances, the U.S. and coalition forces cut off IS's access to oil, ransom money, foreign donors, and extortion payments. However, due to the clandestine nature of these transactions and limited cooperation from Turkey and regional partners who could identify the banks and donors, stopping these revenue sources will be difficult. Also, the banks cooperating with IS are unlikely to comply with any international order to stop working with them. At the end of the testimony, Johnston provides three policy recommendations: (1) Continue to conduct airstrikes against oil assets and other financial targets; (2) Develop more effective financial intelligence collection and analysis capabilities regarding IS's financial networks; and(3) Continue supporting the deployment of U.S. advisors to Iraqi Security Forces.

Crowcroft, Orlando. "ISIS: People Trafficking, Smuggling, and Punitive Taxes Boost Islamic State Economy," International Business Times, June 16, 2015.

"Libya's thriving trade in smuggled Syrian and African migrants is earning militia groups such as Islamic State over $320m per year and providing a much-needed financial lifeline for the radical terrorist group as it expands from its traditional hubs in Iraq and Syria. Once branded the best-funded terrorist group in the world and banking up to £1m per day from oil sales, bank robberies, extortion, smuggling and punitive taxes on local citizens, IS has had its funding squeezed over the past six months. This has come as it has lost control of oil fields and faced renewed crackdown on the smuggling of antiquities and historical artefacts, which it had been looting from Syrian and Iraqi historic sites and selling on the black market in Turkey. But in Libya, it appears IS has joined a number of other militias—tribal, political, and religious—in taxing human traffickers in order to cash in on a lucrative human trafficking economy."

Di Giovanni, Janine. "Who Is ISIS Leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi?" *Newsweek*, December 8, 2014.

This article starts by relaying the statement of an attendee of the mosque where al-Baghdadi made one of his rare public appearances. Abu Ali, a pseudonym, claimed that there was complete and total control of the appearance, from control of recording to forcing all attendees to swear allegiance to Baghdadi and not allowing them to leave the mosque until at least 30 minutes after he had left. Ali describes him as having the "working mentality of a mafiosi," and speaks on his level of organization. The article proceeds to provide a background on al-Baghdadi. A London-based Iraqi analyst, Sajad Jiyad, then refutes some of the claims about al-Baghdadi being truly religious, stating that he is most likely an opportunist who enjoys the prestige and attention of being seen as the next Osama bin Laden.

Engel, Pamela. "ISIS Has a Cash-Flow Problem," *Business Insider*, September 24, 2015.

"A little more than a year after declaring an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria, the extremist group is having a hard time keeping the promises it made to those living in its territory . . . Some of the cash crunch comes from falling oil prices and airstrikes targeting oil facilities, and sources contend that ISIS spends more on weapons than on fulfilling the needs of the people living under its control. To make up for its reported drop in revenue, ISIS is said to rely more on taxation."

Engel, Richard and Robert Windrem, "ISIS Makes Three Times as Much From Oil Smuggling as Previously Thought: Officials," July 24, 2015.
"Two U.S. counter-terrorism officials now tell NBC News that the amount of money ISIS can earn from selling and smuggling oil and gas is roughly to $8 to $10 million a month. The officials said this is the most accurate information they have had so far, calling previous estimates speculation. 'We have learned more about the internal market. ISIS sells oil and gas everywhere. It sells within Syria, and to the Syrian regime. It sells in Iraq. It is a more extensive and complex market than we assumed,' a senior counter-terrorism official said."

Fairfield, Hannah, Tim Wallace, and Derek Watkins. "How ISIS Expands," *New York Times,* May 21, 2015.
A central goal of IS is expansion. The group continues to take over key cities in Iraq and Syria with the aim of building a broad colonial empire across many countries. A year after announcing its expansion goals, it is operating or has cells in more than a dozen countries. The series of graphics in this article provides visual representations of IS advancement and describes a three-part method of expanding their territory. This expansion process consists of controlling and governing area in which IS already has a significant presence; infiltration of communities through intimidation of local leaders and use of sleeper cells; and absorbing other groups through pledges of loyalty or *bay'at*.

Global Imitative Against Transnational Organized Crime. "Libya: A Growing Hub for Criminal Economies and Terrorist Financing in the Trans-Sahara," policy brief, May 11, 2015.
"Of all of the criminal economies, the most urgent to address is the flow of refugees across the Mediterranean as increased flows could in turn lead to further financial establishment of radical groups involved in trafficking in Sinai and Egypt and linked to Libya, Syria, and Iraq—including IS. A further increase in organized criminal networks involved in smuggling is possible on routes including to and from Jordan as well as transits to Libya and Egypt. Increasing the number of refugees originating from Syria, especially as a result of Islamic State attacks near Damascus (as we have observed around refugee camps), can thus facilitate systems of migrant smuggling and human trafficking. This effectively increases armed groups' ability to entrench themselves more deeply in Libya and to gain sources of incomes outside of Iraq and Syria." (p. 8)

Hansen-Lewis, Jamie, and Jacob N. Shapiro. "Understanding the Daesh Economy," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (August 2015): 142-155.
This article evaluates the sustainability of IS's economy. While the terrorist group manages to bring in a large amount of revenue each year, the article shows that it is not sustainable over a long period of time. The majority of IS income besides oil sales derives from extortion, ransom money, forced taxes and similar means. The group touts in its propaganda videos its infrastructure and social services, yet the reality of the situation is reflected in the poor health of the population under its rule. The economy itself has little potential to grow, as it entirely based off limited sources of funding that will run out over time. The authors conclude as a result that containment seems a viable strategy for combating IS. Its inability to have a stable/functioning economy will most likely result in desertions and uprisings from many of the already unwilling inhabitants.

Hardy, Sam. "How the West Buys 'Conflict Antiquities' From Iraq and Syria (and Funds Terror)," *The Great Debate* (blog), Reuters, October 27, 2014.

Hardy discusses how the buying and selling of antiquities from the Middle East supports insurgent groups spanning ISIL to the Free Syrian Army. These artifacts include ancient Greek and Roman items, to appeal to the U.S. market. Many objects are laundered through auction houses in Germany, which will see a new law come into effect in 2016 designed to help stop this illegal trade.

Harrison, Ross. "Newsflash: Time Is Running Out to Defeat ISIS." *National Interest*, August 21, 2015.

Harrison argues that IS trying to destroy the nationalism of individual countries in order to further its own goals. Once traditional unifying factors and identities are gone, it will be easier for them to implement their own ideology. He argues that the U.S. needs to re-create borders to enforce traditional nationalism, work with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and high-level clerics to refute IS's ideology, and use the more moderate groups as a bulwark against the more extreme ones.

Huang, Reyko. "The Islamic State as an Ordinary Insurgency," *Washington Post*, May 14, 2014.

Part of the Islam and International Order symposium, Huang compares the actions of the Islamic State to other terrorist and insurgent groups and shows their similarities. Examples are cited in which other groups committed similar atrocities that were not nearly remarked as upon as the Islamic State is. The author argues that this is mainly due to the fact that IS makes everything so visible: The average person can easily see these activities posted online, whereas the previous groups' only exposure was from news coverage and history texts. The Islamic State is just as horrendous as previous groups, Huang argues—the only difference is that they broadcast it to the world.

Kadercan, Burak. "Three Huge (and Dangerous) Myths about ISIS." *National Interest,* August 30, 2015.

Kadercan argues that the security community does not have a set, concrete method for dealing with IS. There are three common myths: that IS owes much of its appeal to the territory it holds; that it needs to continue to expand in order to stay relevant; and that if the "myth of invincibility" that IS proclaims is broken, then IS can be be broken. The author argues that since IS operates on a "territorial flexibility" that the loss of territory does not greatly impact its legitimacy. The group pushes a narrative of a "capable underdog" in which martyrdom is relished and the sheer act of fighting against overwhelming odds is lauded. The author concludes that studying the supporters of IS, who have an understanding of the capabilities of the group, may provide the security community with a realistic view of its abilities and sources of legitimacy.

Katz, Rita. "Follow ISIS on Twitter: A Special Report on the Use of Social Media by Jihadists." INSITE Blog on Terrorism and Extremism, June 26, 2014.

IS has become adept at utilizing social media, especially Twitter, in order to spread propaganda, recruit new followers, and conduct psychological warfare. In addition to a plethora of unofficial accounts, IS has several dedicated accounts and an entire media wing called Al-Furqan. The readily available and easy-to-use platform of social media has allowed the terror group and others like it to spread their message and garner support. When their accounts are shut down, they start

new ones that often masquerade as accounts concerned about the social welfare of Muslims or as charity organizations.

Lewis, Jessica D. "Al Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent," *Middle East Security Report 14*, Institute for the Study of War, September 2013.
This report details the revival of al Qaeda in Iraq in 2012–13 after its initial degradation throughout much of 2007–08. Vehicle-borne improvised explosive device attacks remained its signature after the U.S. withdrawal in 2011. The article analyzes AQI's "Breaking the Walls" campaign, which sought to establish governance across Iraq and Syria while aiming to retake territory it had formally controlled.

———. "Al Qaeda in Iraq Resurgent, Part II," *Middle East Security Report 15*, Institute for the Study of War, September 2013.
This report supplements the previous one by focusing on the geography, volume, interval, and selected targets that characterized al Qaeda in Iraq's waves of violence and prison attacks. It proceeds to detail the evolution of AQI's military organization over 2012–13. AQI's capabilities are assessed in the context of operational planning and how this reorganizes AQI as a military organization as opposed to a leadercentric terrorist organization.

———. "AQI's 'Soldier's Harvest' Campaign," *Backgrounder,* Institute for the Study of War, October 9, 2013.
This report examines the campaign launched by al Qaeda in Iraq in late 2013 to control key terrain in Iraq while targeting any Sunnis who work for the government. By analyzing the contest for control between AQI and the Iraqi Security Forces, this report documents the intimidation and displacement of Iraqi soldiers and government officials by AQI.

Lia, Brynjar. "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (August 2015): 31-41.
With the rise of the Islamic State and its proclamation that it is indeed an actual state, comparing IS to other past and present "jihadi proto-states" is important in order to better understand it. The comparison allows for a better look at the common features of these types of states and a better look into understanding their aggressive tactics. While the jihadi proto-state is not a new phenomenon, the rate and number of attempts and successes have increased since 2011. The author states that each of these proto-states has four common characteristics: they are intensely ideological, internationalist, territorially expansive, and irredentist. The governments tend to be harsh and repressive, are often established to combat rival Islamists, and depend on the support of external constituencies.

Lister, Charles. "Profiling the Islamic State," *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* 13, November 2014.
This report provides a detailed overview of IS, from its origins to its presence as of 2014, and provides analyses on its objectives and issues regarding the use of foreign fighters. "Part II: The Islamic State Today" provides information on the group's policies, military strategies, and governance of controlled areas. The section regarding foreign fighters flows into policy recommendations for countering ISIS. The recommendations include stopping IS's revenue flows, disrupting manpower and resources, targeting the group's leadership, countering their propaganda, and stabilizing Iraq and Syria.

Malik, Shiv, Ali Younes, Spencer Ackerman, and Mustafa Khalili. "How ISIS Crippled al Qaida," *Guardian,* June 10, 2015.
The inside story of the coup that brought al Qaeda to the brink of collapse. IS has not simply eclipsed al Qaeda on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq and in the competition for funding and new recruits; according to a series of exclusive interviews with senior jihadi ideologues, IS has successfully launched a "coup" against AQ to destroy it from within. As a consequence, they now admit, AQ—as an idea and an organization—is now on the verge of collapse.

Price, Brian, Dan Milton, Muhammad al-Ubaydi, and Nelly Lahoud. *The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State,* Combating Terrorism Center, December 2014.
This report from the CTC provides a thorough look at the Islamic State. It shows the origins and formation of the group and identifies its operational strengths and weaknesses. It also compares IS to other militant/extremist groups that the U.S. has fought against and concludes with an examination of the strategic challenges and opportunities faced by countries engaged in counterterrorism efforts against IS.

Solomon, Erika, Robin Kwong, and Steven Bernard, "Inside ISIS Inc.: The Journey of a Barrel of Oil," *Financial Times,* October 14, 2015.
Liberally illustrated with maps, this article traces one barrel of oil from extraction to ultimate destination to explain the hold ISIS has over Syria's oil fields and oil trade.

Walt, Vivienne. "ISIS Makes a Fortune From Smuggling Migrants Says Report," May 13, 2015,

"The movement of migrants across the Middle East and Africa towards Europe has generated up to $323 million for the Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria and other jihadist groups, a new report has revealed. . . . [W]hile E.U. officials anguish over the plight of people crossing the Mediterranean to get to Europe, the migration has proved an invaluable business opportunity for groups like ISIS. So valuable that international crime experts believe ISIS might have launched some attacks specifically in order to drive people to flee, and then profit from their flight."

Weaver, Mary Anne. "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi." *Atlantic* (Web edition), June 8, 2006.
This article provides a detailed account of al-Zarqawi's transition from a violent gang member to a jihadi fighting in Afghanistan and finally into the leader of AQI.

Weiss, Michael, and Hassan Hassan. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror.* New York: Regan Arts, 2015.
This book starts by describing the growth and development of IS and highlights their use of propaganda, executions, and use of foreign recruits to expand their presence in the Middle East. It profiles key members and tells their history before they joined the group and explains what role they had in the evolution of IS. The authors discuss the impact of what is described as "political and military maneuvering" by the U.S., Iran, Iraq, and Syria and how this has impacted IS's expansion. Through interviews with U.S. military and IS members, the authors shed light on internal struggles within IS and how the group's hatred for Shias is causing another war in the region.

Winter, Charles. "Islamic State Propaganda: Key Elements of the Group's Messaging," *Terrorism Monitor* 13, no. 12 (June 12, 2015).

Following IS's lightning-fast expansion in the Middle East and beyond, rarely a day passes without it securing a place in the headlines. This is the inevitable outcome of the group's well-honed messaging strategy, which skillfully uses social media to project its propaganda globally. By dissecting and examining the various strands of IS's propaganda, narrative, and brand, this article deals with the message itself, focusing on how the group has gained such international traction.

———. *Documenting the Virtual "Caliphate": Understanding ISIL's Propaganda Strategy,* Quilliam Foundation, July 2015.

"In the Quilliam Foundation's latest research into IS propaganda, Senior Researcher Charlie Winter presents us with a truly ground-breaking window into the mind of the propagandist, demystifying the media war more than ever before. Between 17 July and 15 August 2015, the Islamic month of Shawwal, Charlie compiled an exhaustive archive of IS propaganda, creating not just a snapshot of its output, but a comprehensive, 30-day view of it. ... When it comes to IS propaganda, it is imperative that we understand it in as granular and nuanced a manner as possible. Using data to test the hypothesis of the July 2015 report *The Virtual "Caliphate": Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy,* Charlie has illuminated the bare bones of the IS brand." (p. 4)

Zelin, Aaron. "The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria Has a Consumer Protection Office," *Atlantic*, June 13, 2014.

IS seeks to control every aspect of life in the areas that it has captured. This is part of a greater strategy of governance, which includes social services religious lectures, billboard campaigns, and a functioning Sharia court system. It is important to the group's propaganda and recruitment efforts that it presents the image of being a functioning state and divert some attention away from its normal campaign of terror.

———. "Picture or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (August 2015): 85-97.

The author conducted a study that tracked, examined, and analyzed a week's worth of IS official media releases. It found that the majority of IS social media output covers military activities, trainings and attacks, governance, preaching, moral policing and morality. The study also revealed that the group tends to rely on imagery more than words, especially highlighting the beauty of its territories.