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Global Ambitions: The Rise of Islamic State Affiliates and Countering Expansion

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Abstract

Since IS announced its caliphate in 2014, it has been posing challenges to those trying to counter the organization. One new challenge this organization is posing to policy-makers is the rise of IS affiliates. This paper will examine the increase and prevalence of IS affiliates linking them to IS' sophisticated expansion strategy. Further, IS affiliates enable it to expand its reach and further destabilize countries by exploiting governance vacuums and making local conflicts more deadly. The U.S.-led Coalition to "degrade and destroy" IS has only just begun to factor affiliates into strategies to counter the organization. Therefore, affiliates have indeed exposed gaps in current counter-IS doctrine. Most important being that airstrikes and training missions can serve to roll back IS but does not begin to solve the problem of affiliates. Moving forward it is recommended that the Coalition focus on the following strategies to counter IS-affiliates: severing the link between the organization and its affiliates; improving local security forces; disaggregation; and, improving political and governance structures. Though some of these strategies have been utilized in core territory in Iraq and Syria, the Coalition could certainly look to expand its current mandate into affiliate regions to counter the new threat.

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Introduction

The civil war in Syria and the advances of the Islamic State¹ (hereinafter referred to as IS) and other radical groups in both Iraq and Syria have resulted in hundreds of thousands of individuals killed and injured, millions displaced, and millions more unable to meet even their most basic needs. The ongoing war and resulting instability in these countries has provided an ideal setting for IS to flourish and gain dominance.² Upon announcing its caliphate³ in 2014, the organization threatened to unravel Middle East borders and destabilize and topple governments in the region. IS' strategy of expansion - to gain affiliates - has enabled it to move steadily towards these goals. In 2016, a white house official stated that, "the terrorist threat today is broader, more diffuse and less predictable than at any time since 9/11," affiliates are adding to the increasing uncertainty.⁴ As this paper will illustrate, IS affiliates⁵ have caused an expansion of IS' geographic scope beyond the core territory in Iraq and Syria. This has created new challenges for the anti-IS Coalition led by the United States (U.S.). These affiliates pose a real threat to the West and to the rest of the world, as they enable IS to expand its reach and contribute to deadly

¹ Though the Islamic State goes by many different names in the media and by different political figures, such as, ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or their Arabic name Daesh (Da'ish), I will refer to the Islamic State as the "Islamic State" in this paper as I argue that it is their unique state-like characteristics that give them the most strength, and it is this defining feature that has caused the growth of IS affiliates. Since IS declared a caliphate in 2014, they referred to themselves as the "Islamic State" to reflect its claim of global dominion. McCants, 2015.

² Ignatius, David 2015

³ The idea of the "Caliphate" is not a new phenomenon. A caliphate is an area containing an Islamic steward known as a "caliph," who is a person considered a religious successor to the Islamic Prophet, Muhammad. For centuries, the Caliphate claimed dominion over all the world's Muslims, however, it was abolished in 1924. The caliphate was how Muslims organized themselves after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. Restoring the caliphate has been a vision at the forefront of many jihadists groups. Searching for the "caliph" became tradition in Islam's Sunni tradition. Vick, 2014.

⁴ Seftel, 2016

⁵ By affiliates, I mean IS provinces. Further, this means groups in other countries outside of Iraq and Syria who are pledged allegiance to IS. Once these groups pledge allegiance to IS, they become provinces, thereby expanding the geographic scope of the group.

regional conflicts.⁶ Additionally, IS striking in regions beyond Iraq and Syria makes its movements more difficult to anticipate and therefore prevent.⁷ IS has declared *wilayats*⁸ (provinces) in parts of Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and the Caucasus to be part of its global expansion plan.⁹ With the rise of the organization's affiliates, the world is beginning to witness a new, bigger threat, with growing consequences, which this paper seeks to explore.

This paper will first provide a brief summary of *Jihadi Proto States* (hereinafter referred to as JPS or proto states) and state-building ambitions set out by these states to demonstrate that IS' actions carried out are not a new phenomenon. It will then explore IS' expansion strategies to explain where the vision of affiliates originated and how these affiliates have come to be a central part of the organization's core strategy.¹⁰ This paper will then analyze the ever-growing phenomenon of IS affiliates to demonstrate the trend happening in the Middle East and Africa. The paper will conclude by discussing current counter-strategies to date, policy gaps, and then propose policy recommendations for moving forward, as well as Canada's role to play in countering affiliates. This paper will aim to: 1. Explain how affiliates are an important part of IS strategy; 2. Explain the dangers associated with IS affiliates and why they have been able to flourish; 3. Explain the increase and prevalence of IS affiliates; 4. Analyze gaps in counter-IS strategies and

⁶ Byman, 2016

⁷ Schuchter, 2015

⁸ The term *wilayat* meaning, governorate, province, or authority was used under the Ottoman Empire and older caliphates to describe provinces, each with a governor (wali) exercising day-to-day authority under the suzerainty of the caliph. Kilcullen, 2015.

⁹ IS has also started to expand into parts of South Asia, but for this paper the argument will be narrowed to affiliates in the Middle East and other countries close by, as they are having and have had the most detrimental, and destabilizing consequences in recent years, though, it is still important to make a brief mention of IS' territorial expansion into these regions to demonstrate the full scope of IS' expansion.

¹⁰ For the purpose of this paper, the IS core refers to the territory controlled by IS in Iraq and Syria as per the ISIS Sanctuary Maps published by the Institute for the Study of War.

review attempts to date (if any) to limit IS affiliates; 5. Identify and evaluate additional policy approaches to counter IS and its affiliates; and 6. Consider the ways in which Canada can contribute to these efforts. While much has been written on the Islamic State, the general purpose of this paper is to frame affiliates in a new way. Affiliates are posing new dangers both in the Middle East and abroad; however, policy approaches to mitigate IS are not yet well integrated to include this facet of IS that is expanding and progressing.

In conclusion, this paper will argue that IS' expansion and increase of affiliates has indeed exposed gaps in policies to counter the organization. IS affiliates are posing imminent threats in the regions they reside that requires action from Western powers. Our strategies must be versatile, and continually adapt along with the threat and include more than military action.

This paper will recommend that the U.S.-led Coalition should first, focus its efforts on a comprehensive offensive strategy that will serve to sever the link between the IS core and its affiliates in other countries. Second, it will recommend that the Coalition increasingly work to build the capacity of local security forces in affiliate regions to aid in containing this threat. Third, that the Coalition utilize a strategy of disaggregation to form relationships with local actors to win over the hearts and minds of the population and stem the appeal of the IS rhetoric. Finally, it will recommend that the Coalition engage in an extensive political strategy with the aim of improving governance in the regions in which IS is located.

Chapter 1: Jihadi Proto-States and *Wilayats*

Although IS took much of the world by surprise in June 2014, with its announcement of its caliphate, the organization and its forebears had been proclaiming it as a goal for

many years.¹¹ The rise of the self-proclaimed “Islamic State,” first in Iraq and Syria, and more recently in other regions in the Middle East and abroad, has brought to the forefront issues of territories governed by jihadi groups. Attempts to form proto-states have been a constant feature of contemporary jihadism for the past 25 years, as doing so represents a bid for increased power and influence vis-à-vis rival Islamists.¹² However, recently, the Middle East has seen such attempts multiply and succeed to a greater extent than in the past with the growth of IS. JPS’ have distinct characteristics: they are intensely ideological; internationalist; territorially expansive and irredentist; and devote significant resources to effective, harsh governance. This chapter will frame the background for IS’ ambitions of an “ideal” state.¹³ This ideal state must encompass a Muslim *caliphate*, or *emirate*¹⁴ that is a defining feature for Jihadist¹⁵ groups and has come to be a defining feature for IS.

As mentioned, the state-building and expansion the Middle East is seeing with IS is not a new phenomenon. This type of “state like” behaviour with the goal of building an “ideal” state has been around for several decades. Islamist extremist groups in the contemporary jihadist movement, the most well-known of which being al-Qaeda, dates back to the late-1980s. A significant number of JPS existed during this period. However, the levels of territorial control these proto-states acquired, the size of their claimed

¹¹ Ignatius, 2015

¹² As Brynjar Lia argues, “This uncompromising strategy pursued by jihadi proto-states is a result of the intense rivalry with other Islamist rebels as well as the proto state’s dependence on external “global jihadi” constituencies whose allegiance and support can only be maintained by demonstrating a high ideological commitment.” Lia, 2015.

¹³ in the eyes of Jihadists.

¹⁴ “Emirate” means a principality and usually refers to a territory ruled by an emir. In early Islamic history, emirates often came to denote local Muslim principalities or small kingdoms nominally subordinate to the Islamic Caliphate, established as part of Islam’s steady expansion eastwards and westwards. Lia, 2015. There can only be one caliphate in any strict sense of the term, but there can be many emirates.

¹⁵ By “jihadists” I mean, the ideology of al-Qaeda and other militant Islamist groups who refer to themselves as jihadis. Though, this definition has become slightly more problematic and convoluted with the rise of IS. *ibid.*

territory, their longevity, and their ability to attract and host foreign fighters all varied immensely.¹⁶ The Islamic State represents a specific type of JPS, with millions of people under its rule, a territory larger than the United Kingdom, and an extensive bureaucracy, police force, and other state attributes. At the other end, there have been smaller groups with lower levels of complexity and state-building capacity. Until recently, the two most successful JPS in the eyes of the jihadists were the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Shabaab in Somalia.¹⁷ Since the Arab Spring¹⁸ in 2011, there has been a significant upsurge in JPS’.

Despite numerous differences, proto-states share a number of important characteristics, the most significant being that they are all highly ideological. Their establishment is justified solely by the ideological imperative to establish Shari’ah (Sharia),¹⁹ and wage jihad against God’s enemies. To demonstrate their ideological purity and allegiance to the jihadi movement’s goals of liberating “Muslim lands” and establishing “God’s rule,” JPS’ are eager to expand and publicize their acts. Other characteristics of these proto states are that they are all *internationalist* projects (illustrated by their desire and ability to attract foreign fighters), and all display aggressive behaviour vis-à-vis both neighboring states and the international community.

For JPS’, international terrorism is considered to be a legitimate means for future

¹⁶ Lia, 2015

¹⁷ In October 1997, the Taliban proclaimed itself to be “The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” and by 2000 it controlled 90% of the country, even after its fall from power in Kabul in 2001, the Taliban’s emirate retained a significant degree of local control throughout Afghanistan. In Somalia, the Shabaab rebel movement controlled an expansive amount of territory from 2007 onward. The Shabaab had an administrative structure of *wilayats* similar to what this paper will examine with IS, in terms of permanent territorial control and providing some measure of civilian services. *ibid.*

¹⁸ Arab Spring refers to the democratic uprisings that arose independently and spread across the Arab world in 2011. The movement originated in Tunisia in December 2010 and quickly took hold in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Jordan .Jones, 2013.

¹⁹ Shari’ah means to “rule according to what God revealed” in Islam. It is the divine law of Islam.

territorial expansion. A final and key characteristic of JPS' is their commitment to effective governance. When controlling territory, JPS' have proven more effective at administering and governing their territories and civilian populations than recognized governments.²⁰ Effective governance is becoming an essential characteristic in IS affiliate regions. The characteristics of proto-states will be explored in further detail throughout this paper.

Over the past 25 years, jihadist groups have repeatedly declared the formation of “Islamic States,” or *emirates* in the Muslim world. However, very few of these proto-states have survived for more than a year, and even fewer have actually controlled territory in any meaningful sense. Although the Taliban and Al Shabaab have had some success, most others have failed completely (or almost completely). In most of these cases, the jihadis vowed to form “emirates” or “states” from territories whose prospects for survival were poor to begin with.²¹ Moreover, many JPS were declared only to challenge local authorities or rival Islamist organizations, and acted aggressively vis-à-vis the outside world with harsh implementation of Sharia laws that put undue international pressure on nascent JPS.²²

IS has signaled a new era of state-building for jihadist groups.²³ In its first incarnation in 2006²⁴ (known as the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI)),²⁵ though it failed to become a state,

²⁰ Lia, 2015

²¹ *ibid*

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ IS has gone by many different names. As Daniel Byman notes in *ISIS Goes Global*, ISIS itself also began as an al-Qaeda franchise. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi emerged as a leader of jihadist forces in Iraq. In 2004, he pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden and changed his organization's name from the Organization of Monotheism and Jihad to al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI). After Zarqawi's death, in 2006, the group took on other names, including the Islamic State of Iraq. In 2013, the group renamed itself “The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” designating Iraq and Syria as its heartland.

the organization learned that in order to ensure establishment of a proto-state, it had to have popular support. Although a lack of such support led to its near defeat on several occasions²⁶, IS and the idea it represented continued to live on through its state-building enterprises. For example, because of its state-building ambitions, it has done everything to maintain momentum, such as, extensive media campaigns and non-military activities to implement Shari'ah.²⁷ Upon announcing a caliphate in 2014, the state-like behaviour IS exhibited was what allowed it to contain and consolidate power. IS has continued to survive and is now the most internationalist and ideologically hardline JPS the world has ever witnessed. It is clear that this organization will continue to grow and expand its caliphate (in any way that it can), causing further disorder.

Chapter 2: The IS Core and Expansion

This chapter will provide a brief overview of the IS core, placing specific emphasis on IS' strategy of expansion, which has determined most of the organization's core strategies. It will also demonstrate how acquiring territory and provinces has been central to IS' strategy from the beginning. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abu Musab al Zarqawi²⁸ (original founder of IS – though known by a different name back then- “Ahmad Fadhil Nazzal al- Khalaylah”) envisioned a caliphate and concentrated his

²⁵ IS roots go back to 2006 in its first incarnation when it was known as the Islamic State of Iraq. The group was first formed then by uniting several groups led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. At this time, the group did not declare a caliphate.

²⁶ For example, in 2008, ISI was almost destroyed due to its brutality, zealotry, and arrogant beliefs that did not resonate with its population.

²⁷ Lia, 2015

²⁸ In 1999, fresh out of prison, Zarqawi arrived in Afghanistan looking to gather money and recruits for his cause from al-Qaeda's leaders. By the beginning of 2001, he had begun to think and plan strategically for the future, argues William McCants, and the Taliban's strict enforcement of Islamic Law resonated with Zarqawi. Zarqawi joined al-Qaeda in 2004 and frequently urged them to “develop and consolidate” an “emirate” inside the Sunni areas of Iraq. To this end, it can be observed that Zarqawi envisioned a “caliphate”. McCants, 2015.

strategies accordingly.²⁹ During that period, IS itself emerged as an al-Qaeda franchise. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama bin Laden in 2004 and changed his organization's name from the "Organization of Monotheism and Jihad to al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI)". Following Zarqawi's death, in 2006, the group took on a number of other names, including the Islamic State of Iraq. In 2013, the group renamed itself "The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham" -designating both Iraq and Syria as its heartland. Through all these years, this idea of the caliphate *reborn*³⁰ originally envisioned by Zarqawi permeated IS' direction and the accompanying expansion strategy has led the organization to numerous successes. This explains why IS has been much more powerful than JPS' in the past, and why this factor is key to analyze.

After seizing the world's attention with its capture of Iraq's second-largest city in 2014,³¹ IS initially prioritized state-building over fighting enemies abroad.³² The organization originally dominated land stretching from Mosul to the outskirts of Aleppo in Syria³³; however, it has recently lost territory as a result of containment strategies by the U.S.-led Coalition.³⁴ With the arrival of IS in Iraq, the caliphate was reborn. Al-

²⁹ Since his initial conception of the Islamic State in Iraq, Zarqawi has always envisioned an expansion of Muslim lands. In the early years, he made one such statement that indicated these territorial ambitions: "First we will expel the enemy, then we will establish the state of Islam, after that, the jihadists would embark on conquest of Muslim lands to reclaim them." Prior to the Iraq war in 2003, Zarqawi conceived of establishing the Islamic State as the core of a caliphate. The subsequent conflict in Iraq presented an ideal opportunity for realizing this vision. *ibid.*

³⁰ By caliphate reborn, I mean that Zarqawi capitalized on the history of this notion to achieve his own goals. He took a familiar and traditional idea and modernized it for a new warfare against infidels. Because of the reconceptualization of this historical idea, Zarqawi has been very successful in drawing followers to his cause.

³¹ The day the Islamic State announced its caliphate (the first day of Ramadan), its fighters converged on Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq. Days later, they raised the organization's flag over the city government buildings. Because this caliphate was already seen throughout history, it had vast resonance for Muslims around the world, but especially for Salafi Jihadists, whose efforts were nominally in the service of that goal. McCants, 2015.

³² Hamid, 2015

³³ McCants, 2015

³⁴ The most recent ISIS Sanctuary Map published by the Institute for the study of war show that since May 25th, 2016 IS militants have lost control of the city of Fallujah, but have launched attacks in Lebanon and

Baghdadi³⁵ renamed Caliph Ibrahim al-Baghdadi, believed that this meant that all Muslims now had to kneel to him. By aspiring to the caliphate, Zarqawi wanted to unite Muslims, and IS challenged the conventional wisdom³⁶ demonstrating that there is no need to overthrow Muslim countries to make a caliphate nor is there a need for persuasion of Muslim countries to declare a caliphate. Instead, IS exhibited that all that was required was conquering land and declaring its own. Unlike any other rebel jihadi pretenders to the caliphate in the modern Middle East, IS had the money, fighters, weapons, and land to make a plausible case that it was the caliph reborn. Put simply, the organization was becoming too powerful to be dismissed.³⁷

IS is also able to gain dominance using a structure of *wilayat* or “provinces” each with its own governor, and local government beneath them, as well as a series of administrative units - in many ways replicating a typical government bureaucracy.³⁸ IS intends not only to remain in Iraq and Syria, but also to “expand” around the world starting with Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East through its *wilayat*³⁹ structure. The organization today is a powerful proto-state actor that is reshaping the region.⁴⁰

on the Jordanian border. IS continues to lose territory in Iraq. ISW has assessed that as IS continues to lose core territory it will mount attacks in neighbouring countries. Retrieved from:
http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/isis-sanctuary-map-may-25-2016?utm_source=ISIS+Sanctuary+Map%3A+May+25%2C+2016&utm_campaign=ISIS+Sanctuary+Map%3A++April+22%2C+2016&utm_medium=email The ISIS Sanctuary Maps will be consulted as the paper evolves

³⁵ The current leader of IS

³⁶ Though all Jihadists fight to restore the caliphate, most see it as a distant goal, a primary reason being that Muslims are too divided.

³⁷ McCants, 2015

³⁸ Berger and Stern, 2015

³⁹ Herein after referred to as affiliates as some *wilayats* are not yet full provinces.

⁴⁰ Willams, 2015

IS' Strategy of Expansion

Unlike Osama bin Laden,⁴¹ who viewed terrorism as a prologue to a caliphate he did not expect to see in his lifetime and whose organization operated a geographically diffuse network of cells, IS requires territory to retain legitimacy. Consequentially, expansion is integral.⁴² IS' strategy is to control territory, steadily consolidating and expanding its position to expand its dominance and ultimately create a government where Muslims can live under Islamic Law.⁴³ To date, it has been able to carry out a methodical and multi-staged strategy of recovery, growth, expansion and consolidation.

The strength of the organization depends largely on its ability to build state capacity and expand. While counter efforts are diminishing its state capacity in Iraq and Syria, IS is still currently able to expand into other territories. IS leverages combined political-military strategies to secure, build, and expand the control of its caliphate.⁴⁴ The organization adopted the slogan “enduring and expanding” following several near-defeats in its early years, and the message has since become central to its strategies.⁴⁵ In order to gain dominance, IS crafted a series of complex alliances with Sunni Arab tribes in Iraq, including with tribes that did not necessarily share its extreme ideology.⁴⁶ The Islamic State believes that the prophecy (of a Muslim caliphate) requires the conquest of every

⁴¹ bin Laden was the founder of al-Qaeda

⁴² Wood, 2015

⁴³ Byman, 2015

⁴⁴ Lewis, 2014

⁴⁵ In 2007, when IS was surrounded on all sides in Iraq, its first *emir* (caliph) adopted the slogan “enduring”. This slogan gained prominence after near defeat in 2008 and again when the organization started to make a comeback in 2010; IS then moved into Syria adopting the slogan “expanding”, meaning that it was now on the march into other areas . McCants, 2015.

⁴⁶ Berger and Stern, 2015

country on earth. For example IS believes that, “This religion will reach everywhere day and night reach,”⁴⁷ The Prophet had foretold, so IS determined to make it a reality.

Consequently, IS’ political vision is first realized by establishing control of a territory.

IS’ strategy as stated in an issue of *Dabiq*⁴⁸ is as follows:

1. Permanently break down political boundaries in Iraq, Syria, and the region by cultivating conditions for government failure and/or sectarian civil war.
2. Establish the Islamic Caliphate by controlling terrain across Iraq and Syria, governing population within and defending against external threats.
3. Bring like-minded people to fight alongside and settle within the Islamic caliphate.
4. Expand the territory of the caliphate and connect to the wider Muslim community, or the Ummah.⁴⁹

It is the last two of these four strategic pillars with which this paper will be concerned.

Taken together, this strategy means that IS relies on military superiority to seize control of land and cities from modern states.

IS has a pattern of expanding, developing, and then consolidating power. Originally ad-hoc, IS now conducts systematic expansion that allows it to act consistently across provinces and between core and periphery territories. As part of its expansion plan, the organization is executing a coherent global strategy across three geographic spheres that give it resiliency and allows it to pressure adversaries from multiple directions (regions).

⁵⁰ The first, the Interior Ring, is the territory it controls in Iraq and Syria (also known as “core” territory). The primary mission for this ring was aggressive defence, although it has recently been put on the offensive with loss of territory. The other two geographic

⁴⁷ McCants, 2015

⁴⁸ Dabiq is the name of the English propaganda magazine written by IS that is used as a recruitment tool. Dabiq is also the name of a village captured in Syria that was one of the villages that was prophesied to fall to jihadists. McCants, 2015, p.103.

⁴⁹ Lewis, 2014

⁵⁰ Gambhir, 2015

rings are the Near Abroad Ring and the Far Abroad Ring.⁵¹ The Near Abroad ring is part of the primary mission of IS expansion through the creation of regional affiliates, and reflects the “Islamic Lands” that IS intends to organize into its caliphate. The Far Abroad Ring is the primary mission of IS in disruption and preparation of the battlefield for its global jihadist movement. IS presence in this ring is less concentrated than in the other two, but is important to note as IS also aspires to global subjugation of non-Islamic lands.⁵² IS’ campaigns in the Interior, Near Abroad, and Far Abroad rings are distinct, simultaneous, and mutually supporting. For example, an IS enthusiast tweeted, “the Islamic State has no borders, and its conquests will continue, with God’s permission”.⁵³ These three geographic rings allow it to break down state borders and will be discussed in further detail in chapter three of this paper.

IS’ caliphate is the key to its global ambitions. The structure of IS’ caliphate makes it different from other insurgencies, terrorist networks, and JPS’ who have attempted to establish a valid state. Although IS does utilize insurgencies and terrorist tactics to its advantage, its strategy of “enduring and expanding” its state means that it must also maintain lands, cities, and populations. Without these things it will fail. Therefore, the organization will utilize vast terrain and regional networks to ensure survival. IS will also seek to renew itself by expanding to new, occasionally non-contiguous territory.

Since IS utilizes control and development of territories as a method of commanding local populations, establishing a caliphate in Iraq and Syria was merely the beginning. The

⁵¹ *ibid*

⁵² For the purposes of this paper, only the first two rings will be explored. Though it is important to mention the third ring as it pertains to IS’ expansion strategy, but is outside the realm of this argument. IS’ far abroad campaign involves encouraging and resourcing terrorist tactics in the Western World. IS hopes the Western states and societies will target and alienate Muslim communities due to these attacks, in a way that pushes those populations away from the global community and toward the Caliphate. Retrieved from: www.understandingwar.org

⁵³ McCants, 2015, p. 124

organization is seeking not only an indefinite geographical expansion of the caliphate's physical boundaries, but also an expansion of its global influence in order to further support the viability of the caliphate.⁵⁴

Chapter 3: The Growth of IS Affiliates

IS' growing variety of affiliates highlights both the organization's complexity and global reach. Expansion beyond the caliphate can help IS to bolster its capacity, particularly in light of recent territorial losses in Iraq and Syria, that has consequently been presenting a growing challenge to international efforts attempting to defeat it.⁵⁵ Individually, IS' affiliates also pose a significant threat to the regions in which they are located: they enable IS to expand its reach and make local groups more deadly in their regional conflicts as resources and ideologies are dispersed. The provinces are also posing a serious threat to Western interests. As Daniel Byman argues⁵⁶, "Hotbeds of jihad that have not yet exported terrorism to the West may do so in the future if local groups strengthen their ties to ISIS".

What the world is now witnessing is that IS is executing a sophisticated global strategy that involves simultaneous efforts in Iraq and Syria, the Middle East, and North Africa and that is slowly progressing into parts of Asia.⁵⁷ Moreover, it is certainly not the organization's intention to stop there. This paper specifically focuses on affiliates most dangerous in the Middle East and parts of Africa. On November 10th, 2014, IS announced that it had received oaths of allegiance from jihadists in Libya, Yemen, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt's Sinai. When this took place, Baghdadi stated:

⁵⁴ Khatib, 2015

⁵⁵ Tanco and Rahmani, 2016

⁵⁶ Byman, 2016, so far, however, no ISIS province has attacked targets in the West.

⁵⁷ Gambhir, 2015

“We give you good news by announcing the expansion of the Islamic State into new lands, to the lands of Saudi Arabia and Yemen, to Egypt, Libya and Algeria, we announce the acceptance of *bayah*⁵⁸ of those who gave us *bayah* in those lands, the nullification of the groups, therein the announcement of new *wilayat* (provinces) for the Islamic State, and the appointment of leaders for them.”⁵⁹

This meant that lands claimed in these countries were no longer independent, but rather, provinces in the new caliphate. The announcement marked the debut of the first IS affiliates. It also signified an expansion of the proto-state itself beyond previously established borders in the core territory, once again signaling IS’ intention to use affiliated insurgent forces in geographically distant regions for expansion and control. IS’ successful mobilization and retention of affiliates means that the organization is no longer bound within Iraq and Syria.⁶⁰ By mid-2015, IS’ affiliates had been established in Barqah, Tripoli and Sirte and Fezzan in Libya, as well as Algeria, Tunisia Egypt’s Sinai Desert, Sanaa and Aden-Abyan in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan-Pakistan (Khorasan) Nigeria, and the Caucasus. There were also numerous affiliates within the core IS territory in Syria and Iraq, acting as administrative subdivisions of the organization.⁶¹

Unlike al-Qaeda affiliates (guerilla or terrorist groups operating of their own accord, in their own regions, furthering their own interests as part of a global insurgent strategy), IS affiliates are more like overseas provinces of an empire or colonial possessions of a nation state, pursuing the parent state’s interest at the expense of their own agendas. IS’

⁵⁸ Bayah, is an oath of loyalty first utilized in the control of the Al Qaeda network, that adds a religious obligation to relationships (Stern and Berger, p. 179). The concept of Bayan in classical Islam refers to a reciprocal contract between the ruler and the ruled, with the latter giving his allegiance to the leader-usually the caliph- in exchange for protection and political and military leadership. Wagemakers, 2015.

⁵⁹ McCants, 2015, p. 140

⁶⁰ Hamid, 2015

⁶¹ Kilcullen, 2015, p. 127

affiliates are formal territorial, legal, and political entities within the caliphate. Their borders and populations are mostly undefined, and they are administered by governors appointed or approved by Baghdadi; and some governing in line with IS policy. With some affiliates, there are barely any links beyond carrying out terrorist attacks, but for some of the bigger affiliates the access to significant resources will allow them to build more strength.⁶² IS affiliates, like their al-Qaeda parallels come in all different shapes and sizes. Will McCants⁶³ characterizes affiliates in three ways: *statelet*-a governorate that holds territory and operates like a state; *insurgency*- a governorate that occupies territory, but cannot always hold it, and is unwilling or unable to perform functions of a state; and, terrorist organization- a governorate that holds no territory and can only operate clandestinely. Most comprise some form of a terrorist organization before IS coopts them, or before the group seeks membership. The organization's strongest affiliate is in Libya, where the affiliate represents statelets.⁶⁴

In terms of its affiliates, IS has consistently placed focus on three parallel tracks: inciting regional conflict with attacks in Iraq and Syria; building relationships with jihadist groups that can carry out military operations across the Middle East and North Africa; and inspiring and sometimes helping sympathizers carry out attacks in the West. These three aims are in line with IS' original, broader strategy of expansion as outlined in the first edition of *Dabiq* and examined in chapter 2 of this paper. The intent here is that through regional affiliates and efforts to create chaos, the organization could be able to

⁶² Groups' contact IS leadership and present military and organizational plans of action, then pledge allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi. IS leadership accepts the oaths, publicly acknowledges the province, and either appoints a new leader or endorses an existing one. The new provinces then have access to training, funding, foreign fighters, as well as access to IS' media campaign and IS then is able to expand its global reach and deepen strategic and political resilience. Raghavan, 2016.

⁶³ McCants, 2015

⁶⁴ Watts, 2016

endure and expand should it lose most of its territory in the core.⁶⁵ Rather than build new provinces from the ground up, IS has typically coopted existing jihadist organizations.⁶⁶

IS' expansion strategy includes several components. First, the organization attempts to attract new members by exploiting personal and factional grievances within established jihadist networks. Second, it provides funds to potential members to encourage defections (collected through smuggling oil, kidnapping extortion, and smuggling antiquities in Iraq and Syria, among other activities). Third, IS uses its victories in Iraq and Syria to attract recruits. Locals appear to be attracted by the organization's successes on the battlefield, a notion that IS has exploited primarily through a sophisticated social media campaign.⁶⁷ Social media is becoming important for affiliates, for example, use of social media allows affiliates to attract attention, and IS' social media proliferation across a wide range of affiliates has been interpreted as a strong sign of its growing network.⁶⁸

Accepting the IS label often leads local jihadist groups to shift their tactics and ideologies. Intrinsicly linked to IS' state-building efforts and in line with its governance is an important ideological⁶⁹ aspect: that is, that IS portrays itself as a movement devoted to defending the rights of disenfranchised, disaffected and repressed Sunni communities. The organization is promoting a narrative in line with its territorial expansion efforts that allows it to attract new followers and foreign recruits, and subsequently further legitimize IS as a state. In both Iraq and Syria, IS presented itself simultaneously as an army and an alternative "state" to defend against and replace repressive or failed political systems

⁶⁵ Gambhir, 2015

⁶⁶ Raghavan, 2016

⁶⁷ Jones, 2016

⁶⁸ Watts, 2016

⁶⁹ Though IS is driven by an extreme apocalyptic Salafi-Jihadi ideology, this is an uncontested fact, due to the fact that IS is ideological at heart and is seeking to overthrow the existing world order with its caliphate. It is important to focus on another ideological aspect that is less obvious to the world that drives its ability to provide governance in areas it acquires territory or recruits.

perceived as oppressive to Sunni Muslims. In doing so, it reached out and gained support of local tribal leaders and further cemented support. While local groups may be attracted to IS for a wide variety of reasons, one reason is undoubtedly conviction: IS has effectively tapped into important beliefs of and important subset of Sunni Muslims, and individuals and groups have in turn affiliated themselves with the organization to “elevate their cause”.

Dangers of IS Affiliates

IS’ strength is rooted in its ability to translate military power into political control by coopting local groups and then providing essential state functions. IS is attempting to preserve itself by extending operations outside of Iraq and Syria. In doing so, the organization advances its regional and global campaigns and ensures that even if the core is diminished, it may still be able to maintain authority through affiliates. Global operations provide IS with strategic resiliency in case it loses terrain in Iraq and Syria, which suggests that IS can encourage or direct Near and Far Abroad activities in order to achieve asymmetric effects.

As noted, IS provinces pose a serious threat to Western interests as they enable IS to expand its reach while making local groups more deadly in their regional conflicts.⁷⁰ IS’ global operations allow it to place stress on multiple fronts at once. For example, the organization engaged in combat in Iraq and Syria, coordinated with jihadist groups planning explosive attacks in Libya, and resourced a cell planning attacks in Belgium in 2015.⁷¹ IS has also fostered relationships with militant networks in Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Nigeria, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. As the organization nurtures its

⁷⁰ Byman, 2016

⁷¹ Ghambir, 2015

relationships with jihadists groups, it increases its potential range for coordinated, asymmetric attacks against enemy states.⁷² The Institute for the Study of War conducted a simulation in 2015 and assessed that IS' affiliates in Egypt and Libya were well placed for this type of cross-*wilayat*, interstate manipulation.⁷³

The capacity for nearly simultaneous and geographically-dispersed action, whether coordinated or coincidental, gives IS an asymmetric advantage over traditional states constrained by boundaries, internal bureaucracy, and international alliances. IS could also use its affiliates to shift the attention of the international community away from Iraq and Syria, taking the pressure off of its anterior operations and effectively dividing the prioritization and focus of the anti-IS Coalition.⁷⁴ Affiliates can serve as areas where foreign fighters could seek safe haven if they were unable to make it all the way to Iraq or Syria, a phenomena that is currently taking place in Libya. Affiliates can also mount attacks in support of IS offensives or to relieve pressure on the organization's defenses.⁷⁵ IS regional expansion through affiliates at greater distances could lead it to pose multi-front threats to neighbouring states in the region. The geographic expansion programs should be understood to be dangerous even if the physical caliphate is destroyed, as even without a physical caliphate, IS could perpetuate as a product of continued power rooted in the provinces.⁷⁶ IS' spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani delivered a speech on May 21, 2016 stating that IS will prevail despite territorial losses and even in the event that it lose major cities like Raqqa, Mosul or Sirte.⁷⁷ His comments reflect the strength and

⁷² *ibid*

⁷³ *ibid*

⁷⁴ By anti-IS coalition, and I mean the coalition of 60 countries to counter IS led by the U.S.

⁷⁵ Kilcullen, 2015

⁷⁶ McFate, 2014

⁷⁷ Gambhir, 2016

power of the fallback options that affiliates could ensure. Taken as a whole, IS' affiliates demonstrate that it has perfected leaderless resistance, remote radicalization, and guerilla-style terrorism to the point where a central organization is no longer needed to coordinate attacks.⁷⁸

The expansion of territory and attraction and mobilization of new provinces offers several advantages to the IS core. For example, adding new affiliates bolsters IS' image both in the Middle East and beyond, making the organization appear more powerful (and attractive, for some). Affiliates also give the organization a broader strategic reach, allowing it to tap into more extensive resources and networks across the Middle East and abroad, including sleeper cells in the West. Libya, for example, provides IS with an operations base for striking nearby Egypt and Tunisia.⁷⁹ Charles Lister⁸⁰ describes IS provinces as mini Islamic States or "ink spots" that will expand through proselytizing and war. As these ink spots expand, Lister contends that the borders will meet up to form a larger entity - meaning that as more affiliates join IS, the organization effectively expands, fulfilling its proclaimed intent of forming a global caliphate.

Affiliate operations in IS affiliates demonstrate the extent of the organization's strategic reach and propaganda on both the regional and global stages.⁸¹ If the U.S.-led Coalition ignores the provinces this risks allowing IS to grow stronger and more dangerous. A failure to simultaneously recognize and counter all the faces that IS presents to the world will severely limit the ability to defeat it. For example, in an article published in *The Atlantic* in 2015, David Ignatius stated "IS is solid at the core but lose at

⁷⁸ *ibid*

⁷⁹ Byman, 2016

⁸⁰ Lister, 2015

⁸¹ Kilcullen, 2015

the edges”.⁸² What the world is now witnessing is the opposite: although IS is losing ground in its core, (some of) its affiliates are providing it with further strength and influence in other regions. Policies must recognize all these dimensions. IS would fail to persist as an alternative political order if it lost all of the cities and regions under its control. The affiliates are tremendously damaging to the regions where they take root, either undermining relatively stable states or exploiting governance vacuums as IS did in Iraq and Syria. Further, affiliates heighten regional disorder and create security gaps that helps IS grow beyond its core territory. With present expansion and the potential addition of more and more affiliates to its cause, IS would be fulfilling its goal of unraveling the Middle East and parts of Africa and slowly reshaping geopolitical frameworks,⁸³ which poses a significant threat to not only the region, but to the international community.

IS has been successful in providing governance to territories with low levels of economic prosperity to begin with - effectively, the organization delivers “good governance” through a comparative lens (suggesting that it is the least bad option compared to the actual government or to an absence of government). With every new territory that comes under its control, IS has instituted a harsh theocratic rule. This has included some form of (skeletal) governance, comprised of a functioning economy and civil institutions such as, police, courts, and tax systems.⁸⁴ The level of sophistication of IS governance in a given area depends on its level of control. Where IS maintains greater dominance, it tends to deploy more sophisticated governance tactics, making a substantial investment in the creation of institutions. As its core territories are reduced, IS could look to establish stronger institutions in affiliate regions, such as Libya and Egypt. If this does

⁸² Ignatius, 2015

⁸³ Kilcullen, 2015

⁸⁴ Berger and Stern, 2015

happen, the organization will further solidify its hold in these areas, and create new challenges for those trying to mitigate it.⁸⁵ IS' system of governance creates a risk for further turmoil and disorder once the organization has successfully embedded itself, which will provide further challenges for policy-makers to counter.

IS' most dangerous affiliates are those that give the organization strategic resilience, meaning those strong enough that they could help to ensure its survival if IS were to be wiped out in Iraq and Syria. The biggest threats currently emerging from IS' affiliates are Libya and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. Militants in both locations pledged allegiance to IS' leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in late 2014. As IS nurtures relationships with these affiliates, it increases the potential range for coordinated, asymmetric attacks against enemy states.

IS in Libya

As noted, because Libya represents a statelet, it is IS' strongest affiliate, and is important to analyze in the context of this paper and beyond. In late 2014, IS operatives began conducting social outreach and military operations along the coast of Libya. The organization has since exploited a governance vacuum and a factional civil war in the country to expand its control. It has clashed with and displaced older jihadist groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and capitalized on local disorder to attract foreign recruits, conduct training, and plot operations abroad. Moreover, the organization has sent hundreds of fighters from Iraq and Syria to Libya as part of an apparent fallback strategy should the core be significantly diminished. The total number of IS fighters in Libya is currently estimated to be between 3,000 and 6,500.⁸⁶ These fighters have created a mini-

⁸⁵ Caris and Reynolds, 2014

⁸⁶ Wehrey and Lacher, 2016

caliphate, dispensing brutal⁸⁷ justice and enforcing social codes as has been done in Iraq and Syria.⁸⁸

The Libyan province under IS rule emerged from the strife that followed the overthrow of the country's former dictator, Muammar al-Qaddafi, in 2011. As countrywide unrest dissolved into outright conflict, local jihadists gained power and the IS brand - and perceived stability offered by it - became increasingly compelling. This translated into many Libyan fighters pledging their allegiance to Baghdadi. The continued violence, proliferation of radical groups, and failure of political reconciliation in Libya has made resolution of this conflict unlikely in the short-term. Instead, Libya could serve to increasingly fuel and foster extremist groups in North Africa, much as Syria does in the Middle East.⁸⁹ IS operations in Libya are only one facet of a larger conflict that has been ongoing for years.

Affiliates in Libya pose a particularly serious threat to the broader Middle East as well as to Western interests due to near-total lack of local opposition to IS. Expansion into Libya has been perceived as "contingency planning" in the event that IS is crippled or defeated in Iraq and/or Syria. This is not a new tactic, but one equally applied by jihadists in the past. For example, after the death of Bin Laden and significant unraveling in the al-Qaeda core, affiliates offered al-Qaeda a way to sustain itself. By expanding into new territories, IS continues to make headlines and in turn garner more support. The potential for access to substantial revenues in Libya also serves to enhance IS.⁹⁰ Due to growing financial pressure in its core territory, oil-rich Libya could be a major strategic prize for

⁸⁷ Byman, 2016

⁸⁸ *ibid*

⁸⁹ Gambhir, 2015

⁹⁰ Howard, 2015

the organization.⁹¹ Moreover, no political or military leader in the region has been able to unify militias effectively against IS – whose success is largely dependent on maintaining the current state of disorder.

Moving forward, Libya is likely to remain highly fragmented, with multiple competing power centres comprising armed groups and political structures, each with varying degrees of affiliation to each other and to the country's two rival governments.⁹² It will be difficult for IS to navigate what is effectively a maze of competing local ethnic, tribal, ideological, and political groups. At present these groups have the potential to resist IS attempts to gain control. What this means is that a greater IS presence in Libya could serve to provide a common enemy, and bring these groups together in arms - which could in turn only further destabilize the region.⁹³ Moreover, different groups provides jihadist with options. Because of competing groups, foreign fighters may join these groups instead of IS. The organization's strength in Libya has so far been tested and its initial spread has been slow. Policy-makers would do well to consider ways to exploit the competing factions in this region.

IS in Egypt

On November 10th, 2014 the Egyptian terrorist group Ansar Bayt al Maqdis (ABM) - a militant government operating out of the northern Sinai-Peninsula⁹⁴ declared its alignment with IS, concurrent with the designation of the group as an affiliate.⁹⁵ The Egyptian affiliate soon began to gain power in the region, targeting the United Nations

⁹¹ Wintour, 2016

⁹² Libya's two competing governments are the Tripoli-based "Libya Dawn" and "Operation Dignity" in Beida and Tobruk. Murray, 2015.

⁹³ Howard, 2015

⁹⁴ This group established itself as a formidable player after the uprising that overthrew Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. al-Anani, 2014.

⁹⁵ Berger and Stern, 2015

(UN), beheading a Croatian expatriate, and attacking the Italian consulate in Cairo. In arguably in its most infamous and publicized move, the affiliate downed a Russian airliner in late-2015. It is estimated that IS now has approximately 5,000 fighters in Egypt, many of whom are veteran jihadists.⁹⁶

ABM's membership in IS and tactics deployed in Egypt thus far demonstrate that Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's⁹⁷ campaign of blind and brutal repression has alienated most of its population. This has, in turn succeeded in making membership in the group appealing to disillusioned young Egyptians, and has expanded the group's objectives.⁹⁸ For example, a 38-year old rights activist who eventually fought under IS grew disenchanted with the lack of reforms to state institutions in post-uprising Egypt.⁹⁹ Sisi's repressive policies in Sinai, has provided ABM an ideal environment within which to capitalize on and gain tribal support for its operations, further feeding into IS ambitions.

The IS affiliate in Egypt further demonstrates how the organization has been able to use its victories in Iraq and Syria to attract new followers and has continued to gather support outside of the IS core. The region plays a central role in the vision of a true Islamic caliphate, not only because of its political and cultural prominence in the Arab world, but also due to its borders with Israel. IS could continue to play on the Egyptian government's failings and the dissent that has eroded Sisi's popularity to gain additional local support. The organization could take further advantage of the governance vacuum

⁹⁶ Byman 2016

⁹⁷ President of Egypt since 2014

⁹⁸ al-Anani, 2014

⁹⁹ *ibid*

that has been created by promoting Sinai province, and framing it as an effective vehicle to undermine Sisi's regime.¹⁰⁰

The IS affiliate in Egypt is destabilizing for the region as it could potentially be used to promote attacks on the Jewish state of Israel. These attacks could in turn help IS further legitimize its operations and enhance its popularity in Egypt.¹⁰¹ As in Libya, if IS were to be defeated in Iraq and Syria, a foothold could provide its fighters with access to safe havens in North and Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as in the Arab Peninsula. The organization could then simply move its power base to another region, likely within Egypt, Libya or both.¹⁰² In addition, an alliance with Egypt could inspire networks within other countries to join IS this is currently the case in Libya, where affiliates are successfully appropriating IS' ideology and tactics to expand their spheres of control.¹⁰³

IS' acquired affiliates in Egypt also demonstrates how unstable the country remains. By clamping down on political dissent, Cairo became a fertile ground for IS and other groups like it, with the potential and influence to recruit youth (Islamists as well as moderates). Compounding this reality is that many members of IS affiliate members are now relocating to Libya and other countries, including Egypt from Iraq and Syria. Members who leave the core territory will move to the safest affiliates - those most amenable to continuing the Islamic State's vision for governance. What the affiliate in Egypt exhibits is that IS seeks to embed itself in areas of disorder to exacerbate conflicts and as such, will focus its efforts on violent "hot spots." IS' propensity to exploit ongoing

¹⁰⁰ Peck and Kessler, 2016

¹⁰¹ al-Anani, 2014

¹⁰² Howard, 2014

¹⁰³ al-Anani, 2014

conflicts will present the Coalition with a persistent tension between reacting individually to affiliates and framing IS as a coherent global actor.

Chapter 4: Policy Gaps and Lessons Learned

In an article published in the New York Times in November 2015, Ian Fisher asks the question, “Were signals missed that could have stopped the Islamic State before it became so deadly?”¹⁰⁴ As this chapter will demonstrate, IS affiliates have indeed exposed gaps in policies emphasizing the need for a more comprehensive approach.

Before focus can be placed on developing a coherent strategy to mitigate the effects of IS and its affiliates, it is important to analyze current attempts to counter this growing threat, as well as strategic failures. Western powers have failed to adequately address IS affiliates and this has negatively impacted attempts to constrain its movements. To date, international efforts to counter IS affiliates have been both incomplete and hesitant.¹⁰⁵ What IS affiliates demonstrate is that attempts by the U.S. to topple authoritarian regimes in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and more recently in Egypt-create power vacuums that can be exploited. Unless the U.S. and its allies can work to suppress the extremists, these vacuums will continue to be used to the benefit of JPS’ and to the detriment of civilians.

Current counter-strategies to date

Over the past decade, military-based efforts to rid the world of jihadi extremism have revealed that overt force alone cannot stop the appeal of jihadi rhetoric and may in fact bolster the recruitment efforts of organizations that espouse this rhetoric.¹⁰⁶ Most recently, under U.S. President Barack Obama, a Coalition of some sixty countries was established to “degrade and ultimately defeat” the Islamic State. In December 2014, a

¹⁰⁴ Fisher, 2015

¹⁰⁵ Watts, 2015

¹⁰⁶ *ibid*

ministerial-level plenary session was held for the Coalition to counter IS, where it was decided that there would be five lines of effort to combat IS¹⁰⁷:

1. Supporting military operations, capacity building and training;
2. Stopping the flow of foreign fighters;
3. Cutting off ISIL's access to financing and funding;
4. Addressing humanitarian crises; and
5. De-legitimizing ISIL's ideology.

As of February 2016, the Coalition had carried out more than ten thousand airstrikes. In Iraq alone, the U.S. has deployed more than three thousand uniformed personnel and armed the Kurdistan Regional Government's paramilitary (the *peshmerga*). When the U.S. and its allies began the airborne operation in northern Iraq in August 2014, IS steadily lost a series of battles and has since primarily been on the defensive in the region. Progress has also been made in parts of Iraq, with the Iraqi Security forces and PMUs recently taking back Fallujah.¹⁰⁸

Meanwhile, in Syria, IS has faced a more limited Coalition of countries targeting its forces from the air, with a U.S.-led effort seeking mainly to strike openly available targets in isolation from broader battlefield dynamics.¹⁰⁹ Within current dynamics and the intensely complex nature of Syria's own multi-front conflict,¹¹⁰ - which encompasses secular nationalist, moderate, and mainstream Islamist as well as Salafist factions - the Coalition remains incapable of launching a multi-pronged strategy to rid Syria of IS. Nonetheless, the increase of IS affiliates in other regions has meant that additional action is required to counter the organization, outside of Iraq and Syria.

¹⁰⁷ Juneau, 2015

¹⁰⁸ Lister, 2015

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*

¹¹⁰ *ibid*

Airstrikes and Policy Gaps

Expansion and the management of affiliates in regions beyond Iraq and Syria has allowed IS to effectively adapt and maintain momentum, the group has been able to solidify strongholds in Libya and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.¹¹¹ Therefore, it seems possible that IS will retain some level of control over its core territory and indeed continue its ongoing and gradual infiltration and acquisition of new territory in the foreseeable future. Despite the Coalition's successes in Iraq and more recently in Syria, conditions on the ground still remain largely factional due to a lack of inclusionary politics. Barring progress by local actors on the political front, current efforts to subdue IS militarily through airstrikes will mean very little in the long-run.

Although airstrikes have been the tactic most utilized to mitigate and contain IS, they do not begin to deal with the problem IS affiliates present. Because of IS' complex system of taxation, opposition airstrikes may reduce the organization's revenues but will not fatally undermine its finances (as IS could simply to greater taxation to compensate for any losses).¹¹² This is a reality that is playing out today: despite the constant airstrikes and significant damage to its infrastructure, IS is making up for lost revenue by raising taxes on the populations under its control.¹¹³ Seriously diminishing IS' economic and fiscal capacity would require one of two things: a large-scale, casualty-heavy bombing campaign targeting IS critical infrastructure, or alternatively, a containment strategy that would cut IS off entirely from the outside world and eventually the group may run out of resources.¹¹⁴ Moreover, if affiliates were grouped together locally, airstrikes could prove

¹¹¹ Seftel, 2016

¹¹² Pagliery, 2016

¹¹³ *ibid*

¹¹⁴ al-Tamimi, 2015

to be effective; however, airstrikes to target affiliates would be taxing on resources and could further provoke them to attack the West, given that affiliates are regionally dispersed.¹¹⁵ The second option would prove to be most beneficial given IS' use of taxation to replenish funding.

Airstrikes, though somewhat successful in the short-term in rolling back IS in Iraq and Syria, also create longer-term problems. First, as the campaign carries on after two years, targets are dwindling and hard to find. Second, the destruction of local infrastructure negatively impacts innocent civilians who could in turn further anger local Sunnis and give them more cause to join IS. These assaults can be effective at killing leaders and scaling down the organization, but this does not eradicate the organization itself. Moreover, new leaders are likely be younger and more radical as a period of conflict goes on, effectively bolstering and at times heightening the cause.¹¹⁶ What this demonstrates is that airstrikes can degrade IS but they will not defeat it.

As a result of IS' well-known and preeminent slogan of "lasting and expanding" the key challenge for policy-makers has been diminishing the organization's operational momentum - that is, its core territory in Iraq and Syria, perceived to be a catalyst for its degradation and eventual destruction. Since 2014, the Coalition has caused IS to lose around 40 percent of its Iraqi territory, in addition to much of its oil infrastructure and heavy forces.¹¹⁷ While IS has hardly been defeated, local setbacks have successfully demoralized some of its followers. By expanding into new territories, the group continues to create headlines outside of Syria and Iraq, allowing it to attract more foreign fighters to

¹¹⁵ Byman, 2016

¹¹⁶ Juneau, 2015

¹¹⁷ Byman, 2016

its core organization.¹¹⁸ For example, in early 2016, the organization launched raids along the Tunisian-Libyan border, killing several members of Tunisia’s security forces.¹¹⁹ As well, when the caliphate comes under attack by foreign powers who labelled “crusaders”, any losses in territory are blamed on these crusaders and thus further solidify support from a small minority of Muslims extremists around the world.¹²⁰ As noted, this has helped IS gain new affiliates. The Islamic State’s image relies heavily on its success, and if it is failing militarily in Iraq and Syria it will need to secure victories elsewhere.

Training Local Forces and Policy Gaps

Anti-IS ground operations have proven successful when launched from areas with sufficient operational and planning resources, as well as motivated and well-trained fighters. For example, Iraq’s *peshmerga* fighters have been effective in pushing IS west and south in Iraq. The problem, however, is creating a Sunni force large enough to have an effective presence in affiliates that are either under IS control or influenced by IS. This force would have to operate from a secure base - not merely a logistical base, but a base of trust in which the Sunnis feel that they are fighting for regions that would ultimately become theirs to govern.¹²¹ Without such a base, strategies for mitigating IS will not succeed. U.S. military power could eventually drive IS underground, but without Sunni empowerment, insurgents will simply return at some point (past IS actions of being defeated and coming back stronger indicate this). A political balance that allows Sunnis to govern their land must be established if IS is to be defeated.¹²²

¹¹⁸ *ibid*

¹¹⁹ Seftel, 2016

¹²⁰ McCants, 2015

¹²¹ Ignatius, 2015

¹²² *ibid*

Moreover, because IS is now expanding the caliphate into other regions military the victories by the U.S.-led Coalition can be viewed as no more than tactical gains (rather than strategic defeat to IS movements). Although IS has faced significant threats from the Coalition, the organization's strategy of expansion could prove useful in facilitating its continued survival. In short, the challenge this poses to policy-makers is that even if core territory is reduced, the organization could expand into other areas, gaining strength instead of being eliminated. Focus must be shifted from the core territory and concentrate instead on this reality.

Policy Gaps in Addressing Affiliates

Some emphasis by the U.S. is beginning to be placed on affiliates in Libya, and military operations to stop the advance of IS in this region are imminent. If the existing U.S.-led Coalition had focused on IS' intentions to exploit a governance vacuum in Libya early on, and concentrated on the fact that the vacuums in affiliate regions would provide the organization with sufficient space to carry out its intentions, the Coalition may have been able to convince neighbouring countries to harden their borders and preemptively make deals with its Sunnis.¹²³ IS has simultaneously used Libya's lawlessness to attract foreign recruits, conduct training, and plot operations abroad, and has sent hundreds of fighters from Iraq and Syria into the region, perhaps signaling it as a fallback option.¹²⁴ The emerging situation in Libya requires a forcible response primarily from its citizens and backed by Western support. Two options are currently on the table for the Coalition: a training program to stand up new army units loyal to the government and a

¹²³ Wood, 2015

¹²⁴ Wehrey and Lacher, 2016

counterterrorism effort focused on providing assistance to those forces on the ground most capable and most willing to confront IS.¹²⁵

Perhaps most worrisome, however, is the fact that neither of these two options present a solution to the factionalism in Libya's security sector. Any strategy to address IS should aim to bridge the country's political divides and channel assistance in a way that promotes cooperation between rival forces. The training program, for example, would be based on the premise that Libya lacks skilled fighters; however, it equally lacks a government capable of uniting skilled fighters. A Western-led training effort in 2013-2014 to build a national army in the region failed because there were no national structures for recruits to join (as rival political interests in Libya's state institutions had effectively turned the security sector into an amalgam of competing militias). Implementing another training program risks repeating this error. Building a unified national army could also take considerable time and should not be viewed as a timely response to the urgent IS threat. In the meantime, Western forces will seek to support existing forces in the region in their efforts against the organization. This in itself poses challenges, as by liaising with and assisting armed groups, Western special operations could empower factional rivals and reduce the incentives for political reconciliation. Moreover, navigating the map of competing militias in the country will present a daunting challenge for policy-makers.¹²⁶

The U.S. has begun to take the growing danger of IS affiliates more seriously and has considered establishing additional military bases in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East in response. However, the U.S. and its allies must go further and develop a comprehensive

¹²⁵ Wehrey and Lacher 2016

¹²⁶ *ibid*

strategy that will weaken IS' various affiliates. Figuring out where exactly the organization has established a formal presence and where local fighters are merely emulating the group can be difficult. The Coalition could start by anticipating and developing strategies to take advantage of the tensions that will likely arise between IS' leadership in Iraq and Syria and its affiliates in other regions. This happened with al-Qaeda when its affiliates eventually became a burden for its core, demanding resources, ignoring its directives, and tarring its name by conducting unpopular attacks. IS will likely encounter similar problems.¹²⁷ The U.S. could do this by using social media to publicly emphasize the differences between IS leaders in the core and affiliate groups. This could reduce incentives for affiliates to remain closely linked to the core, and could cause discontent.¹²⁸

Lessons Learned

As noted, the current strategies being employed in Iraq and Syria (primarily airstrikes) to counter IS are insufficient to deal with the challenges presented by its affiliates. Airstrikes can and have slowed down IS, primarily in Iraq and Syria, but are far from sufficient to deal with affiliates; furthermore, the organization has yet to meet a force on the ground capable of countering its social narrative in its provinces. Recapturing villages and towns controlled by IS is an important first step, but will only help in the long-term if it comes as part of a broader strategic appreciation of the challenge ahead.

While some success has been secured in rolling back the organization, current counter strategies are equally not sufficient enough to produce a sustainable post-conflict phase. A post-conflict phase with less casualties and destruction and with Sunnis working with

¹²⁷ Byman, 2016

¹²⁸ Report by the Combating Terrorism Center, Department of Social Sciences, United States Military Academy, February 2006.

other local actors could prove to be beneficial. In order to accomplish this, the U.S. must lean more on its allies and partners, especially in Europe and the Middle East, all of whom are equally threatened by the spread of Islamic extremism. These countries are also far better attuned to the human terrain within their own borders, giving them an advantage when it comes to identifying and rolling up bad actors and networks, as well as any potential partners to form better relationships on the ground.¹²⁹ IS will never be successfully contained from the outside. These internal factors must be taken into account in any strategy to counter the organization.¹³⁰

In Libya, Western powers have been considering whether direct military intervention, could help to prevent IS from establishing a permanent foothold in the region. Discussions are ongoing about whether a force should indeed be assembled. The U.S. and its allies should double their efforts to bolster the Libyans do a more effective job in governing their own space in the short-to-medium-term.¹³¹ There is a danger that political processes in Libya will not move as fast as IS, and a more concentrated effort needs to be made to ensure that this is not the case.¹³² However, the West must proceed carefully, or else it could exacerbate Libya's political fractures or undermine attempts to re-establish a single government and lay the basis for a cohesive and civilian-controlled military.

Achieving diplomatic and political solutions in Libya will require the cooperation of neighbouring states and other allies in the region. This will be difficult given the differing interests of actors; nevertheless, U.S. leadership will be essential in engaging and

¹²⁹ Velez-Green, 2015

¹³⁰ Lister, 2015

¹³¹ Wintour, 2016

¹³² *ibid*

encouraging support for political solutions.¹³³ Expanding partnerships involves keeping lines of communication open with Western governments and other local actors that will help civilians gain a better understanding of the motives behind organization's like IS, and other extremist groups that may take its place. These partnerships should happen at the international, regional, national, and local levels. The goal is that through these partnerships, the U.S. and its allies could be able to form more effective policies aimed at countering IS.¹³⁴ This is a strategy that could prove effective in affiliate regions wrought with numerous competing factions such as Libya. Just as IS nurtures and fosters relationships with jihadists groups, the U.S. could utilize this tactic to form relationships with key actors to achieve its own ends.

On the other hand, the U.S.-led Coalition has been concentrating its efforts on addressing IS in Iraq and Syria, a reality which has made it vulnerable to strategic surprise resulting from IS' external activities in affiliate regions. Libya is a prime example of a product of this narrow-lens. Further, strategic options to mitigate IS narrow as the organization's affiliates grow in strength and number. As IS grows, it gains asymmetric advantage over the Coalition because it has the potential to project force from multiple regions. IS' Near Abroad and Far Abroad campaigns will likely exacerbate existing political cleavages and divide Coalition resources being employed to counteract its operations.¹³⁵ This growing reality underscores the importance of measured action informed by early appraisal of the capabilities of affiliates, rather than incremental action prompted by developing events.

¹³³ Ghambir, 2015

¹³⁴ Kilcullen, 2010

¹³⁵ Ghambir, 2015

Military measures may contain the Islamic State, but these measures are unlikely to address the issues of governance found in the regions where the organization has taken hold. Finding a way to address these issues will arguably prove to be the only real solution to the conflict as a whole. A military strategy that does not include political reconciliation which offers alienated Sunnis a viable alternative to IS will not be sufficient.¹³⁶ Despite this understanding, diplomatic efforts appear to be deadlocked, as the major powers in the affected regions remain unable to agree on what a political transition period should consist of. IS is adaptive, creative, and ambitious. By contrast, international efforts have been rigid, predictable, and unimaginative.¹³⁷ Any strategy to combat the organization must be adaptive and evolve alongside the threat. The U.S. must escalate its current intervention efforts to reflect IS' growing capacity. Equally, the Coalition's strategy must be flexible enough to account for future evolutions and include a clear direction to its plan. Any response must be proportionate to the threat and must be sustainable. Thus, the best U.S. policy is two-fold: the U.S. should continue its military campaign against IS. However, in order to work towards more adaptive policies, it should continue to gather further intelligence in affiliate regions and develop ways to combat IS that does not involve military combat such as, protecting vulnerable targets, and reinforcing key regional alliances. The U.S. does not have the resources to "degrade and defeat" IS outside of Iraq and Syria and counter missions in affiliate regions would require a more limited military scope.¹³⁸

Although there is a general understanding that IS is a political project, tools employed so far to mitigate the organization have been largely military. To the extent that the

¹³⁶ Lister, 2015

¹³⁷ Itani, 2014

¹³⁸ Ghambir, 2015

Coalition is using political tools, these efforts have been confined to appeals to local Sunni elites and attempts to reintegrate them into the Iraqi government's security and governmental structures.¹³⁹ This strategy fails to take into account the broader base of support now coming from affiliates. Moving forward, the Coalition should carefully map out IS' web of allegiances and avoid taking any action that may inadvertently strengthen these ties.¹⁴⁰ The U.S. must clearly define its global counter-IS mission and then work to clearly determine its objectives for each IS affiliate in support of that mission.¹⁴¹ Without a solution to the foundational political problems societal divides, instability, and power vacuums will continue to form and lay in wait for violent extremists to exploit. Only by acknowledging IS' use of these cleavages to grow roots and expand will the international community stand a chance of genuinely challenging its survival.¹⁴²

As it stands, the U.S. mission to defeat IS is at risk of achieving tactical successes that do not translate into overall strategic victory. Even as the U.S. applies significant resources and political capital in managing the anti-IS Coalition, many other non-IS foreign policy problems will demand attention. In this complex environment, it is difficult for policy-makers to discern the consequences of action or inaction against IS beyond Iraq and Syria even in the near future¹⁴³; however, building on the lessons learned discussed in this paper, the U.S. would certainly benefit in dedicating more of its resources to counter affiliates. In June 2015, a CIA expert stated that, "IS remains a formidable adversary, and that the CIA expects it to rely more on high profile attacks

¹³⁹ Bartkowski, 2014

¹⁴⁰ *ibid*

¹⁴¹ Ghambir, 2015

¹⁴² Lister, 2015

¹⁴³ Ghambir, 2015

outside its own territory to compensate for territorial losses.” This reiterates the dangers the organization still poses.¹⁴⁴

An effective counter-strategy will require a globally scoped mission with distinct campaigns against IS in its Interior, Near Abroad, and Far Abroad. Strategies in the Near Abroad need not mimic strategies in its Interior because IS capabilities vary across rings. Rather, the U.S. and its partners should develop supporting efforts in the Near Abroad through enhanced relationships and intelligence sharing that will enhance the Coalition’s ability to act coherently against the threat.¹⁴⁵

Chapter 5: Policy Options

The recommendations in this chapter build on past and current initiatives utilized by the Coalition against al-Qaeda in the past or more recently in the IS core in Iraq and Syria, and demonstrate the need for improvement and greater focus. It is important to note that any efforts to counter IS affiliates will be extremely difficult, costly and time consuming. These efforts will ultimately require coherent and geographically dispersed strategies, likely coordinated among multiple allies. However, because the Coalition continues to debate a range of proposals to prevent IS from expanding, therefore, the goal of this section is to shed light on key strategies that could over time play a role in mitigating IS in regions where affiliates have taken hold.

As noted throughout this paper, since IS’ declaration of a caliphate in 2014 and despite the subsequent U.S.-led Coalition airstrikes against targets in Iraq and Syria, the organization has gained numerous affiliates.¹⁴⁶ Moving forward, IS may seek to

¹⁴⁴ Blanchard and Humud, 2016

¹⁴⁵ Ghambir, 2015

¹⁴⁶ Byman, 2016

synchronize efforts across its affiliates and possibly also between its three geographic rings in order to maximize regional disorder to its advantage. For example, IS affiliates in the Near Abroad accelerated their activity after IS lost Tikrit in Iraq in 2015 in a show of support and affirmation of the organization's staying power.¹⁴⁷ This suggests that IS leadership can encourage or direct Near and Far abroad activities in order to achieve asymmetric effects. The clear, present and ever-growing threat posed by IS and its affiliates requires that policy-makers consider new ways of mitigating the organization- and that in doing so, they accept affiliates as an integral part of the equation. Although the Coalition has gained tactical-level victories in IS' core territory, these victories will not amount to its elimination in the short- or long-term. A strategy that will "degrade and destroy" the organization is not likely in the short term; however, by refocusing policy-making efforts on IS' strategies of expansion and acknowledging the value of affiliates to its leadership, and slowly adapting policies and their implementation in response, the Coalition may over time be successful in shutting down the caliphate.

Severing the Link Between the Core and Affiliates: Containing the Threat

Though true containment of IS and the severing of its relationships with various affiliates and supporters is undoubtedly a long-term endeavor, plugging the organization's finances and tightening borders could go a long way to stem the instability that it creates. Cutting off ties between IS and its affiliates is certainly an option that policy-makers need to consider, and one that would provide support to a strategy of disaggregation. As noted, fighters in the core are increasingly travelling to other affiliate regions. If the Coalition could find a way to stem this flow, and effectively contain IS and

¹⁴⁷ Ghambir, 2015

its ideology to one or two regions, the organization would likely begin to struggle.¹⁴⁸ For example, the route of migration for IS into Syria appears to have been the Ninawa-Hasakah corridor, which was IS' main hub in Iraq. It will be imperative to cut off other transportation routes such as this corridor as part of a strategy to address the affiliates.¹⁴⁹ Put simple, the U.S.-led Coalition against IS will not succeed without a containment strategy that cuts off the organization's ties to both its affiliates and to the outside world. Such a strategy would stop IS' advances and could turn local populations against the organization.¹⁵⁰ In addition, it should be noted that the land controlled by the organization, while expansive, is largely uninhabited and impoverished.¹⁵¹ Due to this, as IS' membership slowly shrinks, its claim to the territory will subsequently weaken, drawing fewer to its cause.

Disrupting IS would require targeting both the links (the core territory) and the energy flows (foreign fighters and affiliates).¹⁵² Successful containment would also require cutting off both the flow of foreign fighters and its black-market smuggling activities. The latter would also require both isolation and a stripping of IS' resource base, hindering the organization's ability to govern. Training local militias to target resource bases could do this. As noted in this paper, IS' success in developing a state – as compared to the failed attempts of many other JPS' – comes in large part from their ability to self-resource.¹⁵³ Disrupting oil revenues, cutting off global donations, and increasing IS' reliance on legitimate and illicit revenue schemes would help to erode

¹⁴⁸ Wood, 2015

¹⁴⁹ al-Tamimi, 2015

¹⁵⁰ Watts, 2015

¹⁵¹ Wood, 2015

¹⁵² Kilcullen, 2010

¹⁵³ Watts, 2015

local popular support for the organization and make alternate security and governance options more attractive.¹⁵⁴ Most importantly, this would significantly decrease the financial capacity of IS. If the international community were able to shut down access to the resources currently applied by IS to administer its territory, such as food, it would make life increasingly difficult for those under IS rule and could encourage more members to defect.¹⁵⁵

Freedom of movement favours IS. It would be incorrect to assume that IS will be over taxed or constrained by its vast and growing geography.¹⁵⁶ The organization could, however, be constrained to fewer regions if strategies were developed with a lens to limit its scope. Bolstered by its affiliates, IS is currently prepared for a wide range of tactical eventualities. An effective containment strategy would reduce that range to a limited and more predictable set of options – thereby allowing policy-makers to develop and implement policies that more effectively mitigate the organization’s movements. The Coalition must press regional powers bordering territories controlled by IS to do more to prohibit the transit of fighters, volunteers, and resources to and from the core territory. The U.S.-backed New Syrian Army operation “Day of Wrath” has been initiated to seize IS-held towns on the Syrian-Iraqi border and to cut off IS supply lines, effectively sealing the Syrian-Turkish border to the flow of foreign fighters. As well, the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have been similarly threatening IS’ last major supply route from the Syrian-Turkish border. These strategies are weakening IS in its core territory and represent useful tactics that should be applied in other regions, such as Libya, to cut off

¹⁵⁴ Watts, 2015

¹⁵⁵ Williams, 2015

¹⁵⁶ McFate, 2015

potential supply routes and prohibit the establishment or strengthening of bases of operation.¹⁵⁷

In addition, the U.S. should aim to disrupt communication between the IS core and its provinces. This would require working with allies - which would require rigorously building strong relations in the region - to target the latter directly. To that end, the Coalition should aim to build strong connections with provincial command-and-control centers and locals who have personal relationships with top IS leaders.¹⁵⁸ By targeting headquarters, the provinces would be forced to be on their own, which could cost IS local allies. As well, to fight IS as it spreads, the U.S. would need to have access to military bases in many remote parts of the world. Flexibility in this regard would be vital, since it is difficult to predict which provinces will expand and demand the most attention. The strength of allies is perhaps most obvious in this case. For example, France has a strong military presence in North Africa. The U.S. should work to divvy up responsibilities and coordinate operations with France and other Coalition allies, to ensure that all are well-positioned to contain the IS threat.¹⁵⁹

There is evidence that containment is working in Iraq and Syria. The next task is to build and reinforce barriers between IS and its affiliates. As Barry Posen argues, “U.S. and European intelligence organizations must intensify surveillance at home and abroad; the United States and its Western allies must press regional powers bordering the territories controlled by IS to do more to interdict the transit of volunteers and resources and to counter the poisonous ideology that brings new followers to the IS banner.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Forrest, 2016

¹⁵⁸ Byman, 2016

¹⁵⁹ *ibid*

¹⁶⁰ Posen, 2015

Containing IS and preventing it from taking new cities and territories can starve the organization of the military power it requires to continue its campaign. Containing the threat could prove to be effective in this strategy. An effective containment strategy would not only undermine the jihadi narrative of pursuing a state, but provides two key advantages. First, containment over military intervention conserves the Coalition's resources. Second, containment as opposed to direct military intervention prevents further unintended violence against and resulting backlash from local populations caught in the crossfire. However, it is important to note that any containment strategy will be unlikely to succeed in the absence of a political strategy to address the conditions within IS territories that have allowed the organization to gain footholds in the first place.¹⁶¹

Improving Local Security Forces

The slow and steady accumulation of better defensive and security measures could be potentially effective in also helping the containment strategy in severing the link between the organization and its affiliates. However, IS' uneven governance, corrupt practices, and violent rule has already led to backlash in some of its territories.¹⁶² Viable security and economic alternatives to IS must be presented to those populations subjected to Caliphate governance. The integration of Sunni and Shia militias into state-controlled security forces will be complex and difficult, but is a necessary endeavor to create the conditions for other strategies outlined herein to take effect.

In the wake of IS-claimed terrorist attacks in several countries, President Obama has restated that he does not believe the introduction of large-scale U.S. ground forces for combat operations is necessary in order to achieve objectives in the region. Rather, he has

¹⁶¹ Watts, 2015

¹⁶² *ibid*

stated that U.S. efforts to reverse Islamic State gains on the ground should pair continued airstrikes and new special operations missions with expanded efforts to advise and strengthen local Iraqi and Syrian partner forces.¹⁶³ More could be done in this regard in affiliate regions as well. The U.S. provides assistance in countries such as Egypt and Nigeria to partner governments for operations to improve security, but more efforts could be placed at the local level in cooperation and intelligence sharing, specifically in the most dangerous affiliates.¹⁶⁴

The first step toward achieving this could be to improve the capacities of local partners. IS-governed communities need help to build their resilience against threats from jihadist groups. It will be essential that communities, civil society groups, religious leaders, and local law enforcement work together to help prevent these threats from growing. Only these local partnerships, rather than a top-down government-led initiative, can address at-risk individuals and develop strong community relationships.¹⁶⁵ The U.S. special operations forces could station personnel on the ground in IS-controlled or threatened regions to not only assist local forces, but also to help gather information and create better information-sharing networks. In effect, the Coalition would be smart to empower local partners to have up-to-date, relevant information and tools at their disposal. The Coalition should seek to work with the local communities themselves: the less locals feel alienated, the more likely they will be to report any troublemakers in their midst.¹⁶⁶ This would be a smart and effective way to safely insert a small U.S. military presence and better prepare local forces to take on IS on the ground.

¹⁶³ Blanchard and Humud, 2016

¹⁶⁴ *ibid*

¹⁶⁵ Schanzer, Kurzman, Toliver and Miller, 2016

¹⁶⁶ Byman, 2016

Another area where the Coalition could be productive in this regard is security integration in affiliates. In line with the strategy of containment, this could include increased cooperation between national police and international intelligence organizations in an effort to stop the flow of IS fighters. Setting conditions for regional security in the future is an essential part of the war against IS.¹⁶⁷ Strategies cannot only focus on successes in the short-term, but must ultimately be sustainable and forward-thinking. Instead of a training mission or direct military interventions, the West's priority could be to support the establishment of integrated structures and units in the security sector. At the political level, this would require engagement to overcome stand-offs between competing factions over leadership and promote cooperation between rivals. For example, in Libya, the West should work to promote cooperation between rival factions in the Presidency Council, the Libyan government, and the military command.¹⁶⁸ To avoid empowering individual factions and fuelling further conflict, Western military assistance should also include the establishment of coordinating mechanisms between Libyan military forces on the ground. This could include joint command centres for regional militias, with the aim of gradually creating integrated command structures and army units. These command centres could be staffed by local army officers, militia commanders, and foreign special operations advisors.¹⁶⁹ In Libya, unlike in Iraq and Syria, IS has not been able to prey on sectarian divisions – the region has maintained multiple societal and political actors capable and willing to fight back. The West must be careful to ensure that it unifies, rather than further divides, local forces. This is equally as true in Libya as it is in any IS territory. Further, the U.S. could work to create U.N

¹⁶⁷ McFate, 2015

¹⁶⁸ Wehrey and Lacher, 2016

¹⁶⁹ *ibid*

programs to help neighbours of affiliates such as Tunisia and Algeria to improve internal policing and border control efforts to stem the flow of fighters to Libya and other affiliates.¹⁷⁰

During the U.S. surge campaign in Iraq, the “sons of Iraq”¹⁷¹ program incentivized Sunni tribes to fight al-Qaeda Sunni militias and assumed that repelling extremists in Western and Northern Iraq would result in a larger, more inclusive role for them in governance following the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Despite the success of this campaign, greater Sunni inclusion never materialized and disenfranchisement from a Shia-dominated central Iraqi government remains a prime motivator for Sunnis to permit IS existence. Building on the lessons learned in Iraq, this strategy could be further enhanced and utilized in affiliate regions. Given that IS leaders recognize that the legitimacy of the caliphate depends on their ability to police themselves, propping up local security mechanisms will be key to reducing the organization’s ability to do precisely that.¹⁷² Building and improving local security forces could be effective in stopping some of the violence IS brings as well as providing a way for locals to have some form of power over the organization. This task will prove to be daunting, and the Coalition should proceed carefully.

Disaggregation

Over time, IS has increasingly been able to draw strength from its ability to co-opt local Sunni and other insurgent bases. Moreover, it operates through regional affiliates to co-opt and aggregate the effects of multiple, diverse local actors – much like al-Qaeda

¹⁷⁰ Report issued by the Council on Foreign Relations, 2013

¹⁷¹ This program was implemented in 2006. This movement meant that local sheikhs, disillusioned with the insurgency in Iraq offered their support to the coalition forces.

¹⁷² Watts, 2015

before it. IS has been successfully applying this strategy to rapidly expand from its core in Iraq and Syria. However, like al-Qaeda, IS may soon learn that not all affiliates are or will remain obedient. Although local JPS' can take on the IS label, they retain their own command structures, personnel, and parochial goals, and it should not be assumed that these always line up with the ideology or direction of IS. Policy-makers should be looking to disaggregation and methods to exploit existing and potential tensions between affiliates and the core to the detriment of the organization.¹⁷³

Dozens of local movements, grievances and issues have been aggregated by IS to elevate their cause. This was observed with al-Qaeda before IS, who would inject themselves into conflicts, twist local grievances, and exploit them for their own ends. The organization coopts jihadist groups and aggregates their issues and conflicts as a means to gain support.¹⁷⁴ If the Coalition were to succeed in taking away IS' ability to aggregate local actors, it would severely diminish the organization's capacity and traction. A strategy of disaggregation would seek to dismantle or break up the links that have allowed the organization to function and at times flourish as a global entity, it means that the Coalition must identify threats and neutralize them before they pledge to IS.¹⁷⁵

The key to countering extremist organizations such as IS would be to expand local partnerships as a way that disaggregates, instead of conflates, extremist movements. Although this is seen predominantly as a counter-terrorism measure, it could also prove to be effective in slowing the expansion of IS while longer-term political solutions are developed and implemented. In this case, it would require ensuring that IS affiliates do

¹⁷³ Kilcullen, 2016

¹⁷⁴ *ibid*, p. 9

¹⁷⁵ Kilcullen, 2004

not fully synch with the IS core.¹⁷⁶ A strategy of disaggregation to address the threat presented by IS would focus on: interdicting links between Islamist theatres of operation within the global insurgency; denying regional and global actors the ability to link and exploit local actors; interdicting flows of information, personnel, finance and technology between jihad theatres, denying sanctuary areas within theaters, and isolating Islamists from local populations through measures to win hearts and minds and remove the drivers of popular support.¹⁷⁷ Disaggregation also helps to prevent the dispersed and disparate elements of the jihad movement from functioning as a global system.

Building trusted networks would also prove essential to any disaggregation strategy in order to win hearts and minds to counter IS rhetoric. This would mean persuading locals that Coalition success is beneficial for their own success and well-being. It would also require the provision of protection to these populations. If networks of trust were to be successfully established, these networks would grow into the population, thereby displacing those put in place by IS and its affiliates.¹⁷⁸ These networks should include local allies, community leaders, security forces (strengthened by the Coalition), and NGOs in the area. To maintain these networks, the Coalition should conduct village and neighbourhood surveys to identify needs in the community, then build on common interests and mobilize allied support to meet these needs.¹⁷⁹ Another step in disaggregation is to clearly articulate the nature of the threat. This allows governments to discuss the problem in common language, adopting local measures that become mutually

¹⁷⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷⁷ Kilcullen, 2010, p. 214

¹⁷⁸ Kilcullen, 2010

¹⁷⁹ *ibid*

reinforcing at the systemic level. A common understanding would help policy-makers to “think globally and act locally.”¹⁸⁰

Sunni Arab marginalization has been a primary contributor to the rise of IS and its affiliates. By failing to engage with and earn the trust of local communities in IS-dominated regions, Western governments would risk exacerbating the very conditions that have enabled IS to rise in the first place. In an effort to prevent the further spread of extremism, the U.S. and its allies should slow military operations in the Middle East and should instead concentrate on building relationships with local Sunni communities.¹⁸¹ They should also partner with local governments wherever possible to more be able to more effectively deal with local insurgent and jihadist groups. Disaggregation seeks to deny sanctuary, disrupt networks, build the capacity of regional neighbours, and most importantly, interdict links between key players in IS.¹⁸² Utilizing disaggregation could help improve the environment for longer-term political solutions to take root.

Improving Political and Governance Structures

Articulating the path for substantive political achievements against IS would require an entire paper in itself. The purpose of this section is to outline desired political outcomes and strategies for affiliates if the Coalition can successfully work towards the other strategies outlined above. IS has found a way to provide stability in regions wrought with chaos, filling vacuums left by failed governments and applying the provision of social services to gain local support. Central to defeating IS, therefore, will be solving the societal and political failures in the regions in which it operates – including, chiefly, Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt. Whereas political gains could take years

¹⁸⁰ Kilcullen, 2004

¹⁸¹ Hadra, 2016

¹⁸² Kilcullen, 2004

if not decades, and may in fact never come to light, they are nevertheless something that the Coalition should strive towards. Lacking local populations that are committed to improving governance and who are pushing back against ideological extremes, the Coalition will have to continue to resort to military measures.

IS has been able to position itself as a reasonable alternative for much of the population currently under its rule. It has evolved from a small collective with state-like ambitions, to an organization controlling pockets of territory, to a much more significant entity controlling large swaths of territory and major towns spanning Iraq and Syria and provinces abroad (though few of its provinces control much territory). This evolution has challenged IS' opponents.¹⁸³ Even if cooperation with the organization is believed to be driven by fear and coercion, it is important to not discount the relative legitimacy of IS' governance compared to equally bad or even less desirable alternatives in the region. These include, for example: a repressive dictatorship in Syria; sectarian politics in Iraq; Sis's repressive campaign in Egypt; and the ongoing civil strife and various competing factions in Libya. In areas of conflict where local populations perceived no "good" options, the social contract offered by IS need only be marginally better than that of its competitors.¹⁸⁴ The key to defeating IS will be working to improve the societal and political failures in these regions.

Political strategies to undermine IS would be more effective than violence at delegitimizing an enemy, shifting the loyalty of supporters, and attracting followers to the anti-IS cause. A political strategy must focus on the following things: turning locals against IS; removing IS' pillars of support; and inducing defections among administrators

¹⁸³ al-Tamimi, 2015

¹⁸⁴ Revkin, 2016

and fighters to undermine IS from within. As well, funds currently being committed to the Coalition's military efforts could be redirected to developing strategies around social communication; political agitation; provision of humanitarian services (Canada has made some commitments to do this under the new government); and inducement of inefficiencies, incompetence, and defections within IS' base of support.¹⁸⁵ In affiliates, this could begin by developing underground networks of humanitarian services to slowly generate trust, solidarity, and political power as increasing numbers of locals join activities that are autonomous of or beyond IS' control.

The Coalition needs to find a way to better leverage regional actors, as these actors will be integral to shaping ground conditions that promote stability and reduce the opportunity for groups like IS to persist. A political solution should have the ultimate goal of better governance systems. The anti-IS campaign may succeed strategically if state actors can be convinced to cross ethnic and sectarian boundaries to form new Coalitions and alliances to counter IS. This could take several years to take root; additionally, the desired outcome will prove more difficult to achieve in affiliate regions where warfare is ongoing. The U.S. would also face other challenges in uniting its allies for such a mission. Some allies, such as Saudi Arabia, are primarily focused on countering Iranian influence. Others may have few resources, be it time or money, to contribute toward a political solution. Others, still, may simply not have the energy or think it worthwhile.¹⁸⁶ To this end, the Coalition and broader international community may want to work within existing political systems in IS affiliate regions to bolster the voices of credible Sunnis. As part of such an effort, the Coalition could guarantee that

¹⁸⁵ Bartkowski, 2014

¹⁸⁶ Ghambir, 2015

continued financial and military assistance to governments are made strictly conditional on progress herein. As noted, the role of Sunnis in countering IS affiliate regions will be key and must be expanded significantly. On top of this, a “bottom up” approach involving local peace deals and enforceable agreements among local groups and normative systems that protect the community from threats and disorders could be a better approach than focusing on repairing state institutions.¹⁸⁷ To this end, the Coalition would need to work with the local communities to improve rule of law. Ideally, a political solution would come from a combined effort of locals, and international grassroots organizations, but in the short term, these actors would not be able to come to a solution on their own. If this cannot be accomplished then the coalition must increase efforts to form, train, arm, and support a Sunni National Guard and re-establish local police forces drawn largely from Sunni Tribes. While not as all-encompassing as working with a variety of local actors, this could still provide the local population with a preeminent role in re-capturing IS-dominated territory and then being able to govern it down the road.¹⁸⁸

For example, in Libya, specifically, identified as a growing focal point of IS, there must be prompt action in support of local political processes. The U.S.-led Coalition should commit to building dialogue and reconciliation to build a local consensus for common goals with local actors to improve governance in the country.¹⁸⁹ The U.S. has already engaged with a wide group of Libyans to foster relationships and enhance communication, and should continue to work toward the longer-term goal of building a

¹⁸⁷ Kilcullen, 2010

¹⁸⁸ Lister, 2015

¹⁸⁹ Security Council meeting held on February 18th 2015.

cohesive national army that is representative of all of Libya's tribes and regions.¹⁹⁰

Instead of direct military intervention, U.S. efforts would be best directed toward forming a viable Libyan national unity government. The same can be said for Coalition efforts in Egypt moving forward. A military campaign does little to encourage political reform and will only contribute to creating a wider gap between state and society. Efforts should instead be placed in development and diplomacy to eliminate power vacuums. As well, a political resolution in Libya would address concerns of border security and regional radicalization in Egypt.¹⁹¹

IS faces substantial hurdles in regions where it aims to set up affiliates because of the numerous competing jihadist groups in the region. This means that the organization will have to engage other JPS' to further expand its influence, a reality that could be exploited by the Coalition.¹⁹² Because of IS' strong ideology, the most potent policy that could be used against this organization- in regions outside of the core - is to ameliorate socio-economic and political failures and divisions. In sum, the Coalition should be working to implement this effective counter-narrative.¹⁹³ This chapter has argued that an overarching strategy to mitigate the threat presented by IS should consist of a longer-term political solution that works to solve societal rifts, as well as incorporate local Sunnis into the reconstruction of better governance systems. This can be done by using a "bottom-up" approach to leverage regional actors and building networks of trust.

¹⁹⁰ Ali Zway, Fahim and Schmitt 2016

¹⁹¹ Leber and Barakat, 2015

¹⁹² Jones, 2016

¹⁹³ Lister, 2015

Chapter 6: Canada's Role in Countering IS

This section will provide insight into Canada's role in countering IS, including a brief overview of the country's role as a member of the anti-IS Coalition. It will then, discuss specific areas Canada can improve on and will offer recommendations as to how it can further these contributions with a focus on countering IS affiliates.

Canada has been a part of the multilateral efforts to degrade and destroy IS, led by the U.S. since the Coalition's conception in 2014. Shortly thereafter, the country committed six F-18s, two Aurora long range patrol/surveillance aircraft, one refueling aircraft, and a small contingent of Special Forces and troops to train and assist the Iraqi Kurdish forces. Since actions taken against IS have been multilateral, and given Canada's close relationship with the U.S., it was in Canada's best interests to be part of the Coalition, a point that Thomas Juneau has argued:

“IS has openly called for attacks on Western states, including Canada. This is a plausible threat: IS – which can operate either indirectly by inspiring lone self-radicalized actors or directly by planning attacks launched by extremist travelers – has demonstrated both the ambition and the capability to carry through on some of its promises”¹⁹⁴.

When the newly elected Liberal Government came into power in 2015, it revisited the country's contributions in the fight against IS. Canada has since withdrawn its six CF-18 fighter jets, but has tripled their training mission in northern Iraq, doubled their intelligence effort, and expanded their humanitarian and development commitments.¹⁹⁵ This revamped focus has also included providing intelligence, aerial refuel capabilities, and training local militias.¹⁹⁶ However, seemingly absent is a strategy to address IS

¹⁹⁴ Juneau, 2015

¹⁹⁵ MacKinnon, 2016

¹⁹⁶ Report by the Nato Association of Canada, February 2016.

affiliates – not unlike the current strategy of the Coalition as a whole, as this paper has considered.

Canada would do well to expand on its efforts and contributions in the fight against IS. Current initiatives will not serve to eliminate the growing threat, nor provide any solutions to IS affiliates. Canada taking a larger role in sending more troops to train, advise and assist Iraqi troops will help to ensure that local populations are better prepared to take a stand against jihadist groups such as IS. However, Canada's efforts would arguably be even better placed in helping to strengthen local partners within affiliate regions. This would help the Coalition to strengthen security forces, as well as aid in efforts to socially and politically¹⁹⁷ oppose IS across the Middle East. Canada should seek to support the Coalition in working with local actors and Sunnis in the affiliate regions most utilized by IS (currently Libya and Egypt) to counter the organization's appeal as part of a strategy of disaggregation.

At the G7 summit on May 25th 2016, Canada and the other G7 members discussed ways to counter IS' ideology and stressed the importance of “empowering alternative voices” and supporting local communities.¹⁹⁸ In reflection of this understanding, Canada should focus its efforts on using its comparative advantage in diplomacy to help resolve tensions on the ground, primarily in Libya. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has stated that Canada will be scaling up its diplomatic and humanitarian efforts around the Middle East,¹⁹⁹ and this strategy could prove to be effective in regions with IS affiliates. Finally, Canada's strengths include intelligence gathering and sharing and strategic

¹⁹⁷ General Vance spoke of the importance of this in an interview for Power and Politics in April 2016.

¹⁹⁸ MacLellan, 2016

¹⁹⁹ MacKinnon, 2016

communications.²⁰⁰ It should make better use of these strengths in affiliate regions and work to gather information on the ground. This, in turn would help the Coalition to develop clearer, more evidence-based and ultimately more effective policies to target the growing threat presented by IS' affiliates. To this end, Canada should also move to provide intelligence training to local forces in the provinces.

Conclusion

When IS fighters captured the Iraqi city of Mosul in 2014, and declared its intention to create a true caliphate over the Muslim world, its ambitious expansion plan was apparent. Today, IS has eclipsed most jihadist groups in both size and strength; has become successful in spawning affiliates; and has established ever-growing numbers of franchises and supporters throughout the Middle East and Beyond.²⁰¹

As observed throughout this paper, IS has pursued an international expansion campaign from the moment it first declared its caliphate. What this means is that while the organization solidifies its proto-state in parts of Iraq and Syria, it is constantly working to expand its caliphate regionally. To do this, IS has been adding affiliates (or provinces) to its ranks. This has created significant new challenges for policy-makers and Coalition forces seeking to eliminate the organization. Effective counter-strategies will require not only targeting the core in Iraq and Syria, but also paying considerable attention to affiliates in other areas. IS has successfully transitioned from an insurgent group to a state-like entity with a revolutionary and powerful governance structure. It will not go away anytime soon, nor will it end quickly or cleanly if or when it is eliminated. The idea of an "Islamic State" or Sunni caliphate has been dominant in the Middle East

²⁰⁰ Canada's Counter-Terrorism Strategy, Public Safety 2015.

²⁰¹ Byman, 2016

for decades; and even if IS were to be destroyed, another JPS with similar ideological roots would undoubtedly take its place and the idea would persist. It is imperative that strategies to mitigate IS continuously work to address this reality over the long-term, or else the region will continue to be subject to disruption and disorder

This paper has argued that IS' strategy of expansion has exposed gaps in strategies and policies currently being implemented in attempt to counter the organization. Various challenges were explored, and are summed up in brief here. First, airstrikes will only reduce IS in its core territory and will not serve to eradicate the organization in its entirety. Moreover, this tactic will likely cause unintended violence and could heighten local disdain for the West. Second, Coalition efforts have been haphazard at best and have been concentrated in military intervention. Third, policy-makers have not paid sufficient attention to IS' affiliates in developing counter-strategies. Finally, policy-makers do appear to realize the need for a political solution, but thus far have not begun to address political grievances in the affected regions. Any political solution will be extremely difficult to achieve in the short-term.

This paper recommends that, going forward, the U.S.-led Coalition consider a multi-faceted approach that focuses on both the IS core and affiliates in other regions. It recommends such a strategy consist of: 1. severing the link between the organization and its affiliates; 2. improving local security forces; 3. disaggregation; and 4. improving political and governance structures. This paper also recommends that Canadian efforts would be best placed in the third and fourth strategy utilizing diplomacy. Together, these measures could slow IS' expansion and work to counter issues within these regions caused by affiliates.

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