

# Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) a Global Threat: International Strategy to Counter the Threat

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## Abstract

The foundations of the ISIS were formed following the US-led invasion of Iraq (2003). The ISIS or the ISIL was formed by the insurgents of the Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, also known as the al-Qaeda in Iraq (aQI). This group has been given the title of “terrorist organization” by the United Nations, European Union, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and many others. ISIS now controls or can operate with impunity in a great stretch of territory in western Iraq and eastern Syria, making it militarily the most successful jihadi movement ever. Since ISIS has controlled more territory both in Syria and Iraq it has increasingly been able to fund itself from the proceeds of organised crime, including protection rackets and bank robberies, and by selling natural resources. The ISIS tactic is to make a surprise attack, inflict maximum casualties and spread fear before withdrawing without suffering heavy losses. ISIS specialises in using militarily untrained foreign volunteers as suicide bombers either moving on foot wearing suicide vests, or driving vehicles packed with explosives. ISIS is already a threat to the United States. ISIS is not only dangerous in a regional context because it is overthrowing modern state boundaries in ways that incur massive ethno-sectarian killing and cleansing. ISIS is also a global jihadist organization that shares al-Qaeda’s ideology, such that its progress drives towards a post-state and apocalyptic vision that involves the destruction of the modern state system. ISIS already threatens to escalate violence between states in the Middle East that have been fighting proxy wars in Syria for several years such that ISIS military operations may cascade into a broader regional conflict (Jessica D. Lewis: ISW). ISIS is now a direct threat to neighbouring states in the Middle East, and ISIS is broadcasting the intent to attack Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the West. The threat of attacks against the U.S. is present.

## Keywords

Islamic State of Iraq, Syria (ISIS), ISIL, Islamic State, Terrorism

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## 1. Introduction

Since the late-2000s, al-Qaeda affiliates have increasingly focused on establishing local bases of operations and acquiring and consolidating territorial control from which to launch more expansive attacks on what they call the “near enemy,” meaning local governments. While terrorist plots against Western targets have continued to emerge, the

principal threat to Western interests today is posed by increasing instability within the Middle East, which jihadi groups have exploited for their own benefit.

The foundations of the ISIS were formed following the US-led invasion of Iraq (2003). The ISIS or the ISIL was formed by the insurgents of the Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidayn, also known as the al-Qaeda in Iraq (aQI). 3-4 years ago, the Islamic State (ISIS) did not exist; now it controls

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vast swaths of Syria and Iraq. Showing off its handiwork daily via Twitter and YouTube, ISIS has repeatedly demonstrated that it is much more than a transnational terrorist organisation – rather, it is an entity with sophisticated command, control, propaganda and logistical capabilities, and one that has proven its ability to take and hold strategically critical territory at the heart of the Middle East. Principally, ISIS is the product of a genocide that continued unabated as the world stood back and watched. It is the illegitimate child born of pure hate and pure fear – the result of 200,000 murdered Syrians and of millions more displaced and divorced from their hopes and dreams. ISIS's rise is also a reminder of how Bashar al-Assad's Machiavellian embrace of al-Qaida would come back to haunt him.

Facing Assad's army and intelligence services, Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iraq's Shia Islamist militias and their grand patron, Iran's Revolutionary Guards, Syria's initially peaceful protesters quickly became disenchanted, disillusioned and disenfranchised – and then radicalised and violently militant. The Shia Islamist axis used chemical weapons, artillery and barrel bombs to preserve its crescent of influence. Syria's Sunni Arab revolutionaries in turn sought international assistance, and when the world refused, they embraced a pact with the devil, al-Qaida [1].

## 2. What Is ISIS

ISIS is the English acronym for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, a Sunni jihadist group whose sudden capture of Mosul, Tikrit and extensive swaths of Iraqi territory has triggered a new crisis, complete with atrocities targeting Iraqi army soldiers and volunteers. Known in Arabic as Da'ash, it grew out of the Islamic State in Iraq, an al-Qaida affiliate which, in turn, came into existence after the 2003 US-led invasion. This group has been given the title of “*terrorist organization*” by the United Nations, European Union, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and many others. The leader or emir (prince) of ISIS is a 43-year-old Sunni, known by his nom de guerre as Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, or Abu Dua. His real name is Awwad Ibrahim Ali al-Badri al-Samarrai. He was held prisoner by US forces from 2005 to 2009. According to some accounts he was radicalised by his experience of captivity. But others describe him as having been a firebrand preacher under Saddam Hussein's rule. He studied at the University of Baghdad, and was listed as a terrorist by the UN in 2011.

It is a measure of Baghdadi's success and charisma that ISIS has become the group of choice for thousands of foreign would-be fighters who have flocked to his banner. In 2013, he announced the creation of a new group that would be merged

with a rival al-Qaida affiliate active in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra. That was disputed both by Nusra and Osama bin Laden's successor as the leader of al-Qaida “central”, the Egyptian Ayman al-Zawahiri. Estimates of ISIS numbers range from 7,000 to 10,000. Its rank and file members are drawn from fighters who were previously with al-Qaida, some former Ba'athists and soldiers of the Saddam-era army [2].

ISIS now controls or can operate with impunity in a great stretch of territory in western Iraq and eastern Syria, making it militarily the most successful jihadi movement ever. While its exact size is unclear, the group is thought to include thousands of fighters. The last “s” of “ISIS” comes from the Arabic word “al-Sham”, meaning Levant, Syria or occasionally Damascus, depending on the circumstances. ISIS is highly fanatical, killing Shia Muslims and Christians whenever possible, as well as militarily efficient and under tight direction by top leaders. The creation of a sort of proto-Caliphate by extreme jihadis in northern Syria and Iraq is provoking fears in surrounding countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey that they will become targets of battle-hardened Sunni fighters.

## 3. ISIS Military Capabilities

A senior US officer, Lt General Mayville, described ISIS as a “very well-organized and very well-resourced force that is an adaptive and learning force [3].” Chuck Hagel, the US Defence Secretary, told Congress that ISIL has acquired significant resources and advanced weapons as it has seized territory across Iraq and Syria [4]. Jane's Defence Weekly lists the equipment believed to have been captured by ISIS when it over-ran Syrian Army bases in Al-Raqqah provinces, including the bases of the 17th Division, 121st Regiment and 93rd Brigade. Jane's Defence Weekly reported:

The ISIS also acquired considerable quantities of weapons and equipment when it overran these military facilities. For example, solely from the 121st Regiment base it captured at least 12 130 mm M-46 towed field guns and dozens of crates of associated ammunition; at least seven BM-21 multiple rocket launchers (MRLs) with 400-500 122 mm Grad rockets; several T-55 main battle tanks; dozens of military vehicles; hundreds of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs); tens of thousands of rounds of small arms ammunition; several anti-tank guided missiles; and large quantities of assault rifles and hand grenades. At the 93rd Brigade, at least 20 T-55 tanks and five 122 mm D-30 howitzers were captured, along with considerable quantities of other weaponry [5].

ISIS has light arms, various types of rockets (standard and locally produced), mortars, anti-tank missiles and launchers, and anti-aircraft weapons. It also has Humvees captured from the Iraqi army during the occupation of Mosul, as well as

Toyotas mounted with machine guns. ISIS also has heavy weapons and advanced technology captured from the Iraqi and Syrian armies. According to media reports issued by ISIS, the organization has tanks, various types of artillery, various types of shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles, one or more Scud missiles, one or more MIG-21s, air-to-surface missiles and various types of armoured vehicles. It also has mustard gas and possibly other types of gasses it used against the Iraqi security forces and against the Kurds in Ayn al-Arab (Kobani) (Syria). It has anti-tank missiles including, and according to media reports, advanced Konkurs and Kornet missiles [6].

There is evidence of weaponry acquired in one country being used in another. Jane's Intelligence Weekly reported that ISIS used M198 howitzers that it had seized in Iraq against the Syrian Army in Raqqa as early as 23 June [7]. Business Insider provided a list in June 2014 of military equipment thought to be in ISIS's hands. This included approximately 30 Soviet-built T-55 tanks, 5-10 Soviet-built T-72 tanks,

Humvees, AK-47s, M79 Osa rocket launcher (used against Iraqi security forces' armoured vehicles), RBG-6 Grenade Launchers, RPG-7s (rocket-propelled grenades - highly portable unguided shoulder-launched antitank weapons), M198 howitzers (medium-sized artillery piece that must be towed between locations), Type 59-1 Field Gun (a towed field gun), ZU-23-2 is a Soviet anti-aircraft auto cannon), Stinger Man pads (FIM-92 Stinger, a shoulder-fired infrared homing surface-to-air missile), HJ-8 (an anti-tank missile) and the DShK 1938 Machine Gun [8].

Their military is based on mobile foot militant units using light vehicles such as gun equipped pick-up trucks (technical), motorbikes and buses for fast advances. They also use artillery, tanks and armoured vehicles captured from the Iraqi and Syrian Armies. It is alleged that the ISIS military had gained control of 3 aircraft from the Syrian Army and are flying them over Syria, although two of these were reportedly shot down by Syria.

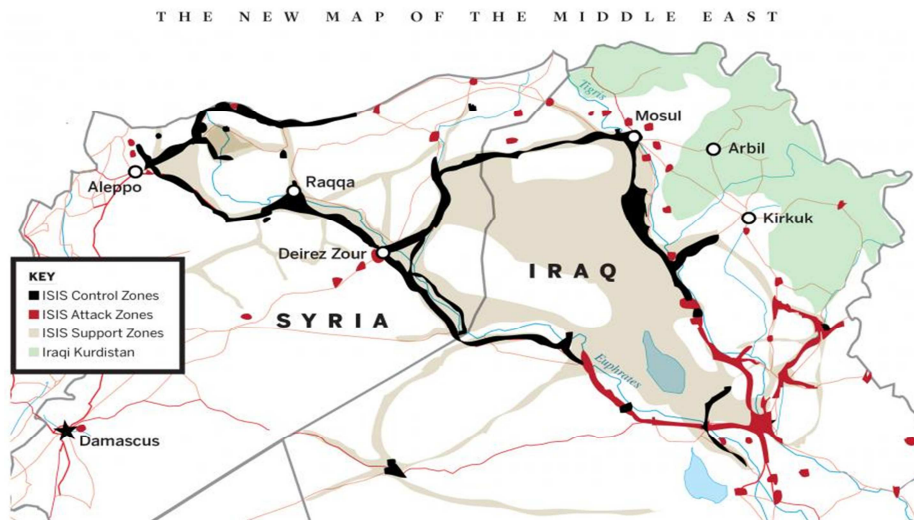


Figure 1. The New Map of the Middle East.

Source: "How Does ISIS Fund Its Reign of Terror?" Janine Di Giovanni, Leah McGrath Goodman, and Damien Sharkov/ Newsweek, November 6, 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/11/14/how-does-isis-fund-its-reign-terror-282607.html>

ISIS has a long history of using truck and car bombs, suicide bombers, and IEDs. They have also deployed chemical weapons in Iraq and Syrian Kurdistan. Terror tactics include genocide, mass executions including beheadings, and psychological operations through sophisticated propaganda. A significant number of ISIL fighters are from outside Iraq and Syria. In June 2014, ISIL had at least 4,000 fighters in Iraq [9], and the CIA estimated in September 2014 that it had 20,000–31,500 fighters in Iraq and Syria [10]. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimates that the force numbers around 80,000–100,000 total (up to 50,000 in Syria and 30,000 in Iraq) [11]. Many reports say troops and

equipment move between various parts of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon as tactical needs arise. There are many foreign fighters in ISIL's ranks. In June 2014, [12]The Economist reported that "ISIS may have up to 6,000 fighters in Iraq and 3,000–5,000 in Syria, including perhaps 3,000 foreigners; nearly a thousand are reported to hail from Chechnya and perhaps 500 or so more from France, Britain and elsewhere in Europe [13]." According to a UN report, an estimated 15,000 fighters from nearly 70 countries have travelled to Iraq and Syria to join militant groups, including ISIL [14].

In January 2015, ISIS was also confirmed to have a military presence in Afghanistan [15] and in Yemen [16].

Additionally, in early February 2015, it was revealed that ISIS was smuggling fighters into the European Union, by disguising them as civilian refugees [17]. An ISIS representative said that ISIS had successfully smuggled 4,000 fighters, and that the smuggled fighters were planning attacks in Europe to retaliate for the airstrikes carried out against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria. However, experts believe that the ISIS claim of 4,000 was exaggerated to boost their stature and spread fear, although they acknowledged that some of the Western countries are aware of the smuggling [18].

## 4. ISIS Funding Sources

Since the end of 2011, Islamic charities and rich individuals in the gulf have been funding insurgent groups in Syria. As the role of Islamist groups within or linked to Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS has grown, many of these donors have directly or indirectly provided money that reaches jihadist organisations. Oil-smuggling operations involving millions of barrels have recently been uncovered. The oil comes from wells and refineries that ISIS has taken over inside northern Iraq and northern Syria, and until it was easy to smuggle it into this quiet part of southern Turkey. One reason is that cheap, smuggled oil is a much-prized commodity in Turkey, where oil is so expensive that it almost doesn't matter who is selling it, even if it's your enemy. U.S.-led coalition forces attacked and destroyed many ISIS oil facilities, precisely to cut off the groups funding. But the border smuggling is only one way that ISIS generates money. Besides revenue from oil smuggling, the group receives money through donations from wealthy sympathizers in countries including Qatar and Kuwait [19].

The main source of funding for ISIS predecessor organisation al-Qaeda in Iraq at the beginning of its existence was likely to have been wealthy Gulf individuals [20]. Nouri al-Maliki, Iraqi Prime Minister, has said that Saudi Arabia and Qatar 'announced war on Iraq' [21], although most sources suggest that the Gulf governments have been assisting groups they perceive as more moderate than ISIS. Many have argued that, at least, Gulf governments, including particularly Kuwait [22], have not done enough to prevent funds reaching groups such as ISIS. Kuwait is singled out as a staging post for the funds, a situation that has arisen not only because of its location but also because of a relatively permissive political and financial environment. The amount of money reaching militants in Syria and Iraq from Gulf individuals has been estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars [23]. Iranian officials have criticised the West for allowing funds to flow from its allies in the Gulf to extremists. The lootings, ransoms and extortion that go toward funding ISIS's day-to-day operations provide a steady

cash flow. More than a third of Iraq's 12,000 important archaeological sites are now under ISIS control and it has hastily begun excavating and selling artifacts dating from 9,000 B.C. to A.D. 1,000 through intermediaries to collectors and dealers. A shrine, a tomb, a church, a palace or an archaeological site is dug up. They will sell the useful objects and destroy the rest. These sales now represent ISIS's second largest source of funding. One of its biggest paydays came from looting the ninth century B.C. grand palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II at Kalhu, which is now called Nimrud [24].

The Islamic State is being funded by black-market oil trading, illegal drugs and internet cafes, a local activist group has claimed. However, since ISIS has controlled more territory both in Syria and Iraq it has increasingly been able to fund itself from the proceeds of organised crime, including protection rackets and bank robberies, and by selling natural resources. The looting of millions of dollars from Mosul banks was an example of this, but it had already been going on with the Syrian territory held by the group: a cache of intelligence captured by the Iraqi authorities showed that in late 2012 ISIS/AQI had taken control of oilfields in eastern Syria which had given it a healthy cash flow. The Assad government in Syria has been accused by Western intelligence of buying oil from ISIS [25]. While the oil fields controlled by ISIS in Iraq and Syria are not large by the standards of the region, together with the control of smuggling routes, they are providing the group with revenues of about \$2 million per day, according to the estimate of one expert [26]. The territory controlled in Syria had already given ISIS cash and assets of £515 million, before the takeover of Mosul. After Mosul, an Iraqi intelligence official estimated that 'they could add another \$1.5 billion to that' [27].

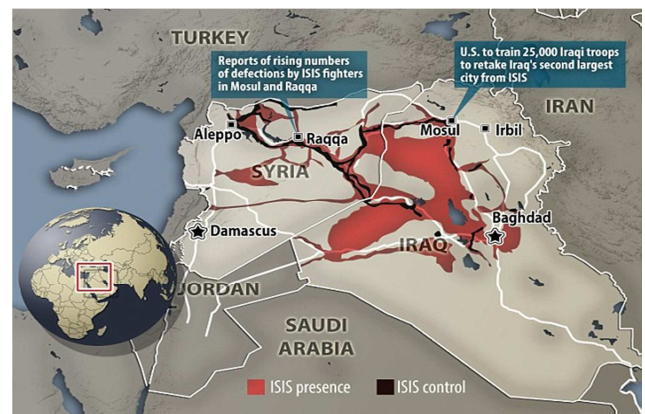


Figure 2. Places of ISIS Control and Presence.

Source: "How ISIS is funded by black-market oil trading, illegal drugs and internet cafes" Sara Malm, Mailonline, 22 February 2015. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2964028/oil-drugs-internet-ISIS-funded.html>.

ISIS has secured massive cash flows from the oilfields of eastern Syria, which it had commandeered in late 2012, some of which it sold back to the Syrian regime. It has also made money from smuggling raw materials pillaged in Syria as well as priceless antiquities from archaeological digs. Computer sticks taken from an ISIS courier by Iraqi forces before the fall of the northern city of Mosul revealed that Isis – before the city's capture – had cash and assets worth \$875m (£516m). After the fall of Mosul, ISIS looted the banks and captured military supplies that have boosted the group's coffers to about \$2bn, according to Iraqi officials.

**Table 1.** Ten ways the Islamic State is making money

1	Sales of electricity and gas to the Syrian government through ISIS-controlled dams and gas fields.
2	Taxes on citizens of the Islamic State
3	Customs revenue on import and export of goods in the caliphate
4	Exporting goods such as fruits, vegetables, grains and fabrics
5	Internet cafes
6	Religious taxes – punishment for smokers, missing prayers and breaking sharia law
7	Confiscating private lands and selling it on public auction
8	Selling crude oil on the black market in Turkey
9	Growing and selling drugs and black market cigarettes and alcohol
10	Looting museums and selling artefacts on the black market

Source: Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, The Syrian people's Campaign against #ISIS #Assad regime in #Raqqa - Raqqa.Slaughtered@gmail.com

## 5. Tactics and Activities of ISIS

ISIS is currently a military organization that is no longer conducting terrorist activities exclusively but is conducting conventional military operations in company and battalion formations, which was not the case in traditional al-Qaida way of fighting. ISIS has been attacking Iraqi military positions with company or battalion-size formations to clear towns and urban settlements, and then hold and then build those settlements. This tactic of clear-hold-build is surprisingly the counterinsurgency tactic coalition forces used both in Iraq and Afghanistan. ISIS has been fighting as the Americans fought against Sunni insurgency in 2006 by mimicking their tactics. The basic ISIS tactic is to make a surprise attack, inflict maximum casualties and spread fear before withdrawing without suffering heavy losses. And then wait the Iraqi forces and unfriendly locals to evacuate or flee from the designated territory.

In this sense their use of violence is not indiscriminate one but a strategic one serving to the purpose of creating a sterile environment. Simply, their aim is to drive the unwanted out of the captured lands and building and a “sterile” human population in sectarian terms in the controlled territories. This strategy provides ISIS a submissive human population and thus makes the holding phase easier to realize. This strategic use of fear and intimidation to not solely for

propaganda purposes but also for controlling the territory captured is another dynamic we have not noticed since 9/11.

The ISIS tactic is to make a surprise attack, inflict maximum casualties and spread fear before withdrawing without suffering heavy losses. ISIS specialises in using militarily untrained foreign volunteers as suicide bombers either moving on foot wearing suicide vests, or driving vehicles packed with explosives. Often more than one suicide bomber is used, as happened when a vehicle exploded at the headquarters of a Kurdish party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in the town of Jalawla in the divided and much fought-over province of Diyala, north-east of Baghdad.

ISIS now has artillery and other indirect fire capabilities, in addition to heavy machine guns. ISIS can induce a surface-to-air threat against Iraqi air force at Balad Airbase, Taji Base, and Baghdad International Airport that effectively neutralizes Iraq's air assets. ISIS can also attack fortified positions in downtown Baghdad through medium-range direct fire via the artillery pieces it has seized. ISIS likely intends to strike the Green Zone and other fortress targets that have adequate ground protection [28].

In June 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS aka ISIL) and aligned forces started an offensive in the northern area of Iraq against government forces. Many mercenaries joined with aligned forces for ISIS. The group created by al-Baghdadi has a great appeal among young foreigners, especially Western youngsters who have converted to Jihad. 80 per cent of the foreign fighters in Syria have gone with al-Baghdadi. With a series of attacks, ISIS and aligned forces conquered many cities, including Samarra (June 5th), Mosul (June 9th) and Tikrit (June 11th). The Iraqi military left the areas, and on June 13th, 2014 Kurdish forces took control of the oil hub of Kirkuk in the north of the Iraq. In June, 2014 the Iraqi government had lost control of its border with Jordan and Syria [29].

The ISIS military is a classical Centre of Gravity. It is an institution comprised of many layers of tactical, operational, and strategic capability, and it is expertly led. The ISIS military campaign belies the brilliance of its military leadership. The ISIS military strategy in Iraq and campaign cohesion have been more sophisticated and more successful than that of any other force with which they have come into violent contact. This strategic capability now also extends into Syria, evidenced most powerfully in the offensive to seize control of urban terrain and oil fields in Deir ez-Zour province. The war craft and multi-front campaign cohesion of ISIS generate strength for the Islamic Caliphate and relative superiority other military forces they have thus far faced in battle. The military itself, a function of many applied strengths, is a Centre of Gravity.

ISIS is spreading further afield from its base in Syria and Iraq. On 24 September, 2014 it was confirmed by the French government that a tourist abducted in Algeria had been murdered by a group claiming allegiance to ISIS [30]. Also in September, 2014 it was reported that militants had crossed the border from Afghanistan into Pakistan carrying leaflets and flags, urging locals to join ISIS. Militants from Afghanistan and Pakistan who went to fight in Syria have returned to their home countries to recruit for ISIS [31]. There are also reports that ISIS cells are operating in Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia. Official Saudi news media are supporting the Kingdom's decision to participate in military action against ISIS, but there is a strong undercurrent of support there for the Sunni extremists.

## 6. Malware Infections and Network Monitoring

Intel Crawler, a US-based Cyber threat intelligence firm, has recently published an interesting post in which its experts analyse the repercussion of Iraq Civil disorders on cyberspace. Intelligence researchers have analysed the activities within the Iraqi ISP industry, discovering a significant increase in the number of cyber-attacks during recent months of 2014. The experts observed a significant number of botnets using dynamic DNS services. The circumstance could be related to on-going cyber espionage campaigns on systems in the area. The attackers have used the dynamic DNS services (e.g. "no-ip.biz" and "zapro.org") to allow the malware which infected the machines in the country to reach the Command & Control servers. Also, their IP addresses will change to avoid detection. In March 2014, experts from Symantec observed the growth of indigenous groups of attackers in the Middle East which adopted the njRAT for their attacks. The malware different from other RAT is developed and supported by Arabic speakers. Symantec noted that several groups of bad actors have used the RAT to target government entities in the region.

"Symantec analysed 721 samples of njRAT and uncovered a fairly large number of infections, with 542 control-and-command (C&C) server domain names found and 24,000 infected computers worldwide. Nearly 80 per cent of the C&C servers were located in regions in the Middle East and North Africa, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, the Palestinian Territories and Libya." (<http://resources.infosecinstitute.com/islamic-state-iraq-syria-isis-global-threat-analysis-effects-cyberspace-iraqi-situation/>) The malware includes most common data-stealer features like screen grabbing, key logger and the ability to download and execute further malicious code on the infected systems. Another element of great interest for

security analysts is the activity related to groups of hackers, mainly for two reasons:

1. For their direct involvement in cyber operations that could disclose sensitive information during the cyber-attacks.
2. Because state-sponsored hackers could benefit from the cyber campaigns of hackers to organize cyber-attacks on strategic targets and remain in the shadow.

The popular group of hackers Anonymous has announced a new campaign dubbed Operation NO2ISIS against some nations it accuses of funding or arming the radical Islamic terror group ISIS. In particular, Anonymous will target three states suspected of offering support to the Islamic State of Syria and al-Sham (ISIS). Anonymous is promoting a recruiting campaign to organize a series of major attacks against digital assets of its enemies. The ISIS group is also very active in cyberspace, and though it hasn't yet demonstrated capabilities like the Syrian Electronic Army, it conducts an effective propaganda campaign through the principal social media. Analysing the Twitter platform it is possible to note that several accounts were created to under the hash tag #No2ISIS to protest against ISIS activity in Iraq and to spread information on its cruel attacks. On the other side, a group which named itself ISIS Electronic Army is declaring war to Western countries and to the Anonymous collective. One of the most active members of the ISIS Electronic Army, using the nicknamed Kjfido, tweeted this message to Anonymous members.

## 7. A New Campaign of Airstrikes in Iraq and Syria

Targeted airstrikes against ISIS forces near Irbil began on 8 August 2014. US Air Force and Navy aircraft, including F-15, F/A-18 aircraft and MQ-1 Predator drones have conducted more than 190 airstrikes in Iraq in order to protect US citizens and forces in and around Irbil, to assist with the evacuation of civilians trapped on Mouth Sinjar, and in support of efforts by the Iraqi security forces and Kurdish defence force to counter ISIS forces, including in the operation to retake the Mosul Dam and protect the Haditha Dam. Intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions have also continued using a mixture of manned and unmanned systems. Director of Operations for the Joint Staff, Lt Gen William Mayville, confirmed in a Pentagon press briefing on 11 August, 2014 that "about 50 to 60 ISR flights are being conducted daily by US aircraft". On 10 September, 2014 the US President set out his broader strategy for defeating ISIL/ISIS.

The overall objective is to "degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIS through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism

strategy". A systematic campaign of airstrikes in both Iraq and Syria is a key element of that strategy, alongside support for local ground forces, broader counterterrorism initiatives and humanitarian assistance. Once again the President reiterated that US personnel would not be committed on the ground in a combat role but that:

*This counterterrorism campaign will be waged through a steady, relentless effort to take out ISIL, wherever they exist, using our airpower and our support for partner forces on the ground [32].*

The President also confirmed that the US would not "hesitate to take action against ISIS in Syria, as well as Iraq". The first airstrikes under this new strategy were conducted on 16 September, 2014 against ISIS targets to the south west of Baghdad.

Airstrikes against ISIS targets in Syria began on 23 September, 2014. Fighter and bomber aircraft, alongside Tomahawk land-attack missiles, targeted ISIS training camps, headquarters, command and control facilities, logistics hubs, armoured vehicles and leadership figures [33]. The US also took unilateral action against an alleged network of terrorist organisations, the Khorasan group, currently based in Syria. A US Central Command press release stated:

Separately, the United States also took action to disrupt the imminent attack plotting against the United States and Western interests conducted by a network of seasoned al-Qaida veterans known as the Khorasan Group. The group has established a safe haven in Syria to develop external attacks, construct and test improvised explosive devices and recruit Westerners to conduct operations, the release said. These strikes were undertaken only by U.S. assets. In total, U.S. Central Command forces conducted eight strikes against Khorasan Group targets located west of Aleppo, to include training camps, explosives and munitions production facility, a communication building and command and control facilities [34].

The UK has a range of assets available to conduct bombing missions in Iraq. Tornado GR4 aircraft have already been sent to RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, albeit to provide surveillance support (they have been fitted with the Litening III reconnaissance pods). Tornado aircraft can carry a range of air-to-surface weapons, including:

- Brimstone (Dual Mode Brimstone and Brimstone 2): precision close air support weapons, useful against armour and battlefield vehicles.
- Paveway II, Paveway III and Paveway IV: precision-guided bomb.
- Storm Shadow: long-range air-to-surface cruise missile designed to strike large compounds, key command centres,

airfield facilities and bridges.

In addition, it can also carry ASRAAM air-to-air missiles (advanced short-range air-to-air missile) and has a Mauser 27mm Cannon. The RAF can draw on 3 frontline squadrons: 31 Squadron has just deployed to Afghanistan and IX (B) squadron has just returned from Afghanistan, as of mid-September 2014. In addition, there is 2 (Army Cooperation) Squadron, which specialises in low-level reconnaissance.

## 8. International Strategy to Counter the Threat from ISIS

ISIS presents a threat to all modern states in this way. It is therefore vital to find a path to defeat ISIS. Establishing limited objectives to disrupt, limit, or contain ISIS are not sufficient to address the present threat, which already overcomes state boundaries and controls critical infrastructure that are important to neighbouring states. The U.S. might consider ways to destroy the military Centre of Gravity of ISIS. Foreign and Defence Ministers from ten countries [35] met on the fringes of the NATO Summit to discuss an international strategy to counter the threat from ISIS. Convened by the UK and US, the meeting was intended to formulate a comprehensive response to the challenges posed by ISIS, specifically:

- The provision of military support to Iraqi partners
- Stopping the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and Iraq
- Countering ISIS's financing and funding, including any trade in petroleum products
- Addressing the humanitarian crisis
- De-legitimising ISIS's ideology.

In the immediate term the ten countries agreed to engage with a new Iraqi government over the potential for additional training and equipping of the Iraqi security forces at the federal, regional and provincial level. A multinational task force will also be formed to share more information about the flow of foreign fighters into Syria and from Syria into Iraq. The meeting recognised that "the formation of a new and inclusive government in Iraq will be a critical step in this effort" and that "the effort to degrade and destroy the threat posed by ISIS will take time and persistence" and will "require a unified approach at the international, regional and local level – combining military, law enforcement, intelligence, economic and diplomatic tools" [36].

These counterterrorism initiatives were outlined as a key part of President Obama's strategy to defeat ISIS. This effort was also the focus of a UN General Assembly meeting held on 25

September, 2014 with a view to establishing a “truly global coalition” to counter ISIS. Russia has traditionally supported the West’s campaigns against Islamist extremist groups; it cooperated with the NATO campaign in Afghanistan by facilitating the Northern Supply Network.

After initially downplaying the threat posed by the extremist militant group Islamic State or (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) which has used its brutal military acumen and barbaric sectarian strategy to capture large parts of Iraq and Syria, India, earlier in December 2014, banned the group, making it illegal for anyone participating or supporting the terror group to be prosecuted for unlawful and terrorist activities. The Indian government blocked more than 30 major websites to prevent the spread of Jihadi propaganda which has been pivotal globally in luring more than 15000 young men and women from 80 countries to join rebel groups like ISIS.

## 9. Conclusion

ISIS is operating in both military and political spheres to achieve its objective to form an Islamic Caliphate. A counterstrategy to defeat ISIS has to be just as sophisticated. It is necessary to approach the subject of strategy formulation with a sound estimate for the basis of ISIS’s strength, its endgame, as well as its strategies applied in Iraq and Syria thus far. Without this understanding, it might be possible to miss what will actually happen if U.S. political and military means are misapplied to the current problem.

ISIS is already a threat to the United States. ISIS is not only dangerous in a regional context because it is overthrowing modern state boundaries in ways that incur massive ethno-sectarian killing and cleansing. ISIS is also a global jihadist organization that shares al-Qaeda’s ideology, such that its progress drives towards a post-state and apocalyptic vision that involves the destruction of the modern state system. ISIS already threatens to escalate violence between states in the Middle East that have been fighting proxy wars in Syria for several years such that ISIS military operations may cascade into a broader regional conflict. ISIS is now a direct threat to neighbouring states in the Middle East, and ISIS is broadcasting the intent to attack Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the West. The threat of attacks against the U.S. is present.

It is therefore necessary for the U.S. to consider ways to defeat ISIS, not only to preserve the integrity of the Iraqi state, but to preserve our own security. Defeating the Islamic State will, in fact, be very difficult. Developing a strategy to do so will be very hard. But hard is not the same as impossible. As pressure grows in Washington for a response to the crisis that has engulfed the region, policymakers must move beyond the assessment phase and begin building a comprehensive strategy. This effort must begin with a close

examination of the sources of strength, intentions, and vulnerabilities of the Islamic Caliphate created by ISIS. Only then can a coherent counter-strategy emerge [37].

U.S. security interests are tied to rolling back and neutralizing ISIS. The U.S. needs a more robust capability in Iraq and to allow U.S. forces to effectively engage former Sons of Iraq and Sunni political leaders. A Combined Joint Task Force of special operations forces; a mixed aviation brigade of attack and transport rotary wing aircraft; a robust intelligence capability, command and control advisory teams; and other medical, logistics and force protection elements should be based in Erbil, Al Sadiya Airfield in Anbar Province, and Baghdad. This is the minimum capability needed to enable effective targeting of ISIS and other extremists while enabling U.S. engagement and outreach in the Sunni Arab provinces. The U.S. has a cadre of well-respected U.S. commanders, advisors, and diplomats who can work through the support of the Combined Task Force to engage a range of Sunni Arab leaders, many of whom are currently fighting alongside ISIS or have not taken sides yet. The U.S. military developed extensive relationships and intelligence on this Sunni movement and the networks within it, all of which should now be dusted off and employed. This more robust effort is what is required to rebuild stability and turn the tide against ISIS. It will take more than the President’s minimalist approach envisions. [38].

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