ARTICLES

What the ISIS Crisis Means for the Future of the Middle East[1]

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ABSTRACT *Despite all the intellectual energy devoted to understanding "what ISIS really is," the group remains unpredictable and inexplicable for two main reasons. First, the existing frameworks are not appropriate for a holistic assessment of the organization, prompting analysts to mistake ISIS' tactics or propaganda for its political objectives. Second, an almost exclusive emphasis on ISIS per se distracts from the symbiotic and complex relationship between ISIS and the bigger regional crisis. This article draws attention to three interrelated dynamics. First, ISIS is best seen as a "process," not as a static "thing" that can be easily identified. Second, ISIS' successes and failures cannot be divorced from the multi-dimensional crisis in the region. Third, it is necessary to consider the groups' impacts on the greater Middle East with respect to two interrelated dimensions: sectarian tensions and existing ethnic relations.*

Since its meteoric rise to global infamy by mid-2014, the group that now calls itself the "Islamic State" (or, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as ISIS) has occupied a central place in the minds of policymakers and analysts, establishing itself as international public enemy number one.[2] In so many ways, ISIS has also constituted a source of embarrassment for the security community.[3] First, very few, if any at all, of the same experts who are quite literally obsessed with the group today foresaw the rise of ISIS to prominence in Iraq and Syria until it actually happened. Second, despite all the intellectual energy devoted to understanding "what ISIS really is" (or, what it really wants), not to mention the accumulation of considerable data on the group, we still do not understand the organization significantly more than we did in mid-2014. Consequently, there is little agreement in the security community over the true nature of ISIS and the proper strategy to effectively "degrade and destroy" the organization.[4]

ISIS remains unpredictable and inexplicable for two main reasons. First, the existing frameworks utilized to explore "what ISIS really is" are not appropri-

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ate for a holistic assessment of the organization, prompting analysts to mistake ISIS' tactics or propaganda for its political objectives. Second, an almost exclusive emphasis on trying to understand ISIS *per se* distracts from the symbiotic and complex relationship between ISIS and the bigger regional crisis that gave birth to the organization in the first place.

This article draws attention to three interrelated dynamics that may help students of international politics make sense of ISIS.[5] First, ISIS is best seen as a "process," not as a static "thing" that can be easily identified.[6] The challenge, then, is to uncover the mechanisms through which the group energizes its ever-evolving strategy. Second, understanding ISIS' strategic resilience requires evaluating the group's state-building and power-projection strategies in the context of regional dynamics. ISIS' successes and failures, and most certainly its future prospects, cannot be divorced from the ongoing, multi-dimensional crisis in the region.

Third, thinking of ISIS as a "process" also makes it necessary to consider the groups' impacts on the greater Middle East with respect to two interrelated dimensions: sectarian tensions and the impacts of the group on existing ethnic relations in the region, especially in the context of the so-called Kurdish question. The impacts of ISIS on the region, in particular, can be analyzed with respect to two key dimensions. First, ISIS is a project that aims to transform the political and human terrain in Iraq and Syria; its leadership is consciously adopting strategies that aim to remake the territories it controls in its own image, while also destabilizing the entire region. The second dimension is rarely discussed: the rise of ISIS created numerous challenges as well as opportunities for all relevant actors. Concerned with the challenges and ever-anxious to take advantage of the opportunities, the regional actors are playing an active role in reshaping the Middle East, a region that will most likely look considerably different in the next decade.

The remainder of the essay unfolds in four sections. The first section offers a brief historical narrative outlining the rise of ISIS. Second, I examine the existing frameworks that are utilized to analyze the group, underlining their weaknesses and strengths. The third section evaluates ISIS' strategic resilience in the context of the regional dynamics. In the fourth section, I examine the ways in which ISIS has been reshaping regional dynamics, especially with respect to sectarian and ethnic relations.

A History of Violence

Until mid-2014, security analysts (scholarly or otherwise) and global media either ignored ISIS or collapsed it under numerous organizations affiliated with

al-Qaeda (AQ). In less than a year, ISIS captured an estate as big as the UK across Syria and Iraq, establishing itself as a geographical reality and an unprecedented challenge to regional stability in the Middle East. ISIS' penchant for publicizing its acts of violence[7] (which has been

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appropriately called "jihadist porn") and its mastery of social media[8] –not to mention, its institutionalization of slavery and ethnic cleansing– have rendered the group global public enemy number one, even forcing AQ to publicly distance itself from its offspring.

The origins of ISIS can be traced to the Jordanian jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, previously a minor AQ associate who was famously denied even a basic audience from Osama Bin Laden in the late 1990s, partially due to Zarqawi's reputation as an unrefined hothead with a past colored by substance abuse and petty crime. During the course of the late-1990s, Zarqawi ran a paramilitary training camp in Afghanistan that was loosely associated with AQ. In 2001, Zarqawi fled to Northern Iraq during the U.S.-led Operation "Enduring Freedom," seeking refuge with Ansar al-Islam, a radicalized Kurdish group. There, he founded Jamaat al-Tahvid wa-l-Jihad (JTWJ) and, anticipating the potential for a jihadist insurgency, moved his operations to Baghdad right before the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Zarqawi's JTWJ gained itself a reputation for brutality and effectiveness, most notably through its attacks on the UN headquarters in Baghdad, various Shia mosques, and civilians. Zarqawi's initial exploits in Iraq also highlighted his two-pronged trademark: sectarian targeting and publicized savagery (especially beheadings). Zarqawi's trademark gained him notoriety and an increasing following, but also motivated Osama Bin Laden, who did not share Zarqawi's penchant for sectarian violence, to keep a distance between AQ and Zarqawi.

Eventually, Zarqawi's increasing profile and continuous appeals to AQ-central for formal affiliation prompted Osama Bin Laden to commission JTWJ as AQ in Iraq (AQI) and Zarqawi as its leader in October 2004. Until Zarqawi was killed in 2006 in a U.S. air strike, the Zarqawi-led AQI wreaked havoc in Iraq, simultaneously exploiting and inflaming sectarian tensions in the region.[9] In fact, the drift between AQ-central and AQI (which would eventually evolve into ISIS) can be traced back to this period. Zarqawi's brutal methods attracted criticism from AQ-central, expressed most notably in a letter sent by AQ's [then] second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2005.[10] In the letter, Zawahiri, albeit in a diplomatic and quasi-formal fashion, warned Zarqawi that AQI's sectarian strategy (not to mention its targeting of Sunnis) was damaging AQ-central's reputation. A second, yet less-pronounced, point of contention

involved the issue of "governance." While Osama Bin Laden and Zawahiri openly opposed the idea of forming Islamic quasi-states before conditions became ripe (Bin Laden feared that a premature attempt at statehood would eventually hurt the prospects of founding a caliphate down the road), Zarqawi showed great interest in establishing a form of territorial governance based on an extremely strict interpretation of *sharia* rule.

Following Zarqawi's death, the new leadership under Abu Omar al-Baghdadi announced that AQI would change its name to Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). In reality, the title of "state" was adopted to cover the increasing weakness of the group and ISI's "statehood" existed only in its title. During this time, the U.S. launched the "awakening" (*sahva*) campaign that involved coopting the Sunni tribes in the Anbar region who were already feeling the brunt of AQI/ISI's increasing brutality and intolerance of any form of dissent. In 2010, ISI, now a shadow of its former self, and having retreated to terrorism (as opposed to insurgency and claims over governance), lost its key leadership, including Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, in an alliance airstrike. At the time, a common assumption was that ISI had been finally beaten into submission.

In 2010, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was virtually unknown to intelligence agencies at the time, assumed the group's leadership. Different from Bin Laden and Zarqawi, there is still little known about Baghdadi. According to ISI(S) propaganda, Baghdadi was a professor of Islamic studies (with a Ph.D.) and a veteran of the fight against the U.S. There exists no hard evidence to sup-

port the latter claim, but it is established that Baghdadi, just like most other key ISIS operatives, spent time in a U.S.-run prison, in his case, Camp Bucca, from February 2004 until his release ten months later. For many analysts, Camp Bucca was where ISI(S) was born from its ashes. In the words of an ISIS affiliate:

> [W]e could never have all got together like this in Baghdad, or anywhere else… Here, we were not only safe, but we were a few hundred meters away from the entire al-Qaida leadership… Bucca was a factory. It made us all. It built our ideology.[11]

Under new management, ISI rebuilt itself between 2010 and 2012. Taking advantage of the feeling of disenfranchisement among the Sunni population in Iraq (a result of Bagdad's policies that alienated the very same Sunni tribes that had contributed to the pacification of ISI between 2006-2009) and the civil war in neighboring Syria, ISI launched a two-pronged initiative in Iraq and Syria in 2012. In Iraq, the group initiated what has come to be referred as the "Breaking Down the Walls" campaign, where ISI rescued hundreds of jihadists and former Baathists from Iraqi prisons; these individuals then constituted the backbone of ISI(S)'s military and intelligence operations, as well as its state-building efforts. Recognizing the opportunities that the civil war offered, ISI also sent a taskforce to Syria under the command of Abu Mohammad al-Julani, whose group adopted the name Jabhat al-Nusra (JN).

Riding on the wave of its increasing influence in Iraq as well as the impressive performance of its Syrian affiliate, the group adopted a new name, ISIS, in April 2013 and immediately declared that Jabhat al-Nusra was its branch. JN reacted to this declaration by taking the issue to AQ-Central. AQ leader Zawahiri, acting as a mediator, weighed in on the behalf of JN, which amplified the tensions between AQ and ISIS. Suffering a reputational setback as a result of the JN-AQ debacle, ISIS launched its "Soldier's Harvest" campaign in Iraq (which entailed targeting of Iraqi security personnel through systematic ambushes and/or assassinations), and openly switched to "territorial" aims in both Iraq and Syria, with the intention to not only capture and hold but also to govern territory there. Its territorial aims eventually led to clashes with other rebel groups in Syria, most notably with JN in Raqqa and Aleppo from August 2013 onward. In January 2014, ISIS expelled both JN and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) from Raqqa, designating the city as its de facto capital. Note that ISIS was still considered to be an "emirate" at this stage. In February, ISIS and AQ renounced any remaining ties, drawing attention to the growing polarization among the jihadist groups operating in Iraq and Syria.

In June 2014, after establishing a stronghold in Syria, ISIS launched its boldest attempt, taking over Mosul and announcing a caliphate in the immediate

aftermath of the battle, also formalizing the struggle between ISIS and AQ (as well as its Syrian affiliate, JN).[12] In September, the U.S. forged a multinational alliance against the group, which then embarked on airstrikes in Iraq and Syria. Despite numerous attempts to "degrade" the group, ISIS is still alive and kicking, defying earlier predictions about its ever-approaching demise.

Making Sense of ISIS: Four Ways to Look at ISIS

ISIS' rise to global infamy immediately triggered questions about appropriate strategies for tackling the group. Broadly speaking, the strategies proffered to defeat or pacify ISIS have ranged from pursuing a containment policy (so that ISIS either "implodes" or becomes "socialized" into the modern state system),[13] to a "hammer and anvil strategy" that draws on local allies and airpower,[14] to putting Western boots on the ground in order to literally destroy the organization.[15] The viability or effectiveness of these strategies, in turn, depends on a simple question: what is the best way to think of, or conceptualize, ISIS? The existing answers boil down to four competing interpretations: ISIS is best seen as a terrorist organization (or, an al Qaeda redux), a band of medieval fanatics bent on utopian and otherworldly ideals, an insurgency, or a proto-state.[16]

ISIS as AQ Redux

An early interpretation of ISIS suggested that the organization was either a "jayvee team" of AQ or the next step in the evolution of transnational jihadist terrorism.[17] While this perspective has lately become less popular, there are still a number of reasons to take it seriously. First, the organization's jihadist ideology, at least to an extent, resembles that of AQ. Second, just like AQ, ISIS makes heavy use of terrorist attacks, reinforcing the relevance of the interpretation. Third, ISIS also appears to be interested in franchising its brand, a tendency that has been the trademark of AQ from its inception.[18] If ISIS is in fact an AQ redux, analysts should further study AQ's ideology and strategic playbook, and policy-makers should focus on breaking ISIS's network of franchises/alliances as well as cutting external financial support, while also treating the threat more in terms of a counter-terrorism effort.[19]

However, it would be a mistake to think of ISIS as an AQ redux.[20] First, "jihadist ideology" is simply too broad of a term with little real analytical purchase. In relation, while both organizations share a penchant for a global caliphate at the ideological level, their organizational structure and short-term goals are essentially different. Most notably, AQ is a network and ISIS is decidedly a territorial entity that can literally "live off the land" with respect to resources, both financial and human. Furthermore, while AQ has long maintained that the

caliphate should be founded in the future (and only when the conditions are ripe); ISIS, defying AQ's criticisms and warnings, has already established a polity that it calls a caliphate. Of equal importance is the sectarian element; while AQ has long underplayed the confessional differences among Muslims, ISIS is decidedly sectarian, defining Shias as their primary target. Furthermore, AQ's "franchising" has been highly selective and has involved some degree of oversight. For ISIS, franchising is carried out almost indiscriminately, as the organization seems more interested in receiving as many *bayah*s (pledges of alliances) as possible from all over the world and less in preserving the "purity" of its brand. Furthermore, there is little, if any, evidence suggesting that ISIS exercises oversight over (or provides direct

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support for) its "affiliates." In sum, despite the organic association between AQ and ISIS, the latter can hardly be defined as an incarnation of the former.

ISIS as a Cult of Medieval Fanatics

A popular interpretation of the group emphasizes ISIS' ideology as a key to understanding its true nature and strategy. While there is some variation in analysts' approach to ISIS' ideology, this perspective is most lucidly expressed by Graeme Wood in his controversial *Atlantic* article entitled, "What ISIS Really Wants."[21] Wood pushes forward two central arguments. First, ISIS should be analyzed on its own terms, not in the broader context of global jihadism or through the frameworks applied to AQ. Second, ISIS' goals and strategy are best understood in the context of its "medieval religious nature." ISIS, in this narrative, is primarily a "religious group" comprised of fanatics who are bent on facilitating the end of days, while also preparing for an apocalyptical battle in the town of Dabiq in Syria.[22] The consequent advice is two-fold. First, the West should keep bleeding ISIS white in Syria and Iraq through air strikes and other forms of indirect strangulation; the hope is that, as a flawed and irrational enterprise, ISIS will eventually implode. Second, more distinctively, since the primary threat is "religious," the West should also combat ISIS on theological grounds. Wood then suggests that non-violent interpretations of Salafism (a belief system that emphasizes an extremely puritan reading of early Islamic texts) should be empowered at the expense of the violent branch championed by ISIS.[23]

ISIS' success owes much to its ideological appeal, which makes it essential to study its ideology, in particular to understand why ISIS remains very attractive to foreign jihadists. However, this perspective should also be approached with great caution. First, the existing research suggests that ISIS is not necessar-

Just like most proto-states throughout history, ISIS is acting as a "stationary bandit," raising revenue through extortion, kidnapping, and smuggling, while at the same time controlling natural resources

ily "creating" a surge in the supply of global jihadists by inspiring dormant jihadists, but is in fact taking advantage of a recent boom that preceded its rise to infamy in 2014.[24] Even then, it is difficult to suggest that it is ISIS' ideology *per se* that is acting as the magnet; it is also likely that ISIS' military exploits and ability to control territory constitutes the main attraction. Second, focusing exclusively on "ideology" can prompt analysts to mistake propaganda for strategy. Considering that ISIS has excelled in strategic communications, it would be prudent to look beyond the discourse that ISIS is marketing, as the content of its propaganda and strategic communications is hardly likely to hold the key to its strategic thinking.[25]

Furthermore, a closer look at "who ISIS is" undermines the "ideology/religion all the way down" interpretation. Behind ISIS' success lies an alliance between jihadists and Baathists, who play a crucial role in strategic planning, running military and communication operations, and building institutions.[26] Baathists from Saddam Hussein's defeated regime see ISIS as their only means for survival and the best vehicle for reestablishing their dominance in Iraq. The existence of this alliance suggests that we are facing not a homogenous group of fanatics whose eyes are fixated on other-worldly prizes, but pragmatic agents who are more than willing to combine an inflammable ideology with military and administrative know-how.[27] Put bluntly, we should not be concerned about millennial fanatics who are preparing for the end of days, but rather about the persistence of a quasi-state run by an alliance of jihadists who have learnt from the mistakes of AQ, and Baathists who know how to work the human and political terrain on limited resources. Mistaking them for a cult of savage fanatics would be a mistake. In sum, jettisoning religious ideas and ideologies from analyses concerning ISIS is not the best idea, but neither is essentializing them.[28]

ISIS as an Insurgency

A third, dominant interpretation looks at ISIS more in terms of a traditional insurgency.[29] The logic behind this interpretation is straightforward: while ISIS may shock and awe global audiences with its barbaric acts and its revolutionary ideology, it is not the first group to do so in modern history. In the end, ISIS can be thought of as an insurgency with 30-50 thousand fighters and, just like all insurgencies, it focuses on destroying the existing political order and building new institutions as well as securing legitimacy to establish and sustain its authority.

In general, an insurgent group may have revolutionary or territorial objectives. Revolutionary insurgencies are best represented by Maoist thinking and practice, where insurgent groups aim to take over state institutions and remake the social and political order in the image of their own ideology. A territorial objective is usually associated with nationalist independence movements, whereas an insurgent group, claiming the title of spokesperson for an ethnic/national group, aims to carve out a discrete and pre-determined piece of real estate from existing state(s). The implication of such an interpretation for developing a strategy to defeat the organization is straightforward: employ the best practices that fit the situation from the existing counter-insurgency playbook(s).[30]

ISIS-as-an-insurgency interpretation, however, has three limitations. First, ISIS' strategy runs counter to two principles that lie at the heart of insurgency groups in the modern age: the group does not shy away from alienating local populations through extreme forms of suppression and brutality, and it shows great interest in holding and fighting over territory. Second, ISIS' objectives do not completely match those of previous insurgent groups. It goes without saying that ISIS, refusing any adherence to nationalism or the nation-state form, is not interested in carving up a discrete piece of real estate from an existing state, say, along the lines of the Kurdish insurgent group PKK that has been fighting the Turkish state for more than three decades. Furthermore, while ISIS' ideology and political objectives can most certainly be called "revolutionary," it currently does not seem interested in (or capable of) toppling the regimes in Baghdad or Damascus, as, say, a Maoist insurgency would be. The third and relevant dynamic involves considering where ISIS stands at the moment: the three-stage approach to insurgency and counter-insurgency models that emanate from Maoist thinking –with its emphasis on i) strategic defense; ii) stalemate; iii) conventional offensive– does not apply to ISIS. ISIS has already established its authority in parts of both Syria and Iraq and is acting more like a state than an insurgency. Two points are relevant. First, if "ISIS proper" is dismantled and drawn out of main population centers, it may re-adjust its operations and strategy so it can be seen as a full-fledged insurgency, à la the Taliban circa fall 2001, but this is not the case at the moment. Second, it may still be possible to define ISIS in terms of an insurgency, but such undertaking requires that we need to redefine the term and its reflection, counter-insurgency.

ISIS as a Proto-state
An increasingly popular interpretation about the group's nature and trajectory is that ISIS is an exercise in state-building and, therefore, it is best to think of it is as a proto-state.[31] Behind this interpretation lie two factors. First, ISIS is decidedly territorial, controlling territory and defining its very existence in terms of such control. Second, ISIS is interested in governing and administering, which involves the systematic and institutionalized provision of public goods. In fact, just like most proto-states throughout history, ISIS is acting

The jacket belonging to an Iraqi Army uniform lies on the ground in front of the remains of a burnt out Iraqi army vehicle close to the Kukjali Iraqi Army checkpoint, some 10 km of east of the northern city of Mosul, on June 11, 2014, the day after Sunni militants, including fighters from the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) overran the city.

AFP PHOTO / ??????????? ???????

as a "stationary bandit,"[32] raising revenue through extortion, kidnapping, and smuggling, while at the same time controlling natural resources. In return, ISIS provides a modicum of security and "protection," as well as public goods that range from subsidized bread to free education and health.[33] ISIS also polices the streets and even manages traffic. Overall, ISIS has proven itself a capable, if brutal, Leviathan, especially in a terrain that has been scarred by intra-communal violence and anarchy.

The strategic implications of this interpretation are open to debate and can be categorized into three different perspectives. First, a number of analysts suggest that ISIS can be defeated only through a large-scale conventional war, which means what is required at the end of the day is boots on the ground.[34] The second perspective, usually associated with neorealist IR scholar Steve Walt, maintains that even if ISIS graduates into "full" statehood, there is not much to worry about, as the group will then be "socialized" into the international system and its ideology will fail to spread.[35] The most sensible approach, therefore, is to contain ISIS and deter any further aggressive behavior. A third, and popular perspective, involves assumptions about the faulty and self-destructive nature of ISIS' statehood: ISIS is destined to implode in the face of piecemeal territorial losses (and its failure to expand further), as well as shortcomings in its provision of public goods.[36] Under such circumstances, the best way to tackle the group is to contain and strangulate it, allowing the gradual loss of support for the group, not to mention financial meltdown, to take its toll.

An alternative way to examine ISIS may involve treating the organization not as a static "thing," but as a "process" best defined as the "interrelation between structures and actors that changes the characteristics of both of them in time"

It is true that the revenue ISIS raises from its activities (assumed to be 1 to 3 million dollars a day) is not all that much for a "state" ruling over six million people. The assumption that ISIS will eventually implode, however, misses one crucial dynamic: a stationary bandit needs to sustain a "standard" in its services only when it faces competition from other bandits. Simple market mechanisms are at work: unless other political actors in the region offer competitive services, ISIS can rule those lands on the cheap. Given that the Baathist leviathans have either fallen or retreated from ISIS-land, there is little reason for optimism about ISIS' impending implosion.

Upon close inspection, the conventional thinking about ISIS' proto-statehood reveals itself to be misleading, if only partially. The notion of "proto-statehood," in particular, assumes a specific endpoint towards which the group might be moving, usually implicitly identified as a modern state as most international relations scholars understand the term. However, we have little reason to think that ISIS wants to evolve into a modern state; the group's discourse and institutional practice suggest that it aims to become "something else." For one thing, ISIS' reading of the history of the modern state is akin to that of a critical theorist who would argue, and rightly so, that the modern state is in fact a Western artifact that was either exported to or imposed on the rest of the world during the last century or so, with varying degrees of success.[37] Under this interpretation, ISIS' penchant for creating a "different" kind of state does not derive solely from religious considerations; ISIS owes much of its initial success to a simple dynamic: the model that ISIS promotes is more in sync with the present-day realities of the terrain, making it easier and more practical to build a sectarian mini-empire in the midst of two failed states and rising ethnic/sectarian tensions, not to mention geopolitical competition among regional actors.[38]

The analysis above suggests that ISIS neither intends nor categorically needs to provide the degree and quality of public goods that is required of a modern state to stay afloat. Put differently, the assumption that ISIS cannot sustain itself as a state-like institution in the long run because people under its rule will be too displeased with the quality of services and eventually rise up is a little too optimistic.

Russia's interests in the region lie primarily with keeping the Assad regime alive, not with defeating ISIS *per se*

In sum, while the different frameworks that are currently being used by analysts and scholars can help us explore different components of ISIS, they all suffer from a number of shortcomings. While a comprehensive treatment is beyond the scope of this essay, the inadequateness of the existing frameworks suggest that an alternative way to examine ISIS may involve treating the organization not as a static "thing," but as a "process" best defined as the "interrelation between structures and actors that changes the characteristics of both of them in time."[39] Such an approach may help students of international politics better analyze the interaction between the actors behind ISIS' actions and the strategic environment in the region. A first step toward that direction, in turn, would be to emphasize the relationship between ISIS and its regional dynamics.

Putting the "ISIS Crisis" into Regional Context

ISIS emerged and remains a regional threat not because it was too powerful or because its potential opponents were too weak. It succeeded because its capable regional opponents have few incentives to individually or collectively arrest its development and destroy the group. ISIS can afford to present an uncompromising and fanatical front partially because it has little reason to believe that the United States and its Western allies will put boots on the ground in Syria and Iraq. While recent polls suggest an increasing inclination for military action against ISIS, it will be difficult for the U.S. government to put U.S. "boots on the ground" in the Middle East, especially after a decade spent in Afghanistan and Iraq. European states such as France, in turn, may have greater reason to get more directly involved in the region especially after the Paris attacks of November 2015, but they simply lack the resources to do so. It follows that short of an unexpected change of "hearts and minds" in the Western world (most notably the U.S.), Western involvement in the region will likely remain limited to air strikes and "fighting through auxiliaries."[40]

Under such circumstances, ISIS also does not appear to be overly concerned about other regional actors. The Iraqi government has yet to recover the reputation it buried in Mosul. Furthermore, Baghdad's heavy reliance on Shia militia and Iranian support, which reached new heights during the battle over Tikrit in March 2015, inadvertently empowers ISIS by fueling the Sunni-Shia rift on which the organization feeds. The ever-volatile Shia-Sunni tensions, in turn, prompt the argument that what is required in the region to deal with ISIS is neither Western nor Shia boots on the ground, but Sunni ones.[41] However, there is little reason to think that states like Turkey, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia,

in the absence of a direct threat from ISIS or externally-provided stimulus (which may involve compromises or "carrots" provided by the Western powers), will put boots on the ground to defeat the Islamic State. First, there are the obvious economic and human costs that would be associated with such an undertaking. Second, ISIS does not currently present a *direct* military threat to these states. Third, because these countries are overwhelmingly Sunni, they are arguably more susceptible to ISIS-coordinated terrorist attacks on their soil, (as evidenced by the recent attacks in Suruç and Ankara in Turkey), a threat which would become more likely in case of a direct intervention. Furthermore, almost all militarily-capable Sunni powers (by which I mean the countries that are overwhelmingly Sunni and usually associated with conservative governments) have complicated interests in Syria and Iraq. Turkey's ISIS policy, for example, is heavily influenced by its position against the Assad regime as well as its concerns about the possibility of a Kurdish state in Syria and/or Iraq.

Syria's Assad regime, in turn, remains another competitor for ISIS. While the Syrian military has extensive experience in battling jihadist groups, motivating Assad to tackle ISIS would be difficult for two reasons. First, Assad's weakened forces are tied up fighting the FSA and non-ISIS jihadist groups like JN. Second, Assad would be unwilling to concentrate his forces and attention on ISIS unless the West commits to a settlement where the regime remains intact and the FSA is liquidated. Considering that Assad has been demonized in the West for years, and countries such as Turkey adamantly oppose any reconciliation with the Syrian regime, this would be a very hard pill to swallow for the United States and its allies.

Russia's involvement in the region from Fall 2015 onward also raises questions about the fate of ISIS. However, Russia's interests in the region lie primarily with keeping the Assad regime alive, not with defeating ISIS *per se*. Motivated by preserving a client polity, if not a full-blown nation-state, in its strategic outpost in the Eastern Mediterranean, Russia is indeed targeting the insurgent groups –including but most certainly not limited to ISIS– that it deems as enemies of the Assad regime. Under such circumstances, and given its current priorities, there is little reason to think that Russia would concentrate its efforts on destroying ISIS.

The Kurds appear to be a motivated and capable fighting force, especially in the wake of the successful defense of Kobani and liberation of Sinjar. However, not only are the existing Kurdish military experiences and capabilities best suited for territorial defense, the Kurds' strategic priorities are to preserve what is deemed as Kurdish homeland, and to gain recognition as a capable and legitimate political entity. Even if the West can incentivize the Kurdish forces to go on the offensive against ISIS through promises of further recognition and

ISIS is fueling sectarian tensions in the Middle East in two ways: directly through its actions and indirectly by fuelling a discourse/rhetoric that portrays the dynamics of political competition and cooperation primarily in sectarian terms

support for an independent Kurdish state, Kurdish incursions into regions that are deemed outside of the Kurdish homeland would inevitably provoke ethnic tensions and elicit harsh responses from numerous regional actors.

In particular, Turkey is deeply concerned with the emergence of an autonomous Kurdish polity on its southern border, especially one with organic ties to its nemesis, the PKK. Similarly, the Peoples' Protection Unit's (YPG) increasing military might, when combined with the fact that the Syrian Kurds took over a number of strategic towns where Sunni Arabs comprise the majority of the population, is fueling ethnic tensions between Kurds and Arabs. For example, while Western audiences applauded the capture of Tal Abyad (a Sunni Arab majority town) by the YPG forces in June 2015 as a strategic success, the development also created suspicion among the Sunni populations in the region. Furthermore, the rise of the YPG (and the PKK) also raises questions about the prospects of a greater Kurdistan in Iraq and Syria, which would be a big concern not only for Turkey, but also for Baghdad and Iran. Overall, these factors limit the geographical reach and effectiveness of Kurdish forces in the struggle against ISIS.

This leaves Iran as a wild card. Even if Iran opts for a more direct involvement in the conflict and helps bring down ISIS, the resulting "victory" may set the stage for a post-ISIS sectarian firestorm that could drag the region into a multi-theater transnational conflict. Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war is a case in point. When the Iranian government –informally– sent its elite Quds forces to fight alongside Assad a couple of years ago, Tehran inadvertently empowered a narrative that portrayed the civil war as a Sunni-Shia conflict (despite the fact that the Assad regime has considerable Sunni support). In addition, countries such as the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have strong incentives to check and contain Iran's increasing clout and influence in the region, further limiting the extents to which Tehran can go *vis-à-vis* its involvement in the struggle against ISIS.

The analysis above points toward a general trend: ISIS benefits not only from the weaknesses of its individual competitors, but also the spider web-like conflicts of interest among them. Almost all of the actors invoked above would prefer to see ISIS degraded and destroyed; however, not only do they prefer that other actors bear the costs of tackling ISIS head on, they are also highly motivated to prevent other regional actors from gaining ground (both militari-

ly or in terms of influence) at their expense. This dynamic provides the organization with the opportunity and time it needs to build the kind of state it seeks.

How the Islamic State is Reshaping the Middle East

The claim that ISIS is reshaping the Middle East is hardly hyperbole. The group is changing the political landscape of the entire region, fueling old tensions while also triggering new ones. In particular, the organization is simultaneously posing new threats and creating new opportunities for regional actors, motivating them, either out of fear or interest, to play a more active role in the remaking of the Middle East. Broadly speaking, the ISIS crisis is remaking the sectarian and ethnic dynamics in the region.

Fuelling the Sectarian Divide

ISIS is fueling sectarian tensions in the Middle East in two ways: directly through its actions and indirectly by fuelling a discourse/rhetoric that portrays the dynamics of political competition and cooperation primarily in sectarian terms. The "direct" method is obvious and follows the original vision of the group's founder Zarqawi. By defining its power projection and state-building efforts in sectarian terms, ISIS aims to fuel regional tensions by targeting Shias and, by implication, provoke a Shia backlash against the Sunnis. ISIS then feeds off the resulting cycle of enmity, fear, and violence, presenting itself as the chief protector of Sunni populations in conflict-ridden areas.

While ISIS' "actions" receive considerable attention, there is still relatively little discussion about the discursive component of the group's strategy. The group's sectarian strategy, when conceived in terms of its strategic communications campaign, suggests ISIS wants regional and global spectators to think that the main problem in the region is the perennial Sunni-Shia conflict. It follows that thinking of solutions to the ISIS crisis in terms of the sectarian divide only helps the Islamic State market its rhetoric more effectively. Dormant sectarian tensions have exacerbated the conflict in Iraq and Syria. However, sectarian divides are consequences –not causes– of state failures in these countries. As long as they functioned, the Baathist regimes under Bashar al-Assad and Saddam Hussein brutally and effectively kept intra-communal sectarian tensions under control. The rise of sectarian cleavages in the wake of these regimes' collapse in authority should not be surprising. As political theorist Thomas Hobbes reminded us almost four centuries ago, in times of anarchy, people tend to coalesce around any identity or idea that might help them.

Following Hobbes' insights, one can easily argue that the Sunni populations living under the ISIS' rule are concerned primarily with avoiding victimization and anarchy, rather than avoiding Shia rule *per se*. Indeed, there are still size-

able Sunni populations living in Assad-held territory in Syria and under Baghdad government (which is usually associated with policies that favor Shias over Sunnis) in Iraq. Considering the existing sectarian divides, facing Shia-dominated armed forces most certainly creates an element of fear for Sunnis. But it is the actions of those forces that confirm the sectarian fears while also creating a cycle of enmity and distrust between the Sunni and the Shia.

Take the example of Syria, where the civil war has come to be interpreted in overwhelmingly sectarian terms. It is true that Bashar al-Assad and the leading cadres of the Syrian military, bureaucracy, and intelligence are Alawites, who comprise roughly 13 percent of the population. The overwhelming majority of the population (around 70-75 percent) is comprised of Sunnis. However, the rhetoric that the Assad regime is built on sectarian victimization and suppression does not necessarily reflect reality, as Sunni economic and political elites have played an important role in the Assad regime since its inception in 1970. In addition, Assad also shied away from sectarian rhetoric by appointing a Sunni prime minister in 2012 and broadly framing the Syrian civil war in terms of the secular-jihadist struggle.

None of this changes the fact the Assad is a ruthless dictator who has killed many of his own people. Because Assad drew upon Iran's elite Quds Force, Shia militia from Iraq, Hezbollah, and the violent paramilitary forces known as Shabiha, he has contributed to the narrative that the Assad regime is bent on eradicating Sunnis. Still, it would be a mistake to view Assad in the same way that the jihadist groups, including ISIS, portray him. Assad can still claim support from the majority of the populations still under his rule who prefer a repressive autocratic regime over jihadists and anarchy.

Misreading the true nature of the Assad regime in particular, and the complicated and multifaceted nature of the regional crisis fueled by state failure in general, would further embolden the sectarian narrative that a number of jihadist groups including ISIS have been promoting for almost a decade, at least since the time of Zarqawi's AQI. That being said, there is little reason to be optimistic about the role of sectarian enmity and violence in the region. Over time, it is likely that the sectarian narrative promoted –quite aggressively– by ISIS will evolve into a self-fulfilling prophecy, ossifying the sectarian rift in the region.

ISIS and the "Kurdish Question"
ISIS is transforming ethnic relations in the region, especially with respect to the fate of the Kurds. The so-called "Kurdish question" –the fact that while they can easily fulfill the criteria for nationhood, Kurds have long been denied self-determination, and have been "trapped" and divided inside the borders of four sovereign states (Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Iran)– has been one of the most

An image grab taken from a propaganda video released on March 17, 2014 by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)'s al-Furqan Media allegedly shows ISIL fighters raising their weapons as they stand on a vehicle mounted with the trademark Jihadists flag at an undisclosed location in the Anbar province. The jihadist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant group has spearheaded a major offensive that began on June 9, 2014 and has since overrun all of Iraq's northern Nineveh province.

AFP PHOTO / HO / AL-FURQAN MEDIA

persistent yet relatively ignored puzzles of the Middle East during the century that followed the demise of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. All this changed with the rise of ISIS. As global audiences were quite literally shocked and awed by the organization's much-publicized brutal acts and strategic dexterity, not to mention the speed of its initial territorial expansion, the Kurds also began to make headlines, first as victims of the barbaric hordes of the self-proclaimed Caliphate, then as its most capable and willing adversaries.

In this context, any analysis of the implications of ISIS for the Kurdish question should start with a simple recognition: speaking of "the Kurds" as a homogenous and unified political and military entity does not make analytical sense. There are three relevant paramilitary groups to speak of: *Peshmerga* in Iraq; the PKK operating in and in reference to Turkey; and the YPG, the military arm of the Syrian Kurds. Of the three, *Peshmerga* appears to be the most powerful actor, and also the most prudent one. Empowered by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), *Peshmerga* can draw on not only well-supplied and well-equipped forces, but also legitimacy in the international sphere. Note that there exists a very good reason behind *Peshmerga*'s prudence, or defensive posture, *vis-à-vis* ISIS: The KRG already governs the Kurdish-majority areas in Iraq and is recognized as a capable political entity that has established a beacon of stability in the heart of the Middle East. The KRG, acting more like a "realist" state than anything else, understands that any attempt to take over more territory or to claim outright independence will trigger an immediate – and most likely, harsh– reaction from a multitude of regional actors, including Turkey, with whom the Iraqi Kurds have established a robust relationship.

The sense of legitimacy that the YPG derives from its fight with ISIS is also being used strategically to "whitewash" the PKK's reputation as a terrorist organization

All the KRG needs to do at this stage is to keep calm and carry on, waiting for the day when its *de facto* near-independence will pave the way, if gradually, for *de jure* sovereignty. That is, if the Iraqi Kurds ever decide they can be better off all on their own. The same prudence also accounts for *Peshmerga*'s reluctance to actively participate in the defense of the Syrian town of Kobani. Not only would it be too costly to send forces into the heart of ISIS-land, the KRG would also run the risk of appearing as the "Prussia of greater Kurdistan" [circa 1860s], a revisionist force that aimed to create an expansive Kurdish state that could carve up territories from Syria, and even Turkey and Iran down the road.

The PKK and the YPG, in turn, are close associates with organic ties. Both organizations are "hungrier" than the KRG, as they have yet to consolidate their power in their respective domains and establish some sense of self-sufficiency and security. They also share a similar left-leaning political ideology. While it is safe to assume that these organizations act in tandem, there are also differences between the two. First, while the PKK is considered a terrorist organization, the YPG has established itself as a legitimate militia whose main intention is to defend Kurdish populations in Syria.

Second, while the PKK is forced to remain on the run as an insurgent group, the YPG is part of a political establishment that governs territory. In 2012, Syria's Assad regime decided to let go of the Kurdish-populated areas in northern Syria without a fight, freeing resources to tackle its more immediate enemies elsewhere. Assad's decision triggered what is now known as the "Rojava [Western Kurdistan] Revolution," which led to the creation of self-governed Kurdish "cantons" in Syria, protected by the YPG. ISIS' implications for the Kurdish question, in fact, are better conceived in terms of the consequences of the Rojava Revolution.

So, what are those implications? ISIS presents the Kurds with threats and, while few talk about it, opportunities. The threat is real and straightforward: ISIS does not hide its intentions to either eradicate or subdue the Kurdish populations in Iraq and Syria, and has already caused considerable suffering to the Kurds. That the suffering is real, however, should not detract from the opportunities that ISIS provides to the Kurdish groups in the region. We can talk about four key areas.

First, ISIS quite literally presents an existential threat to the Kurds and by doing so incentivizes them to unite under a common banner. Second, the YPG's

struggle with ISIS in Syria has provided the Kurdish nationalist movement with a multitude of national myths and heroes, especially in the context of the successful defense of Kobani (which relied on heavy air support from the United States). Kobani now inspires countless Kurds and will most certainly play a crucial role in bringing them together by providing an array of symbols of sacrifice and heroism. Third, the fact that ISIS has established itself as international public enemy number one, when combined with the ineffectiveness or unreliability of alternative auxiliaries such as the Iraqi army and the Shiite militia, has allowed the YPG and *Peshmerga* in particular to benefit from direct Western support, defined in terms of equipment and air support. This support will likely have long-term consequences for the said groups.

The fourth opportunity that ISIS provides to the Kurdish groups involves legitimacy and popular support. The Kurdish groups have already taken advantage of the global media's eye on the ISIS crisis and the resultant international disdain for the jihadist group by launching a strategic communications campaign that presents the Kurds as an exceptionally capable (ethnic) group that is fighting the barbaric hordes in the name of humanity and civilization, not necessarily for a nationalistic cause (note that these objectives need not be mutually exclusive). Second, the sense of legitimacy that the YPG derives from its fight with ISIS is also being used strategically to "whitewash" the PKK's reputation as a terrorist organization. Put bluntly, after a century of being ignored, the Kurds have captured not only the international spotlight, but also near-unanimous ideational support in the eyes of Western audiences.

In sum, for these Kurdish groups, ISIS presents both an existential threat and a unique, if costly, opportunity to push forward their agenda for political autonomy and the creation of a greater Kurdistan. The prospects of such an outcome, in turn, are bound to create further tensions in the region, not only among states like Turkey and Iran, but also among Sunni Arabs in Syria and Iraq who may be concerned with an expansionist Kurdish nationalist agenda.

Conclusion

In addition to the existential and ideological threat it poses on the ground, ISIS poses an unprecedented challenge to students of international politics. The group can be seen as a transnational terrorist organization, a cult of religious fanatics, an extremely resourceful insurgent group, or an exercise in state building. In so many ways, ISIS contains elements that are associated with all these interpretations, yet it cannot be placed in any one of the relevant conceptual and analytical boxes. As an ever shifting and evolving process, the group still remains elusive.

So, how should we approach the debate on ISIS? First, we need to start framing the threats and challenges posed by the Islamic State not only in terms of the group itself, but in the context of the broader regional crisis that led to its meteoric rise. ISIS was born out of a decade-long political crisis in Iraq, and came of age by feeding off of state failure in Syria. Tackling the group without considering the complicated and regional nature of the crisis will either lead to strategic failure or an outcome where the Islamic State is "destroyed," only to be replaced by an even bigger and more complex challenge to international security. We should stop obsessing with "how to fight ISIS" and think harder about how to deal with the broader regional crisis that ISIS represents. Second, we should base our arguments on realistic assumptions about regional actors' motives and capabilities. Thinking more realistically about what makes the relevant actors tick is necessary for assessing which options are viable, and which are not, in the face of a complex and time-sensitive crisis. ●

Endnotes

1. The views expressed here are my own and do not reflect those of the Naval War College, the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

2. For example: Patrick Cockburn, *The Jihadis Return: ISIS and the New Sunni Uprising* (OR Books, 2014); Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (USA: Doubleday, 2015); Jessica Stern and J. M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (USA: Ecco, 2015); William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2015); Daniel Byman, *Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement: What Everyone Needs to Know* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2015); Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (NY: Regan Arts., 2015); etc.

3. David Brooks, "When ISIS Rapists Win," *The New York Times* (August 28, 2015), retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/28/opinion/david-brooks-when-isis-rapists-win.html?_r=1; also see "The Mystery of ISIS," *The New York Review of Books* (August 13, 2015) retrieved from http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2015/aug/13/mystery-isis/.

4. "Degrade and Destroy" is a phrase used by U.S. President Barack Obama, for more check the link: https://www.whtehouse.gov/blog/2014/09/10/president-obama-we-will-degrade-and-ultimately-destroy-isil.

5. Note that some of the arguments presented in this article have previously appeared in outlets such as *The National Interest Online* and *War on the Rocks*. In particular, see Burak Kadercan, "This Is What ISIS' Rise Means for the "Kurdish Question"," *National Interest* (September 09, 2015), retrieved from http://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/what-isis-rise-means-the-kurdish-question%E2%80%9D-13798; Burak Kadercan, "3 Huge (And Dangerous) Myths about ISIS," *National Interest* (August 30, 2015), retrieved from http://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/3-huge-dangerous-myths-about-isis-13740; Burak Kadercan, "The Method behind the Islamic State's Madness," *War on the Rocks*, retrieved from http://warontherocks.com/2015/04/the-method-behind-the-islamic-states-madness/; Burak Kadercan, "How not to Fight ISIS," *War on the Rocks* (October 06, 2015), retrieved from http://warontherocks.com/2015/10/how-not-to-fight-the-islamic-state/.

6. I thank Alex Wendt for suggesting this terminology.

7. On civilian beheadings, see Steven Zech and Zane Kelly, "Off With Their Heads: The Islamic State and Civilian Beheadings," *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2015).

8. On ISIS propaganda, see Scott Gates and Sukanya Podder, "Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015).

9. Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command*, (NY: St. Martin's Press, 2015), pp. 279-290.

10. David Ensor, "Al Qaeda Letter Called 'Chilling,'" *CNN* (October 12, 2005), retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/meast/10/11/alqaeda.letter/.

11. Martin Chulov, "ISIS, The Inside Story," *The Guardian* (December 11, 2014), retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/11/-sp-isis-the-inside-story.

12. On AQ-ISIS competition, see Aaron Zelin, "The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, (2014); Donald Holbrook, "Al-Qaeda and the Rise of ISIS," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (2015); John Turner, "Strategic Differences: Al Qaeda's Split with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2015); Shiv Malik, Ali Younis, Spencer Ackerman, and Mustafa Khalili, "How ISIS Crippled al-Qaida," *The Guardian* (June 10, 2015).

13. Stephen Walt, "ISIS as Revolutionary State," *Foreign Affairs* (2015) retrieved from https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/isis-revolutionary-state.

14. Robert Pape, Keven Ruby and Vincent Bauer, "Hammer and Anvil," *Foreign Affairs* (January 02, 2015), retrieved from https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2015-01-02/hammer-and-anvil.

15. For example, Davis French, "To Defeat ISIS, Put Boots on the Ground," *National Review* (November 17, 2015), retrieved from http://www.nationalreview.com/article/427213/defeating-isis-requires-boots-ground.

16. For a similar categorization, see James Fromson and Steven Simon, "ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (2015). One possible path is to frame ISIS as "all of the above."

17. "Jayvee team," in the American context, stands for the sports analogy, "junior varsity" team.

18. We should not underestimate the impacts of "intellectual stickiness" on debates over strategy and policy. Like organizations that refuse to change their practices in the face of rapid change, analysts who have invested their intellectual acumen on AQ for a decade and a half may be tempted to overplay the association and similarities between AQ and ISIS, which is easier to do if both are collapsed under some unifying global jihad theme.

19. For example, see Kathleen Bouzis, "Countering the Islamic State: U.S. Counterterrorism Measures," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2015).

20. Also see Audrey Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs*, (2015).

21. Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic*, (2015).

22. For an emphasis on the prophetic thinking behind ISIS' ideology, see William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*.

23. A more modest version of this thinking suggests that the West should challenge the "narrative of the Islamic State." For example, see Alex Schmid, "Challenging the Narrative of the "Islamic State"," *ICCT*, (2015).

24. Owen Jones, "ISIS Is Turning Us All Into Its Recruiting Sergeants," *The Guardian*, (2014).

25. There is also a tendency to over-emphasize a number of texts written by strategic thinkers of the jihadosphere, most notably "The Management of Savagery," dated 2004 and translated into English by William McCants, retrieved from https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf. While these texts are important, their influence on ISIS' state-building and power projection strategies should not be exaggerated. The Chinese strategic thinking does not follow Sun Tzu in every aspect, and the Western states' strategy is not a direct application of Clausewitz's On War. We can learn from such texts, but, we have little reason to believe that they constitute magical keys for unlocking ISIS' strategic thinking.

26. On the AQ-Baathists-ISIS triangle, see Truls Hallberg Tønnessen, "Heirs of Zarqawi or Saddam? The Relationship between al-Qaida in Iraq and the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015).

27. On the Faith movement launched by Saddam Hussein during the 1990s, which aimed at "injecting" a more "religious" element into the Baathist indoctrination, see David Patel, "ISIS in Iraq: What We Get Wrong and Why 2015 Is Not 2007 Redux," *Crown Center for Middle Eastern Studies*, (January 2015).

28. For the relevant "military orientalism," see Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes*, (NY: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2009).

29. For example, Reyko Huang, "The Islamic State as an Ordinary Insurgency," *The Washington Post* (May 14, 2015), retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/05/14/how-the-islamic-state-compares-with-other-armed-non-state-groups/; Marc Lynch, "Islamism in the IS Age," *The Washington Post* (March 17, 2015), retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/03/17/islamism-in-the-is-age/?tid=a_inl; Marc Lynch, "ISIL and the New Islamist Challenge," Center for a New American Security (February 15, 2015), retrieved from http://elliott.gwu.edu/sites/elliott.gwu.edu/files/downloads/news/lynch-HASC-ISIL-Feb15-2015.pdf; Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Is ISIS a Revolutionary Group and if Yes, What Are the Implications?," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015).

30. For example, David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

31. For example, Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham: Current Trends in Islamist Ideology," *Middle East Forum* (January 14, 2014), retrieved from http://www.meforum.org/3732/islamic-state-iraq-ash-sham.

32. Mancur Olson, *Power and Prosperity: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships: Outgrowing Communist and Capitalist Dictatorships*, (NY: Basic Books, 2000).

33. See , Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham: Current Trends in Islamist Ideology."

34. Though "whose boots" remains a controversial topic. See Joseph Nye, "How to Fight the Islamic State," *Project Syndicate*, (September 08, 2015), retrieved from https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/how-to-fight-the-islamic-state-by-joseph-s--nye-2015-09.

35. Stephen M. Walt, "ISIS as Revolutionary State," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 94 (2015).

36. For example, Marc Lynch, "Islamism in the IS Age"; Clint Watts, "Let Them Rot: The Challenges and Opportunities of Containing rather than Countering the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015); Jamie Hansen-Lewis and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Understanding the Daesh Economy," *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2015).

37. On the plasticity of the state form, see Richard K. Ashley, "The Poverty of Neorealism" in Robert Keohane (ed), *Neorealism and Its Critics*, (1986). On the threat that ISIS poses to the Westphalian order, see Barak Mendelsohn, "The Jihadi Threat to International Order," Belfer Center, (2015).

38. A similar line of thinking convinces Robert Kaplan to "bring imperialism back to the Middle East," Robert Kaplan, "The Ruins of Empire in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, (May 25, 2015), retrieved from http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/25/ruins-of-empire-in-the-middle-east-syria-iraq-islamic-state-iran/.

39. Ulrich Franke and Ulrich Roos, "Actor, Structure, Process: Transcending the State Personhood Debate by Means of a Pragmatist Ontological Model for International Relations Theory," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 36 No. 4 (2010), p. 1070).

40. Burak Kadercan, "Why Fighting Through Auxiliaries Usually Fails," *National Interest*, (September 13, 2015), retrieved from http://www.nationalinterest.org/feature/why-fighting-through-auxiliaries-usually-fails-13818.

41. Joseph Nye, "How to Fight the Islamic State," Project Syndicate, (September 08, 2015).