

# THE IMPLICATION



**T**he so-called “Islamic State” (ISIS) that has swept into power in parts of Syria and Iraq presents an imminent danger to the global community, with its capacity as an effective, ideologically-motivated and bloodthirsty fighting force, coupled with its expanding territorial reach on the ground and online. ISIS has taken on a quasi-state form that mixes modernity with ancient rites, and aggressively promotes sectarian violence and religious extremism with a decidedly apocalyptic bent.

By June 2015, it had established affiliate terror organisations that have claimed responsibility for deadly attacks in Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, and Yemen. Likewise, ISIS has won the allegiance of terror groups from as far away as Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Nigeria; in the latter case, Boko Haram’s leaders pledged fealty to ISIS’s self-declared caliphate. Also worrisome, ISIS has been successfully radicalising and recruiting fighters worldwide through its sophisticated brand of

social media tactics and aggressive offline actions. ISIS purveys an extremist, violence-infused ideology with an expansive outlook to match, as articulated by its widely uttered slogan “baqiyya wa tatamaddad”, which essentially implies that the Islamic State is here to stay and will continue expanding.

For the international community, ISIS’s savage – yet so far only partly successful – record as occupiers and killers, combined with its designs for the Levant and beyond, warrants very close scrutiny. Indeed, ISIS has introduced to the Middle East a new level of extremism and brutality, marked by volatile fluidity, with far-reaching, dangerously destabilising effects on state and non-state actors, regionally and globally. In fact, General John Allen, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State, described ISIS as “one of the darkest forces that any country has ever had to deal with”, as well as “a truly unparalleled threat to the region that we have not seen before.”

ISIS and its progenitors aggravated and

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**Heavy hardware:** *ISIS has expanded its military capabilities by seizing huge quantities of weaponry from Syrian and Iraqi forces*

opportunistically took advantage of the de facto unraveling of Iraq and Syria over the past two years. The ISIS quasi-state now rests on a large swath of territory subsuming eastern Syria and western Iraq; it has taken Raqqa, Syria, as its declared capital, and is now in possession of the second-largest city in Iraq, Mosul. As such, this newly declared Islamic State is not a “traditional” terrorist organisation, but a trans-national variant of a more dangerous degree.

And yet, by the end of March 2015, ISIS lost some 25 percent of the land (13,000 square kilometers) it controlled at its zenith. As of June 2015, 10,000 ISIS fighters had been killed, as well as about half of its top leadership. At the same time, its funding sources have weakened, declining services in areas under its control have been noted, and internal strife has expanded. The seeming invincibility of ISIS perceived in summer 2014 was shattered by spring 2015. And still, the quasi-state’s broad aspirations and inherent capabilities – due to control of land, thousands of fighters, ample

funding, and otherwise – merit careful and dedicated efforts to ensure their demise.

ISIS’s radical ideologies of Salafism-Jihadism-Takfirism, fervent focus on Islamic eschatology, global ambitions, and harsh actions have served to recruit members worldwide to its cause. Concurrently, ISIS has sought to intimidate individuals, communities, and countries across the globe. These threats and widespread ISIS massacres of Sunni, Shiite, and non-Muslim victims were often recorded and broadcast through online social networks and the Islamic State’s own propaganda outlets.

The United Nations has characterised some ISIS massacres as violations of international law, accusing the group of committing acts of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes. Increasingly, governments, non-profits, non-governmental organisations worldwide – non-Muslims and Muslim-alike – have harshly criticised the ideology and actions of ISIS militants.

Apparently taking their cues on cruelty from the Assad regime, as well as from ancient practices, ISIS’s jihadists now seem to view the most horrific tactics as acceptable. Frequent beheadings, amputations, crucifixions, mass executions, stonings, throwing people off buildings, as well as burying – and even burning – people alive mark a new level of casual brutality. With each passing day, new taboos are broken, from organ harvesting to fund operations to the proposed sale of the bodies of dead opposition fighters.

ISIS’s often-issued ultimatums requiring non-Sunni believers in its territories to convert, pay a jizya (tax), or be killed, have inflamed sectarian sentiments as well as accelerating internal and external displacement of refugees. The savage practices of ISIS militants have contributed to an alarming humanitarian crisis while further undermining any chance of reconciliation in the region for many years to come.

ISIS’s vision and practices have attracted many recruits, drawn from other Sunni and anti-Assad groups. Ultimately, ISIS has been able to acquire substantial territory, assets, and spoils from rebel forces and from the Syrian and Iraqi militaries. These acquisitions have significantly buttressed the group’s fortunes and capabilities. Still, by the first quarter of 2015, ISIS has experienced some military setbacks – including the losses in Kobani (Syria) as well as Tikrit and the Sinjar mountain range (Iraq) – as well as political and social failings. Yet the capture of the capital of Anbar province, Ramadi, and other advances in Iraq and Syria (Palmyra) during the second quarter of 2015 illustrate that ISIS is far from defeated.

ISIS has been especially cunning in looting banks, conducting extortion, and engaging in commerce such as oil trading and smuggling. It has also raised funds from other criminal activity to enhance its revenue streams. As a result, ISIS has amassed unprecedented assets to fund its regime. The confluence of this newly acquired wealth, various dramatic military successes, and police-state rule have made it a formidable threat

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to security concerns in the Middle East and beyond.

While playing the role of conqueror, ISIS has attempted to provide some semblance of governance as it provides administrative and service-oriented support although, of late, of poorer quality. In territories that it controls, ISIS collects taxes, administers courts and runs schools. The organisation has an elaborate hierarchy, comprised of al-Baghdadi as caliph, two deputies, 12 governors each for Syria and Iraq, the Shura council, and various councils overseeing disparate issues such as finance, the military and security. ISIS has also afforded its operatives some autonomy in their operations, injecting some elements of decentralisation.

Presently, ISIS is characterised as a hybrid pseudo-sovereign terrorist group, and an organised criminal entity. Ultimately, those opposed to it must seek to weaken and, over the long term, defeat the whole organisation. Fortunately, the global community is taking note. Each state is crafting policies that will best serve its own interests, as expected given the often divergent and competing needs and perspectives. Regardless, some decisions, such as authorisation of airstrikes on Iraqi and Syrian targets within the occupied territories, have proven fairly positive. Since then, ISIS's footprint in Iraq has shrunk, although some consolidation – if not advancement – has occurred in Syria.

Concurrently, there appears to be fervent acceleration of ISIS affiliates or franchises – for lack of a better term – in an increasing number of countries. So too, lone wolves and cabals from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, the United Kingdom and the United States have attempted or successfully carried out terrorist attacks on behalf of or inspired by ISIS ideology.

The 60-plus member countries of the coalition aligned against ISIS provide a solid basis from which to counter this de-facto jihadist state. The open question is whether or not the coalition will pursue additional effective strategies to decimate ISIS, as the entity experienced some military setbacks in fall 2014 through spring 2015.

The support that ISIS has acquired both in the region and beyond will also affect its sustainability. Unless counterbalanced, ISIS's well-developed social media instruments and strategic communications will likely enable it to continue to gain new adherents, both direct operatives and those inspired by the regime, particularly from abroad.

As a consequence, the ultimate military defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq is clearly needed, to put a stop to the threat that it poses today and in the future. This is all the more evident given the group's possession of tanks and other weaponry generally available only to de jure nation-states. Once it achieves a military defeat of ISIS, the international coalition will then need to create some semblance of stability so that traditional elements of civil society can function.

ISIS did not arise overnight nor without extensive resolve and resources. The solutions to undermining,



and ultimately, defeating this quasi-state will be lengthy, arduous, multifaceted, and will no doubt entail some risk. But the risk of not acting is clearly greater. Ideally, the introduction of such concepts as inclusion and pluralism would also be beneficial, so that a multitude of interests can be considered. Sadly, though, this is most unlikely, at least in the short term, given ISIS's disdain for accommodation and its bloody record of extremism and brutal governance. So too, compromise is hard to come by in post-conflict areas. As such, the aftermath of ISIS's defeat, should it occur, does not guarantee a particular outcome.

As ISIS continues to call for its operatives and new adherents to attack Western and other targets, efforts must be made to undermine plots against the US or Western states. While often traditional law enforcement and intelligence efforts have proven helpful in preventing terror attacks, encouraging the public to forewarn law enforcement about alleged suspicious activities, including actions that appear out of line with normal conditions, is critical. Pre-terror incident indicators the public should report to authorities include: terrorists conducting surveillance, gathering information, testing security, acquiring supplies and funds, acting suspiciously, undertaking dry runs, and getting into position to undertake an attack.

With the 14th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks looming, transnational jihadist terrorism – in the form of ISIS, among others – continues to merit further attention and sustained counter-efforts along intelligence, military, law enforcement, security, legal, political, diplomatic, business and non-profit fronts. Failure to combat this menace on multilateral fronts will lead to the expansion of transnational jihadist terrorism for many years to come.

***ISIS must be fought on multiple fronts, with an effective counter to its propaganda operations essential***

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