



## Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL in Support of SOCCENT

### *Subject Matter Expert Elicitation Summary Report (July – November 2014)*

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**This report represents the personal views and opinions of the contributing experts. The report does not represent official USG policy or position.**

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## Executive Summary

From July through November 2014, NSI conducted a Subject Matter Expert (SME) Elicitation study to gather insights from interviews, panel discussions, seminars, and personal communications with over 50 SMEs from the United States, the Middle East, and Europe. The interview questionnaire and transcripts from the SME elicitation effort are available upon request.<sup>1</sup> CTTSO provided the Apptek Talk2Me platform to expedite the transcription of the SME Elicitation interviews. In addition, all of the data (human edited and original audio) are posted on the Web-based Talk2Me platform for the SMA study for further analytics and reporting.<sup>2</sup>

This report summarizes SME findings that help us understand ISIL's intangible appeal. However, it does not attempt to adjudicate or force convergence of the findings.

### Conditions: The Perfect Storm

Some SMEs described conditions on the ground as a "perfect storm" for the emergence of ISIL. The confluence of the conditions listed below allowed ISIL to rise rapidly.

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- Failed states of Iraq and Syria: The power vacuum in the Sunni regions of Iraq and Syria opened the door for an alternative governing force to coalesce and gain the acquiescence and/or support of the civilian<sup>3</sup> population.
  - Sunni grievances: The combination of political exclusion of Sunnis from government in Iraq and Syria along with the abuses visited upon Syrian Sunnis by the Assad regime have fed narratives of Sunni grievance, victimization, and marginalization.
  - Arab world undergoing rapid change: ISIL is an expression of rising Islamist fundamentalism, declining sense of state-based nationalism, and a sense of empowerment spurred by the Arab Spring.
  - Information Age: The advent of the information age makes it easier for people to communicate across large distances, to create a platform for sharing experiences and beliefs with like-minded individuals, and to actively persuade others to sympathize with or join a cause.
  - Youth bulge: Like many parts of the developing world, Syria and Iraq are experiencing a youth bulge that, when combined with unemployment and lack of political voice, has resulted in a reservoir of young, angry men.
- David Jacobsen, University of Southern Florida
  - Nazar Janabi, private consultant
  - Lina Khatib, Carnegie Middle East Center
  - Jytte Klausen, Brandeis University, START
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  - Rob Schultz, Naval Postgraduate School
  - Daniel Schuman, Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, US Department of State
  - Jacob Shapiro, Princeton University, Minerva researcher
  - Katherine Shats, Georgetown University Medical Center
  - Mubin Shaikh, Liverpool University

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<sup>3</sup> Civilian refers to the people living in ISIL-controlled areas.

On the whole, SMEs felt that these conditions made it possible for ISIL to seize the opportunity to push for an alternative form of governance in the region. However, while these conditions were extremely important, ISIL's sustainability and longevity is also based on its capacity to control the population and to garner sympathy and support from the broader Sunni Muslim population both inside and outside the region.

- Erroll Southers, University of Southern California, CREATE
- Shibley Telhami, University of Maryland
- Detlof van Winterfeldt, University of Southern California, CREATE
- Shalini Venturelli, American University
- Jeff Weyers, Liverpool University
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### Capacity to Control

SMEs believed that ISIL's capacity to control is based on several factors.

- Fear and coercion: ISIL has a monopoly over the use of force in areas it "governs." It uses the implicit and explicit threat of violence against civilians to ensure acquiescence.
- Provision of better governance and order: Some argue that ISIL provides better governance and essential services than what was experienced under Iraqi and Syrian rule. Furthermore, ISIL provides some degree of stability and order in a previously uncertain environment.
- Lack of a viable alternative: There are currently no alternative forms of Sunni-empowered governance available. ISIL draws on the power of collective Sunni identity and Sunni grievances to establish its legitimacy.
- Strong leadership: ISIL has a strong, agile, pragmatic leadership and organizational structure. It has a highly motivated and a dedicated rank and file under the leadership of a disciplined and experienced cadre, supported by consistent and compelling messaging.
- Success breeds success: ISIL's momentum and its ability to survive coalition attacks to date plays a role in convincing civilians and local power brokers that it will be around for the long-term, which reinforces support or acquiescence to ISIL, and in turn further reinforces ISIL's capacity to control.

ISIL's capacity to control is largely based on its interactions with the local population. However, ISIL also enjoys sympathy, support, and recruits from the global Sunni Muslim population. SMEs interviewed felt that the primary way ISIL achieves support from the global Sunni Muslim population is through persuasive use of narrative. SMEs identified over 20 narratives ISIL uses to persuade, the most powerful of which are described below.

### Persuasive Narratives

Narratives are messages that represent the ideals, beliefs, and social constructs of a group. ISIL uses them within the civilian population to consolidate control and amongst the global Sunni Muslim population to garner sympathy, support, and recruits.

- **Moral imperative:** ISIL uses a variety of narratives to convey the idea that Muslims have a moral imperative to support them. These narratives include the restitution of the caliphate, creation of a utopian society based on Muslim laws and values, ISIL as a representative of the pure form of Islam, ISIL bringing back the Golden Age of Islam, al Baghdadi as a direct descendent of the Prophet, and that ISIL's caliphate will unite all Sunni Muslims.
- **Sunni grievances and victimhood:** ISIL uses shared feelings of marginalization, repression, and lack of power to gain legitimacy and support. They draw on sub-narratives of victimization among Sunnis at the hands of Shias and the West to cement this powerful narrative.
- **Immediacy:** ISIL rejects al Qaeda's core narrative that it needed to wait for the right time to establish a caliphate. ISIL claims that they did it within months. ISIL touts its willingness to take action, combined with its success in establishing what it calls a caliphate, as evidence of their proclaimed righteousness and destiny.
- **Reinvention of self:** No matter what kind of life you led, when you convert to Islam and join the fight, all previous wrongdoing is washed away. ISIL offers a new start and a new sense of identity and purpose to anyone who joins them.
- **Thrills, adventures, and heroism:** Some individuals are particularly drawn to ISIL because it advertises thrills, adventures, and opportunities for heroism (and violence) that appeal to some young men's sense of masculinity.

### Schools of Thought

While these factors represent areas of qualified agreement on key factors explaining ISIL support, SMEs differed on which factors were the most important, which led to two primary schools of thought regarding ISIL's longevity.

1. The first school of thought is ISIL has resilient properties via its capacity to control people and territory stemming from pragmatic leadership and organization, intimidation tactics, tapping into existing Sunni grievances and use of a well-developed narrative and media outreach to attract and motivate fighters.
2. The second school of thought is ISIL is not a durable organization. It has taken advantage of a pre-existing sectarian conflict to acquire land, wealth, and power. It only attracts a narrow band of disaffected Sunni youth, is alienating local populations by over-the-top violence and harsh implementation of Sharia, is unable to expand into territories controlled by functioning states, and does not possess the expertise required to form a bureaucracy and effectively govern.

In reviewing the effort, a third school of thought emerged: that the real challenge is not ISIL as an organization, but rather the sense of disempowerment, anger, and frustration in the Muslim world. This condition is evidenced by rising Islamist fundamentalism found within Sunni Muslim populations around the world combined with a declining sense of state-based nationalism. It is fueled by a perception of inequality and thwarted aspirations in addition to the conditions mentioned earlier in this chapter: failed states, demographic shifts, unemployment, drought, spread of communication technologies, marginalization, etc. If the problem is larger than ISIL, then solutions that only seek to undermine ISIL's



capacity to control are insufficient to address the underlying cause of conflict, as they address only the symptoms of the problem and not the underlying root cause.

### **Additional Factors**

This summary presents a cursory review of the many topics addressed by over 50 SMEs interviewed for this effort. In addition, the report also touches on a number of other controversial topics. These include:

- whether ISIL is primarily ideological or opportunistic;
- whether the local elite power base in Iraq and Syria sincerely supports ISIL;
- situational factors contributing to the sustainment of ISIL;
- the degree to which regional Sunni Muslim states support or oppose ISIL; and
- a brief look at whether the rise of other historical violent social movements could be instructive.

SME elicitation through the SMA SOCCENT Speaker Series will continue. To be added to the distribution list for the series, please contact Mr. Sam Rhem at [samuel.d.rhem.ctr@mail.mil](mailto:samuel.d.rhem.ctr@mail.mil).

## Caveat

The information presented in this report is based on the opinions of recognized experts on various aspects of the situation in Iraq and Syria. While some of the opinions that were elicited are based on more rigorous research, the discussions themselves were focused more on conclusions and expert opinion than on a quantitative analysis of available data. Therefore, these findings are qualitative in nature, and should be interpreted as such.

## Context

### What is ISIL's strategic objective?

Before we try to understand the intangible nature of ISIL's appeal, it is important to understand ISIL's strategic objective. In general, the SMEs agreed that ISIL's short-term goal is focused on seizing and holding territory in the Sunni parts of Iraq and Syria. Experts disagreed whether ISIL is primarily an ideological movement versus a primarily opportunistic organization. Furthermore, while many agreed that ISIL would like to retake all lands that were at any time part of any caliphate, most SMEs did not feel ISIL has this capability in the near- or medium- term to do so. ISIL may have global goals, but their focus seems to be regional for now.

This debate has significant implications for the evolution of the conflict, as conventional wisdom tells us that defeating an idea is infinitely harder than defeating a group that just seeks territory, power, and influence. However, like any other complex social movement, there is no black and white answer to this question (or any other question posed in the report). An opportunistic group may rely on ideology for legitimacy and support and an ideological group may need territory, power, and influence to sustain its movement.

### Argument One: ISIL is primarily ideological

Proponents of this argument say that ISIL's primary goal is to establish an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria with the intention to expand the caliphate to cover all Muslim land that at any point in history was under Muslim control. Support for this argument draws on narratives of Muslim victimization, Islam as the answer, the golden age of Islam, destiny, moral imperatives, and sacred values among others. These narratives are explored later in the report.

Furthermore, ISIL does not just want to create an Islamic state; it wants to upend the modern international system of nation states and specifically the Sykes-Picot borders in the Middle East. It rejects the role of the United Nations as the gatekeeper of the global world order. ISIL wants to create a homogenous identity for their people within their Islamic state. ISIL leaders want Muslims to prioritize their religious identity over their state identity, which serves to help ISIL forge a connection across Sunni communities on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border.

### Argument Two: ISIL is primarily opportunistic

This line of argument suggests that ISIL's leadership is primarily interested in seeking power, wealth, and influence. This does not mean ideology does not play a critical role in consolidating power, but that ISIL

is primarily taking advantage of conditions of the ground and religion/ideology to seize land and power. Similarly, ISIL itself does not have grievances of their own creation, but instead takes advantage of existing deep-rooted Sunni grievances to establish a state. Proponents of this view argue that ISIL's leadership is ultimately seeking four primary outcomes: wealth, territory, power, and influence.

### **Wealth**

*“The ISIL insurgency may be inspired by ideological messaging and emotive narratives, but it is also a lucrative enterprise for the insurgents.” Denise Natali*

One of the non-ideological incentives for ISIL's quest to establish a state is economic incentive. The economics of war making is often overlooked, but is not a new incentive. The Sunni parts of Iraq and Syria have abundant oil reserves, well-established smuggling networks, and porous borders with neighboring countries. ISIL's political economy, which is based on extortion, taxes, and oil revenue, is currently self-sustaining. It is not a coincidence that ISIL took parts of the country where they could generate revenues, such as oil fields. That revenue allows ISIL to purchase better weaponry and makes them more of a force to be reckoned with.

One SME argued that the failure of the Turkish and Kurdish government to shut down oil smuggling routes and trade makes them passively complicit in ISIL's economic sustainability. Kurdish and Turkish traders buy ISIL's oil at very discounted rates and sell it to local purchasers, primarily gas stations. Gas prices are very high right now and there is money to be made in smuggling oil. ISIL clearly recognizes the importance of revenue generating infrastructure, which is why they did not destroy petroleum refineries or the Mosul Dam.

### **Territory**

For the first time, an extremist group has done what al Qaeda could not do: gain control of territory and declare it their own. It is sovereignty over land that makes ISIL so able to attract others to live in their society or fight for their cause. Imbuing the seizure of land with religious meaning (i.e., creating a caliphate) helps to elevate ISIL's stature, status, and image.

### **Power & influence**

Power and influence is a hard thing to measure. Some believe that ISIL's commanders are essentially “thugs and hooligans” who are only after their own power, wealth, and influence. Proponents of this theory argue that it is self-evident since Arab Sunnis in Iraq tend to be relatively secular. Furthermore a primary grievance among Sunni Arabs in Iraq is lack of political representation in mainstream politics and Shia dominance, and not lack of religious freedom. In terms of influence, ISIL portrays themselves as wanting to establish theological sovereignty over all Muslims in the Arab world. However proponents of this theory argue that ISIL's motivations are mostly about control, not ideology.

### **Maybe the answer is “all of the above”**

Some argue that this is an impossible question to answer and that all of the responses are right to some degree. ISIL is ideological, sectarian, as well as wealth, territory, and power seeking. Religious groups can

have earthly and rational goals that are couched in terms of religious themes. ISIL's goal is to transform this world and accomplishing this goal will require wealth, territory, and power. Similarly, religious groups can simultaneously have political goals while drawing on grievances to support their causes. It might be overly simplistic to characterize ISIL as either ideological or opportunistic.

### Are ISIL's goals restricted to the Levant or are they global?

*"ISIL is a curious mix of localism and globalism." John Arquilla*

The consensus among SMEs is that ISIL's goals are both regional and global. ISIL's territorial goals are regional for now, but will expand once it has consolidated power and has the opportunity. One reason why ISIL may be focused in the near-term on regional jihad versus global jihad is that the regional, sectarian conflict gives them a solid base of support. Groups engaged in regional conflicts tend to be better poised to gain recruits.

However, ISIL's long-term objective may be to expand the caliphate all over the globe. In tracking al Baghdadi's speeches, his rhetoric seems to be increasingly global in vision, according to Larry Kuznar's research. So while the near enemy is the Shia, there are increasing mentions of defeating the West. The slogan ISIL uses to describe itself is "lasting and expanding." Physical expansion is at the heart of ISIL's mission. It is only constrained by the context in which it finds itself and its military capabilities. If its current rate of success continues, it is unlikely to continue to limit its goals to just a regional focus in the long term.

### Conditions: The perfect storm

SMEs frequently used the term "perfect storm" to describe the conditions that allowed ISIL to come to power so quickly. These conditions include:

1. failure and weakening of nation states in Iraq and Syria;
2. Arab world undergoing rapid change;
3. drought;
4. economic viability of the Sunni parts of Iraq and Syria;
5. youth bulge; and
6. strong narratives and grievances.

### Failure and weakening of nation states in Iraq and Syria

*"In terms of the Kurds and Sunnis, Maliki's government provided few services. It did everything it could to drive them into the arms of a new insurgency." Williamson Murray*

The failure of Iraq and Syria to effectively govern the Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria opened the door to ISIL. History has shown us that when there is a collapse of central authority, a competition for power ensues. For some, ISIL provides Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria the hope of better governance. For others, the lack of a viable alternative to ISIL led to some degree of acquiescence.

In Iraq, the Maliki government broke the social contract that creates a sense of allegiance between states and their citizens, which in turn creates a nationally-bound identity rather than a regional one.

This failure of government created a sense of economic, political, and social breakdown across the region. Iraqi institutions were not consistently providing all of the people with what they wanted. There was a sense that others were passing them by. This was particularly true for former Sunni Baathists who were prohibited from participation or employment within the government. Finally, the lack of effective leadership and representation within the Syrian or Iraqi government left Sunni Arabs with no other viable alternative to ISIL. After a decade of chaos and war, Sunni Arab populations in the region were desperate for predictability and order.

### Arab world undergoing rapid change

The Arab world is undergoing rapid change catalysed by the evolution of communications and media, according to research conducted by Dr. Alexis Everington at Madison-Springfield. He presents four main points supporting this conclusion.

1. Arab Nationalism (the paternalist dictators) is dead. However, the monarchies (e.g. Gulf States) are still alive.
1. There is a resultant political vacuum and various groups are trying to fill it.
2. To win, groups resort to the historically most potent ‘influencing factor’ – religion – and so competing groups take on Secular, Liberal, Moderate Islamist, Salafist, Violent Jihadist hues (e.g., ISIL).
3. These groups then use whatever language/narratives/rewards/threats/imagery it takes to resonate with their target population, enabling them to dominate the social ecosystem.

Other causes of rapid change in the Muslim world noted by SMEs include globalization, corrupt governments in the Arab world, lack of economic opportunity, and resistance to modernity.

### Economic viability

Economic viability is essential to state capacity. The areas of Iraq and Syria governed by ISIL have natural, abundant oil wells in addition to refineries and pipelines. The Sunni Arab regions of Iraq and Syria contain 4,000 miles of pipelines and oil infrastructure. ISIL has confiscated these assets and re-created smuggling routes that emerged in the 1990s. They smuggle oil to Syria, Turkey, and Kurdish regions, taking advantage of porous borders. Additionally, ISIL utilizes other forms of revenue generation including taxes and extortion.

### Youth bulge

Sunni Arab populations have a substantial number of young men with no work, nothing to do, no inspiration, and no clear future. This well of frustration makes young men easy targets for ISIL’s messaging, especially as they offer jobs and hope for a brighter future.

### Strong narratives and grievances

Narratives and grievances play an extremely important role in ISIL’s success both within the population it controls and populations from which it draws sympathy, support, and recruits. These narratives are discussed in more detail in the section below.

## Persuasive Narratives

### Narratives from a neuroscience perspective

Dr. Jim Giordano, Georgetown University Medical Center, presented a brief on the neuroscience of narratives. His major points are summarized below.

Narratives are messages that represent the ideals, beliefs, and social constructs of a group. Narratives may change how one thinks (i.e., neuro-cognitive functions) and appeal to some more than others (i.e., neuro-cognitive phenotypes). In other words, it appears that there are certain predispositions that can occur in brains because of particular situations, and such cognitive functions can escalate to the point of acting out and expressing emotions and behaviors that are reactive to cognitions and emotions fostered and amplified by circumstance, influence and narratives.

This is not abnormal human behavior; rather, it fits well under the Gaussian distribution of what might even be expected of human behavior given perceived inequities and imbalances of relative power, capability, and influence. This is not crazed action, and these individuals are not psychotics. These are individuals who have banded together by virtue of a set of common cognitive and emotional traits, who have created a belief system and set of narratives that puts them juxtaposed to, and defiant against, a (perceived) position of power.

Young minds, adolescents, and their growing brains are not fully formed. Young minds are impressionable, and the information revolution gives them a way/a device that almost automatically isolates them from their own groups and connects them with others that are out there, potentially predatory ones like ISIL.

One needs only to look at somebody between the ages of nine and fifteen to see their openness and vulnerability to ideas. Very often, this reflects their view of their own situation, and many kids of that age—and even older—evidence some kind of existential angst if only on a superficial and social level.

If you deprive individuals of too many of their needs (food, clean water, etc.), they are not going to worry about larger social issues, nor will they immediately be aggressive and violent (unless such aggression is seen as means to the ends of obtaining said core necessities). But if in fact you deprive them of enough things that they really want or desire, and you wave those things in their face, which the Internet is now able to do, those objects of desire can often become objects of disdain, borne from being objects of envy. And very often what ends up happening is a want to destroy it so that nobody else can have it.

Another narrative strongly drawn on is repression, which leads to inequitable vulnerability and marginalization. Repression generates strong feelings that propel one toward taking action. Individuals, as well as groups, can be mobilized by narratives of (perceived) repression. This is a fairly well researched neuro-cognitive phenomenon in the study of dominance groups as well as neuroeconomics.

## Narratives from an entertainment perspective

*“[T]here are no new stories. Take a lot of common themes that you see out there and just render them in a way that people can relate to. That’s where great storytelling comes from.” Anon2*

NSI interviewed three private sector executives with extensive experience and success in developing content geared toward 15-28 year old males. While they have no background on ISIL whatsoever, they were able to speak to narratives that resonate with this group. Essentially, they asserted that creating compelling narratives is not difficult to do. For a narrative to work, there has to be an in-group and an opposition group (us vs. them). The themes that motivate people include struggle against oppression, good vs. evil, overcoming obstacles, redemption, retribution, etc. These are common themes to any good sci-fi novel. Successful advertising materials and video narratives are designed to appeal to multiple audiences at the same time: for adolescents, it is about the struggle with identity and role confusion; for young adults, it is about intimacy and isolation; for middle adults, it is about stagnation versus advancement.

## Description of common narratives

Please keep in mind that SMEs referred to many kinds of narratives and this is one attempt to distill them into categories. There is no common terminology used in association with narratives.

### Appeal overstated

While this is more of a school of thought rather than a narrative, several SMEs believe that ISIL’s appeal is overstated. Eight scholars from the US Naval Post Graduate School wrote that:

*“[ISIL’s] perverse “Disney Land for Jihadis” attraction appeals to a narrow band of discontent and disaffected young Sunni males looking for meaning, rewards, or justice. ISIL’s success, ostensibly bestowed by the divine, attracts the opportunistic seeking to change their lots in life. However, in the long term ISIL’s grand strategy is self-defeating. The U.S. should exercise measured restraint, yet actively and quietly assist in ISIL’s destruction by setting the conditions for failure. The U.S. must not play into ISIL’s IO spin by hyping their combat prowess, heaping notoriety on their leaders, or legitimizing their barbaric actions by highlighting them. The U.S. does not need to “defeat” ISIL as it will eventually implode on its own, and any “Israeli style” over-reaction could either play into their “magnetic appeal” or prolong ISIL’s inevitable demise.”*

Additionally, social media research conducted by Texas A&M (Randy Kluver and Jacqueline Chinn) found that social media analysis of individuals discussing ISIL on Twitter find a simultaneous rejection of ISIL’s ideology and a rejection of US foreign policy and “hypocrisy.”

### Creation of a caliphate

ISIL’s first goal was to seize territory to establish a caliphate. ISIL’s leadership considers this task accomplished. The idea of a caliphate has historical and cultural significance to Muslims. Simply using the term caliphate lends ISIL a sense of legitimacy. ISIL is distinguished in that it is the first Islamist extremist organization to declare a caliphate and actually seem to be governing one.

What is unique about the Islamic State is that its leadership is calling on like-minded individuals to come join the movement to live and form a society rather than to fight and die for the cause (*hijdra*). The first issue of *Dabiq* did not just call for foreign fighters; it called for doctors, engineers, Islamic scholars, and others who could build up the apparatus of the state. ISIL has intentionally invited women and families to immigrate to the caliphate. This narrative helps solidify ISIL as an alternative lifestyle, not just a form of jihad. This is qualitatively different than what other violent groups have asked of their supporters.

Shalini Venturelli stated that, “Among ISIL’s many other innovative gains is a powerful construction of Koranic doctrine for the ‘imagined community’ of a Caliphate. They could not realize this construction through established or official spiritual leaders in Muslim countries whom they see as extensions of the state. Instead they sought alternative spaces, other types of public spheres for discussion of Islamic belief and interpretation of Islamic identity. This indicator of innovation is powerful because it forms the foundational strength of the knowledge system or epistemology of the ISIL community of believers, fighters and supporters. They have generated a whole new class of spiritual voices making persuasive claims to authenticity by distancing themselves from official Islam.”

### Utopian society

One of ISIL’s messages is that it intends to create a utopian society by strictly implementing Sharia law. One expert, Nazar Janabi, explained that this is a powerful narrative that they are clearly demonstrating in their social media campaign. He described one video of a man driving around a town under ISIL control. Everything was peaceful; people were doing their work. No one was smoking or drinking. The message was that this is how Medina was during the Prophet’s time. Additionally, the speaker on the video spoke with crisp, clean, elegant Arabic, enhancing the appeal of the message.

This perception of ISIL as a harbinger of a Utopian (or at least more Utopian) state is supported by one poll evaluating American Muslim support for ISIL. Drs. Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko conducted a survey (n=200) that found that approximately 25% of American Muslim respondents would not go themselves to fight Assad but would not condemn an individual for doing so. Another quarter say either that going to fight is morally justified or that going to fight is morally required of any individual who can do it. “In short, about half of US Muslims sympathize with the cause of fighting Bashar” they concluded.

### Victimization

From a neuroscience perspective, shared feelings of marginalization, repression, and lack of power can be important factors that render consonance with shared beliefs, ideals, and rhetoric important to alignment and recruitment, according to Jim Giordano. ISIL draws on Sunnis’ profound and long-term social-psychological history of vulnerability, marginalization, and suppression. In this report, we divided this narrative of victimization into two sub-narratives: Muslims as victims of the West and Sunni repression by Shias.



### **Muslims as victims of the West**

There is a long-standing narrative that Muslims are victims of Western influence and repression. The West has a long history of interference and suppression of Muslim populations including the Crusades, colonization, decolonization, and war (e.g., Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.). Social media analysis conducted by Randy Kluver and Jacquelyn Chinn showed that anti-US and anti-West sentiment is clearly a prominent theme on Twitter amongst ISIL sympathizers. Also, Western governments are perceived to prop up corrupt regimes that have repressed Sunni populations, like the current Iraqi and Syrian governments. Discrimination against Muslims living in Western countries, particularly in Europe, also feeds this narrative. One SME, Jocelyne Cesari, stated that ISIL recruiters emphasize that “if you do not turn away from the West, you will lose your soul.”

Iraqi Sunni Arabs see US involvement in Iraq, the abandonment of Sunnis after the Awakening, the 2005 constitution, and de-Baathification as evidence of victimhood at the hand of the US. During the Awakening, Americans made promises to the Sunni Arab tribes that they would support them. The al-Maliki administration basically undermined what was achieved with American and Iraqi blood and treasure.

*“We [the Americans] threw them [the Sunni tribes] under the bus. We didn’t deliver them any kind of protection or political autonomy or self determination in any way...And so they’ve all rushed back to the skirts of ISIL.” Joshua Landis*

These perceptions created a grave sense of mistrust of the Iraqi and American governments, which played into ISIL’s hand. The lack of American intervention in Syria is another sticking point that seems to support this narrative. The perceived moral bankruptcy of the West presents an opportune time for ISIL’s Islamic utopian narrative.

### **Sunni repression by Shias**

ISIL exploits sectarian Sunni/Shia narratives to generate legitimacy. Sectarianism was not originally an element of ISIL’s rise, but it has become an increasingly important element that cannot be ignored. Larry Kuznar’s research found that it is clear from al Adnani and al Baghdadi speeches that Shia are seen as ISIL’s primary enemy followed by America and the West. The Shia/Sunni split is a fundamental issue for ISIL.

Some Sunnis in Iraq and Syria see ISIL’s idea of a caliphate as an alternative to the modern nation state system, which has failed them. In particular, many young Muslim men feel that they are living in an era of defeat. ISIL is seen as a way to restore Sunni power. It represents strength and revival in these young men’s minds. Some experts argued that Sunni support for ISIL is not grounded in ideology, but in the lack of inclusion in governments in both Iraq and Syria. Even those who dislike ISIL and disagree with its ideology see ISIL as the mostly likely power to defeat Iran’s, Iraq’s, and Syria’s militias. They see ISIL as a way to exact revenge from the central government. Many see Assad and al-Maliki as worse than ISIL. In both Syria and Iraq, the sense of disenfranchisement and lack of representation in a largely Shia

government is a primary narrative. Humiliation, repression, and lack of dignity and respect by Shia is another frequent narrative at play in the region.

Some ISIL recruits are motivated by sympathy for the victimization of Sunni Arabs in Syria and Iraq. Sunni Muslims feeling marginalized or repressed, albeit under different circumstances, in other parts of the global Muslim population relate to ISIL's narratives of empowerment against suppressing forces. James Giordano suggests that "a cross alignment of 'vulnerablization,' marginalization, repression, and abuse, that fosters a sense of bio-psycho social alliance with others in similar situations who may then achieve 'power in numbers' and 'power in action' through the aforementioned 'ripple effects' of overtly symbolic gestures of aggression of the (perceived) "marginalized against the dominant." For example, in Syria, the main grievance is the horrific violence the Assad regime has visited on Sunni Muslims. Many Sunnis across the world believed the international community stood by and watched as Muslims were being slaughtered. Until 2013, the main reason foreign fighters came to the region was to save Syrian Sunnis from Assad. Additionally, Sunni frustration has been made worse when Iraqi Shiite military groups and the Lebanese Hezbollah intervened in Syria to support the Shiite regime backed by the Shiite government of Iran against the Sunnis.

Others say Sunni Arab support for ISIL is grounded in sectarianism—or the regional suppression of Sunni Arabs by Shias. And many of these proponents see Iran as the main instigator, trying to suppress Sunnis and gain control over the region. Many join ISIL out of anger towards or hatred of Shia.

Many recruits feel great empathy for Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria. The humiliation of Sunnis there by Shias affects them personally through their strong Sunni group identity. They see the fight as a way to rebalance Sunni power against Shias. Until fall of 2013, many recruits came from Europe in clusters of friends to save the Syrian people from Assad. It is likely that, at first, many Western Muslims went to the region to fight Assad, but they did not go to fight for ISIL. As ISIL controlled more territory and gained greater status, it started absorbing many of the newly arriving Western recruits.

Some experts say ISIL's appeal in Syria and Iraq is not due to sectarianism, religion, or ideology. They argue that sectarianism is a symptom, not a cause. This is supported by polls that show Iraqi Sunni Arabs are quite secular. It is not clear whether Syrian Sunni Arabs are likewise secular. What Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria want is justice. Social media analysis of Syrian Twitter users show that the theme that most resonates with them is human rights abuses, not ISIL's ideological appeal, according to Kluver and Chinn's research. ISIL's messaging emphasizes revenge on Shias for Sunni humiliations. Some of their most popular videos show ISIL soldiers "avenging" Sunni Arabs by massacring hundreds of Shia soldiers.

### Purity

ISIL claims that only an uncompromising, pure Sunni Islam can restore Sunni dominance through the establishment of a caliphate. ISIL plays on narratives of victimization and relies on a tactic of action to "sweep away everything before it" to create a pure (utopian) Islamic society. ISIL's leaderships look out at the world and sees broken states, broken economies, and broken social systems. Everything is falling apart, and ISIL's leaders argue that Islam is the right answer. Any law that does not come from god is an unjust law, which requires violence to set it right. ISIL's leaders state that not only is Islam the answer,

but the Islamic State represent the true representative of Islam. ISIL, therefore, claims the moral imperative—that they are fighting for a just cause.

Since the end of the last caliphate, Sunni power has declined. Many Muslims interpret this as a fall from grace—that they somehow moved away from Allah and lost his favor. In other words, if Muslims were “good,” it should translate to some kind of success in the temporal world, which they argue happened during the time of Mohammad and the Abbasid Empire. One explanation suggests that Islamic states have been corrupted by the existence of various religious minorities and that their values and practices have crept into Islamic thinking. ISIL blames the decline of Sunni influence in the region on the states’ deviation from “pure” Islam. ISIL is an effort to correct that trajectory. ISIL creates a strong link between religious observance and the implementation of Sharia law.

ISIL presents itself as the true implementer of Islamic law and ideology. The idea is that if the other Islamist groups had only been purer in previous fights against infidels and apostates, they would have succeeded. By extension, other Islamist extremist groups are not radical enough. ISIL argues that the current leader of al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is not legitimate because he is not adhering to the principals propagated by Osama Bin Laden before his death. They say the root of Muslim defeat is the failure of the people and leaders to rally around the Islamic state. There is a sense that al Qaeda compromised. ISIL says that once they have purified Islam, the caliphate will be pure and strong enough to usher in a cataclysmic battle between Islam and the West.

The purity narrative is closely related to the narrative of not compromising. If ISIL is going to be pure in its creation of a caliphate, it cannot compromise on Islamic values or laws. In ISIL’s pursuit of a Utopian, Islamic state, they cannot concern themselves with how they are perceived by the outside world, as well as by the local populations.

### **Uncompromising**

ISIL’s uncompromising vision of establishing a caliphate is closely linked to the purity narrative. ISIL has a “if you’re not with us, you’re against us” attitude that applies to everyone, including all Muslims. ISIL sees the world in black and white, good versus evil. Those who are not “with” ISIL are subject to “violent purging”—even Sunni Muslims who do not support ISIL’s claims (such as the Kurds).

Speeches by al Adnani and al Baghdadi indicate that sacrifice and overcoming obstacles is absolutely necessary—that establishing a caliphate will not be easy, according to research conducted by Larry Kuznar. They acknowledge that many fighters will not survive, but that their reward will be waiting for them after death. They emphasize that this is a fight ISIL is destined to win.

SMEs identified compromise as one of ISIL’s redlines. If ISIL compromises on its idea of establishing a pure Islamic caliphate, it may lose support of the civilian and global Muslim populations. Many SMEs pointed out that this is a vulnerability as history shows that groups from the Nazis to the Bolsheviks learned that, at a certain point, they had to compromise their extreme ideology in order to create governing structures.

ISIL seems aware that the implementation of Sharia law may not be popular in the short term, but they believe that Sharia will fix many societal ills and win the people over the long term. And in a purely ideological interpretation of “pure” implementation of Sharia law, it does not matter whether the people like it or not; it is the right way to live according to Islamic prescripts. However, while brutal tactics might be acceptable in the conflict phase of establishing a state, ISIL may not be able to sustain the same level of brutality when they get into the business of governance. If ISIL turns to pragmatism instead of purity, it may be an indicator of their descent.

### Action/immediacy

Al Qaeda core takes a long-term approach to establishing a caliphate and argues that various milestones must be achieved before a caliphate could be successfully established. ISIL has rejected al Qaeda’s strategy of playing the long game. It seized on the “perfect storm” of conditions described earlier in this report to create a caliphate. ISIL furthers this narrative of immediacy/action by telling its adherents that each individual can make a difference right now by joining their cause. ISIL projects an image of not only talking the talk, but walking the walk in terms of taking action and implementing their ideas.

### Golden age of Islam

ISIL narratives draw heavily on the narrative of the Golden Age of Islam, when a sizable portion of the modern world was under Muslim control.<sup>4</sup> According to Hamid and Haddad, Muslims are raised with the sense that they used to be the greatest civilization the world has even seen and have experienced the most precipitous fall from grace in history.

*“There is this feeling that Muslims have been denied what was supposed to be their destiny: a destiny of empowerment, a destiny of hegemony, a destiny of prosperity and success.” Fanar Haddad*

The caliphate becomes a symbol of what Muslims once had. ISIL argues that the only way to re-gain the lost glory of the Golden Age is to overthrow apostate states and establish a new government. Furthermore, the establishment of an Islamic state in Syria and Iraq is much more attractive to Arabs and many Muslims than in the hills of Afghanistan. ISIL is located in the heart of the Muslim world, which makes it potentially more dangerous and more appealing than the Taliban.

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<sup>4</sup> For a visual representation of caliphates from 632 CE to today, please see work by Charles Biery on MapStory <http://mapstory.org/maps/1832/>.



Figure 1 One interpretation of land formerly under Muslim control

This representation of the golden age has been romanticized by ISIL because even under the Abbasid caliphate, there was no homogeneous, Sunni Islamic state, which is how it is often portrayed. The Umayyad caliphate ruled a predominantly non-Muslim population. Additionally, there was a lot of turmoil during the Ottoman, Abbasid, and Umayyad caliphates including several civil wars and a struggle over leadership. SMEs agreed that recent converts to Islam and those who are not aware of Islamic history (e.g., many foreign fighters) are most susceptible to this narrative.

### Rising Islamic fundamentalism

Al Qaeda has primed the Muslim world for at least 20 years to become more fundamental in their thinking and religious practices. This has coincided with increasing sympathy and support for radical groups. According to research conducted by Mansoor Moaddel, “fundamentalist orientation is quite high among respondents from seven Middle Eastern countries. It is highest in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and lowest in Lebanon. The good news is that the intolerance component of religious fundamentalism is much lower across the seven countries. The Saudis appear to be much more religiously intolerant than respondents from the other six countries.”

#### Cross-National Variation in the Indices of Religious Fundamentalism

(1=lowest and 4=highest fundamentalism)

(mean, standard deviation, sample size)

	Total	Egypt	Iraq	Lebanon	Pakistan	Saudi Arabia	Tunisia	Turkey
Nature of Deity	3.45	3.77	3.53	3.02	3.62	3.38	3.56	3.16
	(.550)	(.332)	(.457)	(.619)	(.373)	(.597)	(.503)	(.561)
	20,678	3,495	2,989	2,998	3,522	1,635	3,059	2,980
Literalism	3.43	3.66	3.50	3.03	3.69	3.44	3.49	3.08

	(.579)	(.410)	(.493)	(.718)	(.360)	(.520)	(.510)	(.608)
	20,449	3,473	2,925	2,940	3,520	1,633	3,036	2,922
Exclusivity	3.37	3.46	3.45	2.85	3.69	3.43	3.44	3.20
	(.664)	(.643)	(.547)	(.791)	(.405)	(.646)	(.616)	(.631)
	19,958	3,033	2,874	2,925	3,520	1,634	3,026	2,946
Intolerance	<b>2.55</b>	<b>2.66</b>	<b>2.63</b>	<b>2.36</b>	<b>2.59</b>	<b>3.13</b>	<b>2.22</b>	<b>2.52</b>
	(.642)	(.584)	(.499)	(.631)	(.492)	(.599)	(.705)	(.682)
	18,905	3,371	2,483	2,732	3,452	1,472	2,792	2,603
Anti- Authoritarian Intolerance	2.96	3.15	3.06	2.75	3.18	3.27	2.54	2.80
	(.843)	(.848)	(.732)	(.867)	(.731)	(.717)	(.891)	(.810)
	19,213	3,385	2,574	2,749	3,459	1,542	2,812	2,692
Interfaith Intolerance	2.15	2.17	2.20	1.96	2.00	2.96	1.91	2.24
	(.751)	(.687)	(.656)	(.703)	(.515)	(.768)	(.811)	(.801)
	20,165	3,471	2,829	2,974	3,513	1,558	3,005	2,815
Fundamentalism	<b>3.21</b>	<b>3.39</b>	<b>3.31</b>	<b>2.83</b>	<b>3.40</b>	<b>3.35</b>	<b>3.21</b>	<b>3.01</b>
	(.486)	(.338)	(.399)	(.581)	(.300)	(.488)	(.449)	(.522)
	20,597	3,487	2,951	2,982	3,521	1,635	3,055	2,966

### Eschatology

Eschatology refers to theology that espouses an apocalyptic or “end of days” destiny of humankind. ISIL draws on a narrative that says the final cataclysmic battle between the Muslim world and the West is going to happen within this generation. Furthermore, ISIL tells recruits that they are fortunate to have the opportunity to take part and perhaps give their lives in this final, apocalyptic battle.

### Unity

Larry Kuznar’s speech analysis reveals that al Adnani and al Baghdadi indicate that unity is an important theme to ISIL. One implication of this finding is that this is a potential liability they are concerned about: maintaining the coalition of fighters and various groups. There is a lot of language in their speeches about how ISIL needs to put internal differences aside and work together.

### Masculinity, heroes, thrills & adventure

According to Dr. Kathleen Shats from Georgetown University Medical Center, social norms for men have been built on notions of bravery, honor, and displays of physical force. These gender norms and narratives of heroism and manliness are particularly enhanced during times of war. She argues that research has shown the religion plays a limited role in motivating jihad. It is used as a mobilizing tool that draws on masculine social norms—like violence and martyrdom. “Fighting and violence feature in



Figure 2 Source

almost every cultural construction of masculinity and are associated with bravery, autonomy, adventure or heroism. Harsher economic conditions as well as conflict place additional pressures on men to conform to gender roles—violence can be seen as a way to regain honor and a man’s position in the appropriate gender order” according to Dr. Shats.

Dr. Shats added that “[v]ideos targeting western recruits exploit gender norms surrounding masculinity. Scenes feature video game-like slow motion violence, while the narratives focus on the nobility of joining the fight, earning respect from brothers, and living a meaningful life. Religion is secondary. The focus is on brotherhood, earning respect from others, conquering fear, finding purpose, and being a hero.” Dr. Kuznar also identified masculinity as an important narrative. He summarized that “[e]vil can be defeated only through courageous, violent action; anything less is weakness.”

ISIL projects an image of strong, powerful, undefeatable heroes and conquerors. ISIL intentionally uses imagery from video and computer games to enhance their appeal and “jihad chic.” ISIL promises to restore Muslim pride.

Some recruits seek thrills and adventure. Pre-jihad youth, or youth educated and raised in radicalized communities, across the world in Western Europe, Tunisia, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Pakistan, Indonesia, and even India see ISIL as cool, attractive, a new form of collective identity that is not available to them in their own communities. Scott Atran remarked that “If you follow and engage their dialogues on Ask.fm or other foreign fighter websites you will see that they seek glory, the sublime, and that they yearning to be imbued with a deep sense of moral virtue, however abhorrent what they find is to us. For only virtue can ultimately motivate the killing of large numbers of people who are innocent of doing direct harm to others.”

### Assimilation & alienation

One group of SMEs believes that the lack of assimilation of some Muslim populations, particularly in Europe, makes potential recruits feel alienated and more susceptible to ISIL’s message. Many are single

and unemployed. Chronic unemployment results in young men who are unable to get married or hope for upward mobility. This is particularly true in France, where there is a large North African population that is not well integrated into society. They tend to live in poorer neighborhoods. However, it is a mistake to think that all recruits are poor, uneducated, and homeless. In reality, many recruits tend to be educated and come from middle class families. In fact, another groups of SMEs saw no evidence that western European recruits are alienated. This is an elite group that is highly regarded and looked up to as leaders. They are quite the opposite of marginalized youth.

### **Social and familial ties**

Research done by Scott Atran shows that “in our studies of al Qaeda we find about 70-75% join al Qaeda and its affiliates through friends, about 15-20 % through family, and the rest through other means (discipleship, on their own, etc.)” This holds true with regard to ISIL in Syria, according to the experts from ICSR. “This comes under what we call the 'tazkiyya' network, where individuals back home are 'vouched in' by the friends already in Syria. Wives/children would appear to go through kindred or family links.”

Some of these social ties are formed online through platforms like Twitter and Facebook. However, it is very rare for an individual to convert to Islam or to leave to fight for an extremist group without a personal connection. Many are sympathetic to ISIL’s fight, but only a few commit violence. Why? The predictive variable is fusion with the group. Devoted actors that fuse with the group completely are the most likely to join the effort. Unfortunately, these social ties seem stronger than familial ties as many families are not able to prevent their children from joining the fight.

### **Acceptance & reinvention of self**

*“The volunteers are, by and large, self-seeking young people in transitional stages in their lives: students and immigrants, between jobs or girl friends, having left their natural family and looking for a new family of friends.” Scott Atran*

*“We are all ISIL.” –an ISIL recruitment slogan*

Recruits may be responsive to ISIL’s recruitment efforts because they are on a quest for personal significance. Some recruits were raised very little religious education and are looking for a new family that provides them with transcendental meaning. Some recruits associate arms with power. Simply choosing to bear arms 1) provides a vector for the recruit’s anger and disdain and 2) elevated himself in social stature that compensates for his feelings of oppression, vulnerability, and marginalization. In his mind, he becomes a mythic hero. Finally, some recruits just want to be a part of something. Muslim converts in the West may be particularly attracted to ISIL. Converts consistently say that Islam is unique in that it accepts them for who they are. When they come to Islam, they do not have to take any courses or pay any fees. They simply have to accept Allah as their God. They are then forgiven for anything they did before they converted.

ISIL offers recruits a chance to shed their old life and failures and reinvent themselves. ISIL leadership does not mind what the recruit’s past was like or how much sin was committed. If a recruit joins the



ranks, all is forgiven. There is one ISIL video that tells recruits “we are human, we err, but that if you join us, all will be forgiven.” There is an increasing convergence between petty criminals and terrorism. Like the converts, they want to shed the skin of their past selves. Criminals do not want to be criminals; they want to be heroes. They are also ideal recruits because they know how to use weapons, electronics, etc.

Some recruits may also turn to ISIL to escape from a personal problem or to find new friends after a recent social disconnection.

ISIL intentionally recruits people from diversity wide variety of ethnic backgrounds. They communicate that it does not matter what ethnicity you are. If you subscribe to their way of life and religion, you are part of the chosen society. ISIL is well known for taking any recruit that volunteers, which differs significantly from the practices of other VEOs. These practices have given ISIL a big boost numerically. They have absorbed a lot of fighters coming from Chechnya and Bosnia, and have been able to recruit people with previous combat experience.

### **Generational divide**

Parents do not play a major role in encouraging their children to participate in jihad. In fact, there seems to be a deep generational rift between parents and children. At least in Europe, many recruits are second or third generation immigrants. When young men face the same type of discrimination their parents faced, they are not willing to sit down and accept their exclusion like their fathers did.

*“Rebellious sons are criticizing their fathers for being too subservient, for having accepted the status quo for too long, for being nonchalant in how they have been treated in Western countries, and for having a sort of fatalistic approach. These sons are rebelling against that type of lifestyle, that mode of thinking, and that generation of fathers.” Mehrzad Boroujerdi*

Young men also use the call to jihad as a way of escaping parental control. Many seek to set up independent households. Not only are sons rejecting their fathers, they are rejecting the “greybeards” of their faith. Larry Kuznar noted that if you look at Zawahiri’s speeches from 30 years ago, he was the rebellious son. Now he is the father figure trying to contend with a rebellious son, al Baghdadi.

### **Appeal of sanctioned violence**

While it is most likely not a driving factor, the use of sanctioned violence is likely to have some appeal to a 20-something, societally alienated male. If you give someone meaning and can combine it with violence at the same time, it would potentially appeal to a significant number of people within this demographic.

Additionally, while most recruits are normal psychologically, there may be some individuals who manifest psychiatric traits of hostility and/or have a misguided sense of repression. They might see ISIL as an opportunity to channel their own impulses of aggressiveness and violence under a protective rhetoric and rubric.

### **Altruism**

Members of ISIL view their action as being a courageous method for advancing the cause of their community so Sunni Muslims could benefit. While members of ISIL are willing to die, it is a lot more complex than that. They feel a genuine sense of altruism, that is currently focused on creating a state where they can further their own ideology.

### **Tough but fair**

Sunnis look at the areas already under ISIL governance and many have concluded that ISIL is tough, but fair. ISIL seems to be clear about its rules, consistent about implementation, not corrupt, and “sincere in their brutality,” meaning that violence or punishment is applied consistently and transparently. One SME stated that ISIL’s “laws might be harsh, but at least they [the people ISIL governs] know the secret police will not show up on their doorstep one morning.”

ISIL’s strict adherence to its interpretation of Sharia law provides a degree of relief from uncertainty. Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria have experienced so much turmoil in the last decade that they now crave stability, even if it is harsh. Sunni Arabs in Iraq and Syria are fed up—they have felt fearful for their personal security for too long. Many families fear that a spouse might be unjustly arrested or that their child’s school might be bombed. Many say that at least ISIL provides a degree of security and normalcy in everyday life. ISIL’s laws might be vicious and brutal, but is at least consistent and predictable.

Shadi Hamid stated that “whereas most Arab countries, even repressive ones, are considerably less brutal than ISIL, they are considerably more arbitrary in the application of laws.” People may overlook some of the excesses that ISIL is engaged in if they can provide a daily sense of security. This does not mean that the people governed by ISIL support their ideology; many do not. But at least in the short-run, they recognize that ISIL provides something that they previously lacked: a basic level of security.

### **Fear & coercion**

ISIL implicitly and explicitly threatens individuals it governs with violence if they do not comply with its rules and governance. For many people ruled by ISIL, they implicitly support ISIL because there is no credible alternative and ISIL is extraordinarily brutal toward those who cross them.

### **Provision of essential services**

ISIL recognizes that it cannot control the population through violence alone. Therefore, it is trying to present itself as a “helper of the people.” Its social media messaging often focuses on the services ISIL provides its constituents. They are trying to project an image of the Islamic State as a provider for people in need.

### **Quest for personal significance**

One segment of the population not frequently mentioned in news articles is the lowest social class in Sunni society. These young men are not tied into the Sunni power structure. For these men, ISIL presents an opportunity not only to get back at Shia repression, but also perceived repression of more powerful Sunni elements.

## House of Mohammad

Al Baghdadi claims that he is a descendant of the House of Mohammad. This gives him a superior claim to be caliph as he is both Arab and a descendent of Mohammad.

## Local Elite Power Base

In Iraq and Syria, maintaining the support of the local elite power base is a critical factor in maintaining ISIL's durability. In Iraq, this primarily refers to Sunni Arab tribes and former Baathists. We know far less about local sources of power in Syria, but presume that they include Sunni tribes and the Sunni extremist groups operating there.

## Former Baathists and Sunni tribes in Iraq

SMEs generally concluded that in the short term, Sunni tribes are aligned with ISIL; however, their long-term interests diverge.

Sunni disenfranchisement started in 2003 with the Iraq War and the removal of Saddam Hussein, the Baathist Party, and Sunnis from power. De-baathification efforts barred Baathist military officials from holding public office in Iraq. These disenfranchised Sunnis originally lent their military knowledge to ISIL, becoming a major component of ISIL's success. The best officers were from Mosul and Anbar, both areas under ISIL control. These cities contained core commanders, division commanders, and brigade commanders who had fought the war in Iran. There are a large number of disaffected Sunni Arabs and former military officers in Iraq, which is not the case in Syria.

Meanwhile, the Iraq War created an unstable environment with weak central authority that allowed al Qaeda, ISIL's precursor, to gain a foothold. The USG played a large role in convincing Sunni tribes to turn against al Qaeda in return for promises of real Sunni representation in government and the military. The Iraqi government (and, by extension, the USG) failed to ensure meaningful Sunni representation and empowerment in government, leaving Sunni Tribes and former Baathists with few viable alternatives for Sunni empowerment today other than ISIL.

*"We threw them [the Sunni tribes] under a bus. We didn't deliver them any kind of protection or political autonomy or self-determination in any way. We gave them back to the tender mercies and Maliki, and we know how that ended up. And so they have all rushed back to the skirts of ISIL in a sense." – Joshua Landis*

The 2005 Constitution failed to address Sunni grievances, and promised reforms never materialized. Effectively, Sunni Arabs are no longer a meaningful part of the Iraqi government power structure. The failure of the USG to support Sunni tribes after the Awakening generated a mistrust of both the Iraqi and American governments. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was perceived as persecuting the Sunnis and minimizing their role at all levels of government.

*"Sunnis in Iraq are not seeing what is going on as ISIL action; they see it as a Sunni revolution against the alienation and discrimination that they suffered during the last 11 years." –anonimized contributor*

While Sunni tribal leaders and former Baathists share the short-term goal of Sunni empowerment in Iraq with ISIL, it is not at all clear that they support ISIL's vision of an ideological caliphate. In fact, Sunni Arabs as a whole are quite secular, which means that their tacit support is primarily driven by other factors such as anger over Shia sectarianism, lack of political voice, and economic disparities. Many Iraqi Sunnis see Maliki as worse than ISIL.

Some say that Baathist and Sunni tribes are already beginning to fracture away from ISIL. Clashes between ISIL and Sunni fighters from other groups have already take place, such as in Fallujah. Baathists in Mosul are leaving. There is a wide ideological gap between Sunni fighters and ISIL. ISIL is stronger in Mosul than it is in Fallujah, which has strong tribal participation and former Baathist army officers present.

*"The support ISIL had from the local tribes and populations in June is already waning. We are even seeing pockets of resistance emerge." – Maha Yahya*

*"The clans and tribes in Iraq have...flipped sides in several conflicts historically. There's no reason to think that the allegiance and support with ISIL is enduring in any way, any more than the allegiance and cooperation with AQI was." – Jacob Shapiro*

*"Sunni tribes want to trade, they want to drink, they want to smoke, they want to party. And living under Sharia law is probably not the best way they see their life." – Nazar Janabi*

In conclusion, the relationship between ISIL and the Sunni tribes and Baathists may be a marriage of convenience. Some SMEs believed that Iraqi tribes and former Baathists are waiting for ISIL to free them from Shia/Iranian influence, the central government in Baghdad, and Shia militias before turning against ISIL. But it is not clear that they will be able to extricate themselves from ISIL's influence and control.

### Other extremist groups

*"ISIL has laid its foundation upon fractious, internecine, and tacit Sunni alliances of convenience. The US can exploit friction between ISIL and the Levant's Jabhat Al Nusrah (JAN), Al Qaeda (AQ), Sufi Brotherhood, or Sunni tribes." – statement submitted by scholars at the Naval Postgraduate School*

Al Qaeda offshoots are starting to align with ISIL. ISIL's relationship to other organizations can be best characterized as organizational dominance, according to research conducted by Phil Potter at UVA. When organizations become dominant, they force other organizations operating in the same arena into their sphere. These relationships build operational sophistication, tactical diffusions, and the highways on which new operational ideas travel. There is a close link to resource diffusion. As ISIL has enlarged and strengthened, there has been a growth of broad but shallow relationships. However, while relationships are expanding, they are becoming more tenuous.

*"What we have seen so far is that once ISIL controls territory, the relationship with other organizations in the same space tend to fray. This suggests that if the USG and its allies leave ISIL alone, there would eventually be a struggle between the various Sunni organizations and factions. It is not clear whether this fracturing would be good or bad for US interests." – Phil Potter, UVA*

“Also, there are many cross cutting social ties between the militia groups, even family ties, and although ISIS is increasingly something apart, an-Nusra is generally considered, honest, trustworthy, dependable, good fighters, and acceptable allies by many groups including those in the FSA,” Scott Atran stated.

## Capacity to Control

Capacity to control refers to ISIL’s control over physical space and people. It includes their ability to use kinetic (e.g. violence) and non-kinetic (e.g., influence, coercion, etc.) mechanisms to gain the acquiescence or support of the population it governs. This section will highlight three mechanisms ISIL uses to assert their capacity to control: intentional use of violence, ingratiating themselves with the population, and indoctrination of youth. These mechanisms are not intended to be a comprehensive list of mechanisms ISIL uses to control the population, but represent the ones most discussed by SMEs.

### Intentional use of violence

The use of violence is a tool aptly used by ISIL leadership. It serves many purposes. ISIL uses internecine violence to foment instability and foster resource mobilization. It forces people, both under their control and abroad, to choose a side. The dissemination of images of violence is also a form of psychological warfare and is used as a way to dampen the morale of the enemy. This was evident when ISIL beheaded tens of Syrian soldiers and put their heads in public areas. ISIL prominently displays its brutality. Its leadership intentionally uses violence to terrify. Furthermore, violence and accompanying narrative of purging and purifying makes ISIL seem to be a more authentic threat to some. The outsized use of violence is also a way to outbid every other group on the ground for a finite number of recruits and support. Finally, violence is the tactic ISIL uses “to purify society.”

ISIL also uses a narrative of law enforcement to justify its use of violence against political and military opponents. ISIL states that it engages in executions, crucifixion, and other forms of violence against people it accuses of committing a crime, but the real motive behind these acts is to eliminate challengers. Using the narrative of law enforcement is intended to make ISIL’s violence acceptable to local communities as well as serve as a way to control them. Therefore, ISIL uses violent action to intimidate their enemies as well as those who are not willing to cooperate with them, but at the same time they are presenting an alternative for these communities by providing them with essential services.

Al Adnani and al Baghdadi also frequently use the theme of violence, especially graphic violence, in their speeches. According to thematic analysis of al Adnani speeches conducted by Larry Kuznar, Adnani mentions violence more times than he mentions Allah. The only term cited more often than violence was victory. An analysis of al Baghdadi’s speech found that the most commonly cited term was “direct confrontation” followed by Allah. ISIL justifies its use of violence as the will of God. According to Scott Atran, “For only virtue can ultimately motivate the killing of large numbers of people who are innocent of doing direct harm to others.” Those who are with them will be saved; all others should die.

*“[ISIL’s leaders and adherents] believe this violence is divinely sanctioned and they regard all opposition as posing an existential threat, thus licensing every excess.” – a scholar from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation (ICSR)*

Dr. Kuznar also stated that speeches justify ruthlessness. He summarized that “Infidels are completely dispensable, and should be dispatched with no mercy.”

*“Bodies are standing in the way of creating not just a Utopia but a divinely sanctioned Utopia then bodies don't count.” A description of ISIL's take on violence by Fanar Haddad*

There is historical precedence for the use of excessive violence in Islamic history. During the Wars of Apostasy just after the Prophet's death, there were some tribes on the Arabian Peninsula who no longer wanted to pay taxes. The first caliph launched a war against them and through the use of violence forced them to toe the line.

ISIL also uses violence symbolically. The beheadings is a low-tech approach that represents annihilation—a literal and figurative decapitation of those perceived to be the marginalizers. The high degree of violence represented by beheadings and other violent actions are laden with necessary iconography necessary to create a deep and broad ripple effect. There is symbolic power to ritualized violence. Emotionally resonant narratives can amplify this process and imbue acts of violence with honor.

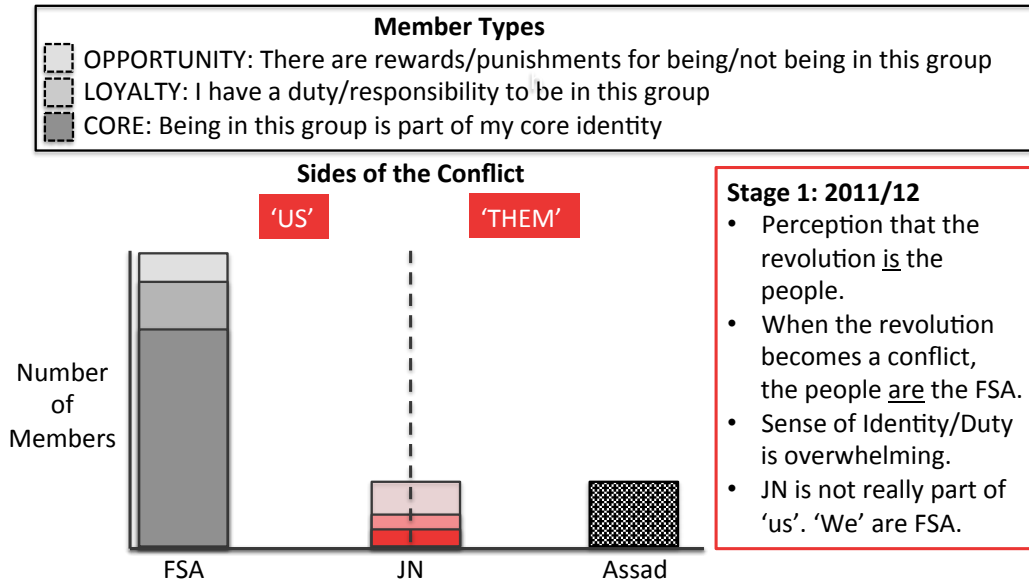
There is evidence that ISIL is deliberate in its use and portrayal of its violence. Peter Neumann, ICSR, noted that ISIL restricts some portrayals of violence online. There were two cases of unauthorized videos uploaded to social media—one showing a crucifixion and one an amputation. ISIL leadership removed these. Bill Braniff, UMD START, added that ISIL does not indiscriminately wipe out problematic communities—they kill symbolic individuals. “They frequently provide a chance to ‘repent’ to others. As long as they get some blood and make examples of some people, the rest can go back to work at the school, the dam, the oil refinery, and help ISIL build the institutions of the caliphate. So we should not say that ISIL never compromises. They are clever; if they want to build institutions of the caliphate, they need people to do that. And they are not all going to be foreign fighters.”

### **ISIL perceived as increasingly local: “one of us”**

Research conducted by Alexis Everington at Madison-Springfield illustrates how ISIL has evolved from being perceived as a foreign group to increasingly being perceived as part of the local community under siege in Syria. In 2012/2013, ISIL was considered a foreign entity, but by 2014 was seen as increasingly part of the local, Sunni in-group due to marriages, provisions of services, familiarity, and their willingness to fight “Assad.” A similar study has not been conducted in Iraq and it is not clear if the same conclusions apply there.

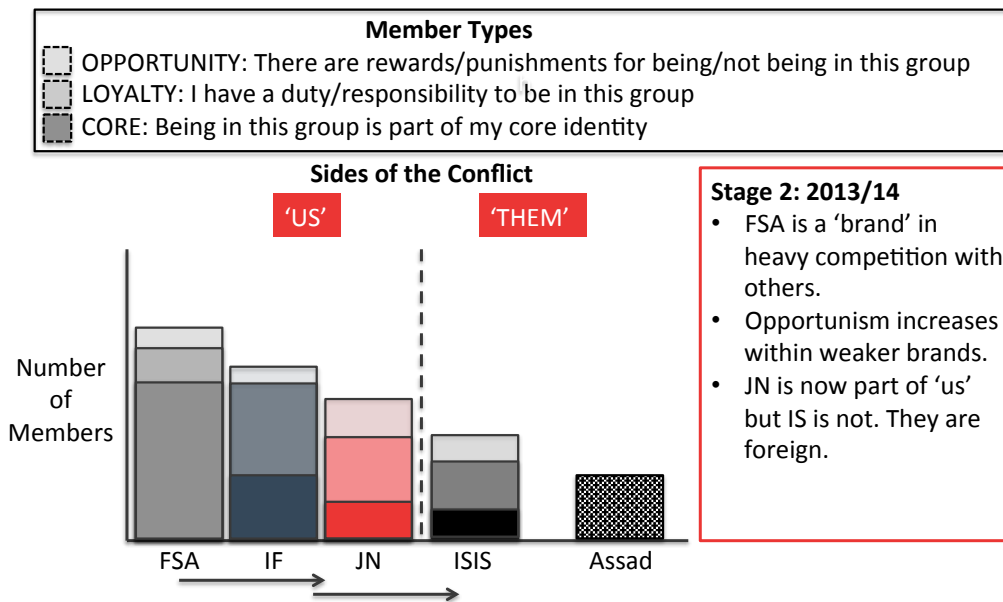
ILLUSTRATIVE

## The Armed Opposition Ecosystem – Stage 1



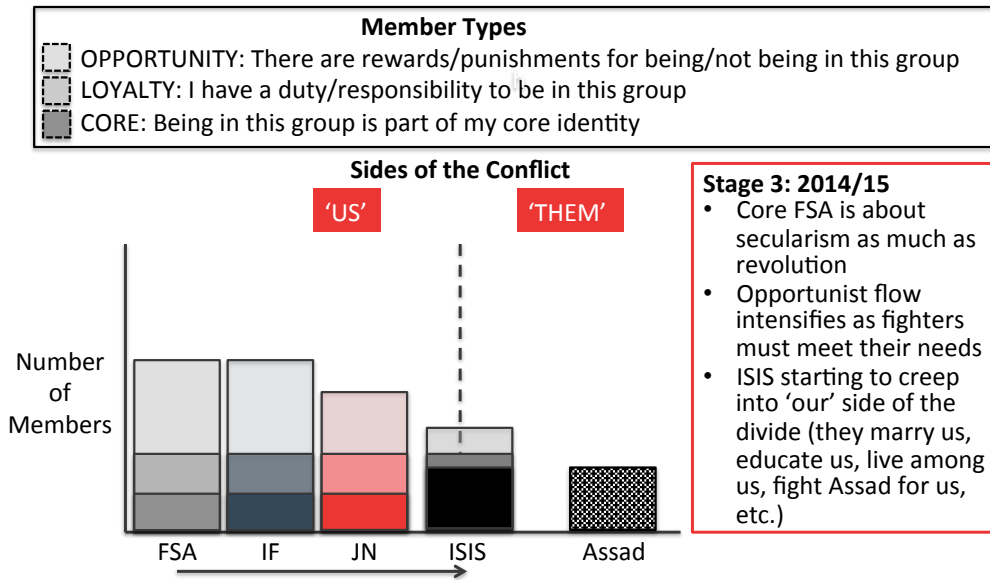
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## The Armed Opposition Ecosystem, Stage 2



## ILLUSTRATIVE

## The Armed Opposition Ecosystem, Stage 3



7

### Education and indoctrination

ISIL has made a tremendous effort to tap into children. First, it has essentially eliminated the secular educational system and replaced schools with religious institutions that generate “an ignorant population that is easier to control.” ISIL is infiltrating state and non-state institutions and infusing them with ISIL ideology with the aim of nurturing a whole new generation that will be compliant. Additionally, ISIL has taken over orphanages. These efforts seem to be yielding results. Videos of ISIL rallies frequently involve children who seem quite enthusiastic. ISIL intentionally wants to raise a new generation with a completely new mentality that views the world in a way that supports ISIL’s goals and ideology.

### External Support

External support refers to explicit or implicit financial, ideological, political, and material support from states outside of Iraq and Syria. For many groups and fledgling states, international support is essential to their strength, legitimacy, and capacity. However, not only has ISIL not courted international support from Sunni states, it had identified them as corrupt and apostate regimes that need to be destroyed. Sunni Arab states have publicly decried the legitimacy of ISIL; however, some experts believe they also have an interest in the existence of a controllable (which ISIL currently is not) Sunni extremist group in the region. One concern expressed by experts was that Arab Sunni governments might realize that the fight against ISIL is working entirely to the advantage of Syrian-Iraqi Shia-Iranian interest, one of the very interests underpinning the crisis in the first place. As a result, there is a risk that other Sunni



governments might withdraw from the coalition and begin to implicitly or explicitly support ISIL if Shia states and groups are perceived as gaining influence over Sunnis.

This section is not intended to be a comprehensive review of external support—it only seeks to highlight several SME insights.

*“Even though they don't support this kind of extremism, there's a long-term support across the Middle East for intolerance and fairly harsh interpretations of Islam that is supported by states that we consider as moderate such as Saudi Arabia.” Boaz Atzili, American University*

*ISIL “doesn't have a friend to support them.” Bill Braniff, UMD START*

## Sunni governments

*“Islamic orthodoxy or organized Islamic establishment in Sunni Islam is terrified at the prospect of the rise of an extremist genocidal Islamic state near their borders. They have a lot to lose, should ISIL solidify its power.” Mansoor Moaddel, UMD*

## Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has a complex geopolitical balance that it has to maintain—retaining its position with the Islamic world yet maintaining healthy relations with the western world. The Saudi government recognizes ISIL as a threat to its stability, but the Saudi people seem more sympathetic to ISIL's cause (Although, a smaller percentage of the SMEs believe that the Saudi people are overwhelmingly against ISIL and what it represents. These experts argue that it is erroneous to conclude that the Saudi Arabian population supports ISIL more than any other country). The Saudi government might be concerned about a repeat of the seizure of the Grand Mosque in 1979. ISIL's ability to threaten the Muslim world and Saudi Arabia in particular is a real possibility.

Analysis of Mansoor Moaddel's country cross-national polling data shows that the percentage of the respondents who adhered to religious fundamentalism and supported political violence is much higher among Saudi respondents than the respondents from the other six countries. Based on this analysis, it seems likely that there is more support for ISIL among Saudis than other Middle Eastern countries. It should be noted, however, that Saudi Arabia is a contradictory place. Between 2003 and 2011 surveys, there has been a significant decline among the Saudi public in support for Sharia, trust in religious institutions, and patriarchal values (among Saudi youth). On the other hand, there has been a significant increase in the percent of Saudis who considered democracy as the best form of government, and consider their the nation, rather than Islam, as the basis of identity.

The government of Saudi Arabia has an interest in expanding Sunni influence in the Middle East and minimizing Iran's influence in particular, therefore it indirectly shares some objectives with ISIL. Saudi Arabia is clearly against the Assad regime and has supported groups fighting Assad with money and arms. However, the rebellion is large and Saudi Arabia has little control over which group gets which funds. Many in Saudi Arabia see ISIL's movement as a historic reclamation of territory. However, at the

same time, the government is extremely worried about the security blow back from groups like ISIL, for whom the royal regime in Saudi Arabia is anathema and an enemy.

Saudi Arabia is also very concerned that US interests might overlap with Iranian interests enough that they will form a partnership of convenience at a time when the US is negotiating with Iran on their nuclear program. Saudi Arabia has always been afraid of some kind of direct accommodation or soft alliance between the US and Iran.

There is a divide between the old Sunni regimes versus the Islamists. Saudi Arabia has allied itself with a military government in Egypt and with the UAE. According to Shadi Hamid, Brookings Institute, the Saudis, the Emirates, and the Egyptians in particular see the Muslim Brotherhood as more of a threat than ISIL or any extremist group. He found it illustrative that Egypt and UAE launched airstrikes in Libya, but show far less interest in doing anything even vaguely similar on ISIL. Turkey and Qatar are perhaps more receptive to the modern Islamist movement than are Saudi Arabia, Egypt, or the UAE.

### Turkey

The government of Turkey also has conflicting interests at stake. Like Saudi Arabia, it is quietly pleased at the reassertion of Sunni dominance in the region, but is also very concerned about security blow back since ISIL considers the government of Turkey apostate as well. Additionally, there is growing sympathy among the people of Turkey for ISIL.

## Shia governments

### Iran

There are three major ties between Iran and Iraq: security, religion, and economics—primarily in the energy sector. Despite sectarian tensions, the Iranians will work with any state if it is in their strategic interest. However, according to polls conducted by Mansoor Moaddel, UMD, in Iran, there has been a decline in secularism, which may strain ties with Iraq if the government should become more inclusive.

### Assad's Syria

There is a small, but persistent belief among some that ISIL is a creation (whether implicitly or explicitly) of the Assad regime. Some say that the Syrian regime, backed by the Iranians, started ISIL in Syria by intentionally releasing dangerous Islamists from its prisons and secretly supporting their efforts to try to frame their violence against Sunnis as a counterterrorism effort to the West. Some say the proof of this assertion is that ISIL has never directly engaged the Syrian Army and has instead targeted regions controlled by other Sunni rebel groups and the Free Syrian Army. However, the Syrian regime quickly lost control of ISIL as other players began to finance and support the group. Whether or not the Assad regime had a hand in the rise of ISIL, it seems clear that they strategically avoided each other as they pursued their separate goals.

## How does ISIL use social media?

One factor that contributes highly to ISIL's staying power is its strategic information capability, which is one of the most powerful factors shaping the sociocultural environment. It drives conflict overall because it shapes beliefs, motivations, behavior, intent and decisions of the key actors. Very early on, ISIL appreciated and understood the value of having a brand, something that people could identify with online and on the ground. Since then, ISIL has used social media deliberately to recruit and gain sympathy and support.

ISIL has very tight control over the images and messages used in its official communications. ISIL's al Hayat media center was established in May 2014 to coordinate their information operations. It is extremely well funded and organized. Perhaps because of this, in addition to Tweets and Facebook posts, ISIL has been able to produce professional-grade videos. In addition to videos, ISIL has also successfully produced some rap albums. Several rappers have joined ISIL and are putting out propaganda music such as McCain, Al Omar Hammami, and Deso Dog.

ISIL leadership also seems to control their fighters' social media presence as well. There is evidence of recruits being made to turn in their cell phones when they arrive in Syria. Therefore, those fighters on the ground in the controlled zones allowed to use social media are a select few.

But those select few have used their social media presence to act like citizen journalists in a way and talk about their experiences on the ground. ISIL uses social media to create a seamless network between fighters in Iraq and Syria and potential recruits in Europe, the United States, and other places that makes people abroad feel like they are part of the conflict. Because ISIL Tweets regularly, especially highlighting their conquest or their more spectacular acts of violence, it makes their followers feel like they are along for the ride. It is almost like being in a video game where people can live vicariously through others. These citizen journalists seems to have been chosen carefully as fighters Tweet in a number of languages, which augments ISIL's recruitment efforts abroad.

However, some SMEs challenged ISIL's continued dominance of the information environment. First, ISIL has to rely on social media because it is not established enough yet to have its own satellite television or multi-nation radio program. It has become dependent on YouTube and Twitter to disseminate its messages. However, because of enhanced cyber security methods, it has become more difficult for ISIL to use the web as a primary communication channel.

With regard to bottom-up support from social media users, Jacqueline Chinn and Randy Kluver from Texas A&M conducted a study of support for ISIL on Twitter. First, the study found that it is important to understand that individuals who participate in Twitter tend to represent a cross section of people that is not necessarily representative of the larger population. Users tend to be highly educated, highly technologically proficient people. So analysis of social media might be skewed, but it can still provide some useful insights. Kluver and Chinn also found that ISIL's appeal in social media was overstated. There are a number of sympathizers who are not necessarily connected with ISIL but maybe have a picture of an ISIL flag on their profile handle. They estimate there are about 4,000-6,000 sympathizers on Twitter in the region. Twitter is quick to deactivate accounts of real ISIL fighters, so the number of

sympathizers is difficult to estimate. There seems to be some loose kind of organization among sympathizers where they re-Tweet content very rapidly, returning to ISIL's core themes of violence, ideology, goals, and anti-Westernism.

## Historical Comparisons

In the course of discussions with subject matter experts (SMEs), comparisons were occasionally drawn to other groups or historical instances that in some ways may show some similarities to the current situation in Iraq and Syria. Specifically, parallels were drawn to the Nazi party in pre-World War II Germany, the rise of the Taliban, the Bolshevik movement (including Stalin's rise to power), Hezbollah, and other historical instances such as Wahhabism, Maoism and communist guerillas in Africa. A distillation of these comparisons shows some potentially useful patterns and insights that may help to inform strategy and policy regarding ISIL.

The findings presented in this chapter are reflective of comments made by SMEs during qualitative interviews. Parallels to other organizations were often stated to make or reinforce a point, and are not necessarily reflective of an in-depth, disciplined, and multi-dimensional formal case study comparing ISIL to these other organizations. While the points made provide valuable insight, these findings should be viewed as qualitative in nature, based on deduction and informed conjecture, rather than on a more disciplined study comparing ISIL to the group noted.

## Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime

In many ways, some SMEs argued that the most similar case to ISIL is Saddam Hussein's Baathist party. ISIL's harsh interpretation of Sharia law was not going to be received favorably by many Sunnis in Iraq, but that does not mean that they will rebel. Saddam Hussein maintained control over Iraq from 1979-2003. He was immensely unpopular with Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds until he was overthrown, but he had no difficulty maintaining control. The implication is that ISIL may not need to seek popular support to maintain capacity to control its population and territory.

## German Reich

Some SMEs likened the ISIL movement to Nazi Germany. They argued that the Treaty of Versailles created an escalation of repression, giving rise to revenge ideals, similar to the plight of Sunnis in Eastern Syria and to some extent Western Iraq. Nazi Germany reached a point where it became "self-fertilizing" and able to sustain itself, which ISIL may be poised to do. The Nazis were overcome in World War II by forming a coalition that included regional actors. A similar coalition may be required to defeat ISIL. However, unlike the situation in the 1930s and 1940s, ISIL conducts operations asymmetrically. The main takeaway from this comparison is that continued repression of Sunnis will potentially help to fuel ISIL's drive to greater sustainability. Defeating ISIL will require a united and integrated regional coalition.

## Afghan Taliban

Like the Taliban, ISIL is working to provide elements of governance, particularly in providing law and order. Violence eventually eroded the Taliban's appeal, unless it is always directed at a so-called "other." ISIL, however, is violent against all who disagree. This type of behavior could eventually have

undermining effects. While provision of basic security may facilitate some level of civilian support, continued violence against any who oppose them, regardless of ethnic group, could have a longer term eroding effect.

### **Bolshevik movement**

Like ISIL, the Bolsheviks represented a small, ideologically committed, and solidified group that was able to gain power. They were successful despite their size because they were highly organized. The Bolsheviks took advantage of the vacuum created at the end of World War One, much like ISIL took advantage of the vacuum created by destabilization in Iraq and Syria created by those conflicts. Both the Bolshevik movement and ISIL have a utopian ideology, and uphold it without compromise, in order to overcome perceptions of injustice and victimization. Unlike orthodox Marxists who saw the establishment of a Communist state as a long-term goal, Lenin seized initiative and made it happen right away. This divergence of philosophy and action is very similar to how ISIL approached the establishment of a caliphate as an immediate action, versus al Qaeda's more long-term aspirational end goal. However, Stalin put aside the broader global agenda in order to build state systems and began to act more like a state with a regional and internal focus, similar to how ISIL has taken on a regional and state-building initial focus. One implication of this finding is that organization, commitment, and seizing the initiative may have enabled ISIL's success. However, the degree to which ISIL continues to act like a state may be dependent to some degree upon their ability to retain and further leverage these strengths.

### **Hezbollah**

Like Hezbollah, ISIL has shown itself to be capable of administrative state-building activities, but to a lesser degree than Hezbollah. In addition, both ISIL and Hezbollah train and arm at a very young age, transferring to battle at age 16 or 17. ISIL has also adopted other military tactics used by Hezbollah. Furthermore, like Hezbollah, ISIL does not release the identities of its leaders (except al Baghdadi and Adnani) while they are alive. However, the more these networks look like a nation, the more vulnerable they become to USG capabilities. The implication of this is that ISIL shows some similarities to Hezbollah in intent and action and may share similar vulnerabilities as they continue to pursue state-building activities.

### **Additional comparisons**

1. The Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia – In the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia, so-called “true men of faith” took on the role of overcoming the state, which was considered to be impure or corrupted.
2. Zealots – Jewish zealots (and later the Zealot Party) sought to expel Roman rulers from Palestine. The zealots also were angry with and attacked the Temple priests (Pharisees and Sadducees) who they felt were Roman collaborators who had sold out the true religion. (As they had done elsewhere in the Empire in Palestine The Romans invaded and then Co-opted local leaders—in this case Herod et al on one side and the priests of the Temple of David in Jerusalem on the other.)

## Is ISIL a flash-in-the-pan or durable movement?

We asked the SMEs whether ISIL was a flash in the pan or durable movement. The majority of SMEs argued that ISIL has the potential to be a durable movement. However, what emerged from that conversation was a list of factors that support or challenge ISIL's durability. They are listed and briefly described here.

### ISIL is not durable: Factors that challenge ISIL's durability

#### Lack governing capacity

Some SMEs argued that ISIL does not have sufficient governing capacity (i.e., the knowledge and ability to build institutions) to deal with its neighbors or manage its population in a long-term or stable way. Although they have imposed Sharia law, are able to collect taxes, improve transportation within its controlled areas, and were able to generate a revenue stream from oil sales, ISIL has not proven its ability to establish a sophisticated economy, justice, or bureaucratic system necessary for a nation state. Like the Taliban, ISIL is a "law and order" regime that has simply replaced fractious chaos and corruption with a more structured variant. ISIL has used coercion, not good governance, to control the population. It currently lacks administration, bureaucracy, and provision of services, the kind of technocratic things that are necessary to actually build and maintain a state. That makes them different from a number of other Jihadi groups. Both Hezbollah and Hamas have despite all of their aggressive actions shown themselves much more capable at doing the kind of administrative state building that is necessary to succeed at that task. It is not clear whether ISIL can transition from blood and violence to governance, which requires compromise, something ISIL has been unwilling to do.

#### Lack ties to patron state

Unlike Hezbollah, which was closely linked with Lebanon, ISIL has no formal ties to any other country. There is not a country in the region that openly favors ISIL. Furthermore, the international community is lined up against ISIL. It is not clear whether ISIL can establish a stable government without international recognition or support of any kind.

#### Too harsh

Some SMEs argued that ISIL's brutality would sow the seeds of their own demise. There is some evidence that extreme violence undermines the jihadi cause by alienating the populace. The Muslim Brotherhood is not jihadi, but with the one year of Muslim Brotherhood rule in Egypt, it lost its popular appeal. In another example, when the Egyptian government circulated a picture of a girl, Shayma, that the Egyptian Islamic Jihad killed, it helped turn the tide of popular support against it. Furthermore, in the long term, most Sunnis do not want to live under ISIL's harsh, repressive regime nor do they share ISIL's fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. And unlike other Jihadi groups like Hezbollah or Hamas, ISIL does not have deep ties to or claim to represent a particular, geographically based population.

Additionally, some SMEs argued that revolutionary movements require a constant infusion of blood and victory. It is not clear that ISIL's successes are sustainable. If ISIL ever decides it has to regulate violence in order to govern more effectively, it could ignite a tinderbox. When you get to the stage where rampant brutality is no longer tactically productive, the group might have trouble pacifying fighters who

have become accustomed to violence. Maintaining control over fighters is a pre-requisite for establishing governance.

Some SMEs expressed fear that as ISIL becomes weaker, they will become even more brutal to keep control or get their message across thereby accelerating the process and creating a self-defeating long-term strategy.

### **Already fracturing**

As ISIL has enlarged and strengthened, there has been a growth of broad but shallow relationships. Relationships are expanding, but they are becoming more tenuous. The result is rapid growth in the number of relationships but in a way that lacks cohesion. The implication is ISIL might be relatively easy to fracture, but that does not necessarily imply that the splinter groups will become non-combatants.

ISIL has laid its foundation upon fractious, internecine, and tacit Sunni alliances of convenience. Already, there exists friction between ISIL and the Levant's Jubhat Al Nusrah (JAN), Al Qaeda (AQ), Sufi Brotherhood, or Sunni tribes. Additionally, groups like Baathists in Iraq do not share the same extremist ideology as ISIL adherents. The support ISIL is getting from the local tribes and population is already waning compared to the beginning of June. Baathist and Sunni tribes probably never became devoted actors to ISIL. Once people fuse with a group, they have a very different dynamic than groups that only share short term interests. Furthermore, Sunni tribes historically have flipped sides in several conflicts. There is no reason to think that their allegiance and cooperation with ISIL is enduring in any way.

For example, there are as many as 16 different Sunni Arab groups working alongside ISIL in Mosul alone. But these are alliances of convenience between ISIL, former Baathists, tribes, and radical Islamists. A lot of ISIL's support in Syria and Iraq has been predicated on, "I'll support the enemy of my enemy." That position is not necessarily a direct embrace.

### **Influence is overstated**

The current power and influence of ISIL as projected in the media are highly exaggerated. One factor that corroborates this assessment is the fact that ISIL tries hard to recruit fighters from outside Iraq. If they had strong followers among Sunni Arabs, there would be little need to try so hard to recruit from outside. Also, ISIL has to seemingly provide incentives to tribes and other local power elite to support the movement. SMEs argued that there is little organic ideological support for ISIL among the Iraqi Sunni tribes. There is also some evidence to suggest that ISIL resorts to threats to "lock in" recruits to prevent them from leaving.

### **Has not faced real opposition yet**

ISIL's victories are in a stateless vacuum. Although ISIL has conquered under-governed stateless areas, they are "easy" wins and unlike any future over-stretched and ill-supported ground advance. For example, ISIL could not wage a stand up fight for the Mosul Dam for very long.

### **Unable to expand further**

ISIL has likely hit their apex of territorial gain because they are now essentially surrounded and contained by reasonably well functioning states and other polities such as the Kurds. The notion of a

contagion effect that is going to run over the Sunni-Arab world is vastly overstated and not consistent with the realities on the ground. And if ISIL is in fact contained, then it is easy to target, based on the fact that their cause is tied to creating an Islamic state. As such, they are tied to terrain. And an enemy tied to terrain against the coalition's more advanced technological targeting capabilities makes them much, much easier to target than an organization like Al Qaeda, who was thinking globally and not necessarily tied to terrain the same way ISIL is.

## **ISIL is durable: Factors that enhance ISIL's durability**

### **High levels of recruitment**

ISIL has strong international recruitment rates. It can mobilize across nations and regions to convince people to come to join them.

### **Strong values and narratives**

ISIL draws on strong values and narratives resonant with a small, but significant sector of Sunni Muslims. ISIL holds sacred values, which are a set of transcendental statements that are impossible to verify, according to Scott Atran. That is what makes them so powerful. You cannot reason ISIL's values away and you cannot defeat them with rational arguments. If the group is truly attracting people because of its values, it will continue to grow.

When you look across human history, a group with inferior means will not triumph without a moral imperative. What makes ISIL so powerful, and what is responsible for their stunning victories, is the pull of their ideas. With a fairly small base, ISIL can triumph and dominate.

Scott Atran stated "In 1776, the American colonists had the highest standard of living in the world. Frustrated not over economics, but 'sacred rights' (Thomas Jefferson's original words for the Declaration of Independence), they were willing to sacrifice 'our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor' against the world's mightiest empire. Is our ideal now merely one of 'ease, security, and avoidance of pain,' as Orwell surmised in explaining why Nazism, fascism, and Stalinism had such a stronger pull on engagement and commitment, especially among adventurous youth searching? For the future of liberal democracies, even beyond the threat from violent Jihadis, this may be the core existential issue. "

### **Devoted actors**

Furthermore, Scott Atran argues that like other successful insurgent groups, ISIL has beaten armies far superior to them in terms of resources. The reason they and others are successful is because they are devoted actors that are not susceptible to cost-benefit calculations. "Devoted actors move history. Devoted actors are insensitive to tradeoffs and social influence. We cannot influence them once they are devoted; we can only kill them," Atran stated. Devoted actors also engage in temporal discounting. Future events can be seen as more important than near term events. They are blind to exit strategies; they will refuse to depart from the group.

### **Regional turmoil**

Some experts argued that ISIL would exist as long as the region is in turmoil, particularly Syria.



### **Strong leadership**

Al Baghdadi has strong leadership skills. Furthermore, he has assembled a strong management team. In Syria, they were the only rebel group with a fit, managerial structure. ISIL has a lot of resources and can mobilize their fighters.

### **Success breeds success**

Many experts argued that ISIL's initial and continued success breeds further success. ISIL is able to leverage this narrative in their messaging. As ISIL grows in terms of power and influence, it increases its ability to ensure continued success. Furthermore, people want to join the winning side. Al Qaeda offshoots have started to align with ISIL. Some experts claimed that the Free Syria Army is giving weapons to ISIL and many people are defecting from Jabhat al Nusra to join ISIL.

Thematic analysis conducted by Larry Kuznar at Indiana University found that victory or success is one of the most common themes in speeches by al Adnani and al Baghdadi. Most of the victories mentioned were military successes. He notes that success "seems to be incredibly important...So their success in outreach and garnering support is breeding success. [When] they have a victory, they capitalize on it immediately."

### **Tribes not likely to break with ISIL**

Unlike in the previous section where SMEs argued that Sunni tribes in Iraq and ISIL have diverging long-term goals and are unlikely to remain united over time, other SMEs argued that Sunni tribes and Baathists in Iraq are not likely to break with ISIL without provocation. It seems that ISIL learned a lesson from Al Qaeda and why it has been defeated in Sunni areas. They are trying to avoid any direct conflict or clash with the people and the tribes.

One problem is that the Iraqi & Syrian governments are not offering appealing alternatives to ISIL. There is no alternative for all the Sunnis trapped between Damascus and Baghdad. It is very hard for anyone or any tribe who wants to criticize ISIL to stand up and do it—not only because ISIL will chop them down, but because they do not have an alternative to present, or a better future to present to people who are so dislocated.

### **Enduring grievances**

Sunni grievances are not likely to go away, even if you were to remove ISIL. According to Larry Kuznar, "Divisions within Islam, violent Jihadism and the historical context of conflict between ethnic factions, and resistance against outside forces are important themes manipulated by ISIL to recruit support and justify their actions. Even if ISIL were thoroughly defeated and eliminated from the region entirely, these themes are part of the reality of the region and will remain."

### **Stability**

ISIL does bring some predictability and stability to the people. Particularly in Syria, ISIL has managed to bring a semblance of stability and peace. Criminality has been reigned in and ISIL provides reliable mechanisms of justice and law enforcement.

## How is ISIL different from al Qaeda?

While ISIL and al Qaeda (AQ) share some characteristics and goals, the two groups are substantially different in many respects, including strategic goals, tactics, messaging and recruiting, as well as utilization of social media. ISIL's approach is more aggressive, regionally focused, and in many ways, more sophisticated than is typically the case with al Qaeda.

### Overview

Discussions conducted among subject matter experts regarding ISIL included questions relating to their tactics and strategic goals, as well as an overview of their current brand, including momentum, key elements of their narrative, and means by which their narrative is communicated. Many of the discussions regarding these topics helped to provide insight into critical similarities and differences between ISIL and al Qaeda on each of these topics.

On the surface, there are a number of similarities between the two groups. Both have stated a desire to establish a caliphate, have embraced a strict interpretation of Sunni Islamic doctrine to establish a new moral order, and have used violent methods to achieve their goals. However, upon closer examination, substantial differences between the two organizations emerge across a number of areas, each of which will be discussed below.

### Strategic goals and tactics

The primary differences between al Qaeda and ISIL noted by the SMEs who participated in this effort are summarized in Figure One.

**Figure One: Comparison of Strategic Goals and Tactics**

	al Qaeda	ISIL
Use of territory	Seek safe haven/infiltrate	Seize territory
Focus of jihad	Global	Sectarian/Regional
Targeting	Focus on "far enemy" (USA and West)	Focus on local achievable targets (Muslim world)
Population influence and control	Hearts and minds oriented	Fear oriented based on brutal suppression of dissent
Tribal engagement	Evolved into conflict	Currently based on co-opting and fragile alliances
Outside organization support	Embraced outside organization support	Indifference toward or rejection of outside organization support
Focus of actions	Destruction of enemies	State-building

The most obvious difference noted by SMEs is in use of territory. ISIL controls territory, while al Qaeda does not. Acquisition of territory in the region supports ISIL's version of jihad (regional and sectarian, rather than global), as well as the difference in targeting. While al Qaeda was more focused on the far enemy (Robinson, Braniff), ISIL has thus far focused on regional targets within western Iraq and eastern

Syria, with a focus on targets that present a reasonable probability of success. Within this territory, ISIL maintains control through violent tactics and brutal suppression of opposition, while al Qaeda, at least relatively speaking, has been more concerned with the hearts and minds of those from whom they sought support. However, in contrast to this finding, ISIL has thus far taken a less confrontational stance with Sunni tribes in Iraq compared to the approach taken by al Qaeda. Part of this strategy includes state building messaging and activities, as opposed to al Qaeda's approach of selecting and destroying high profile targets. ISIL also appears less concerned than al Qaeda in building the support of outside groups.

### Branding elements and related goals

In addition to strategic and tactical differences, differences were also noted relating to elements of ISIL's brand image, messaging, and narrative elements. The more notable differences uncovered during the interviews are noted in Figure Two.

**Figure Two: Comparison of Branding Elements and Related Goals**

	al Qaeda	ISIL
<b>Momentum</b>	Trying to create momentum	Riding wave of Arab Spring/Syrian conflict
<b>Image</b>	Cautious	Brash
<b>Usage of Caliphate</b>	As a future end goal	As a current reality, and means to purification
<b>Role of Ideology</b>	Focus on Islamic Law/Dawah	Focus on purification
<b>Call to Action/Reason for Fighting</b>	Fight and die for ultimate long-term cause	Defend and expand current Caliphate, purify Islam

Currently, ISIL has been able to sustain much greater momentum, partly due to riding the wave created by the Arab Spring, as well as the vacuum created in eastern Syria and western Iraq during the Syrian Civil War and the marginalization of Sunnis by the Shia-dominated Maliki regime. al Qaeda, on the other hand, cultivated a more cautious image that portrayed the caliphate as the ultimate long-term goal, while ISIL has taken the more brash approach of creating the beginnings of a caliphate from the start. In other words, while al Qaeda views the establishment of a caliphate as the end goal, ISIL sees it as a means and platform from which to achieve its longer term goals of expansion of influence, and "purification" of what it perceives to be true Islam. Recruits for ISIL are intended to build the caliphate, while al Qaeda recruits are expected to fight and possibly die for the cause.

### Communication and recruiting

ISIL and al Qaeda also show some differences in how they go about communicating to the outside world, in order to build support. The primary examples of these differences noted by the SMEs are outlined in Figure Three.

**Figure Three: Comparison of Communication Methods**

	al Qaeda	ISIL
<b>Languages</b>	Fewer, mostly Arabic	Multi-lingual communications
<b>Social Media Sophistication</b>	Moderate	Highly sophisticated
<b>Message Cycle/Inception to Delivery</b>	Weeks to months	Often within hours
<b>Use of Personalized Messaging</b>	Did not use	Frequently uses

Compared to al Qaeda, ISIL has followed a more aggressive and comprehensive strategy, by publishing communications in multiple languages, including use of personalized messaging. In addition, ISIL's practices show a relatively higher degree of speed of development, along with a more sophisticated social media strategy than what is typically the case for al Qaeda.

### Al Zawahiri vs. al Baghdadi

Social media analysis of Tweets shows that al Baghdadi has a close network compared to al Zawahiri. Tweets about al Zawahiri spanned the spectrum of support to rejection. In other words, there is a much broader diversity of opinions about Zawahiri versus al Baghdadi. The followers of al Baghdadi are far more likely to only reference a small number of people or to reference ideas generated outside a narrow circle of influence.

### Conclusion: ISIL versus al Qaeda

While al Qaeda and ISIL share some general characteristics in terms of ideology and goals, the differences outweigh the similarities. ISIL's control of territory, more aggressive use of violence and intimidation, regional/sectarian focus, and overall branding and communication strategies are markedly different compared to al Qaeda. Therefore, the courses of action that were most effective against al Qaeda may not necessarily have equal effect against ISIL. Any strategies or tactics employed should take into account the operational, ideological, and conditional differences between the two groups. ISIL is a unique organization with unique characteristics. These differences versus al Qaeda should be taken into consideration when developing counter-narratives or courses of action.

### Situational factors contributing to the sustainment of ISIL

In addition to the factors reviewed in prior sections of this report, subject matter experts also helped to provide significant insight into some of the conditional factors that have contributed to the environment that led to ISIL's rise, as well as factors that laid the groundwork for their current recruiting strategies.

Specifically, factors relating to the Arab Spring, Iraqi politics, sociological segmentation, and criticisms of other regimes have, taken together, contributed to an environment that is favorable to ISIL's current level of success. While some of these points have been covered in other sections, a few of the most relevant opinions are repeated here when relevant to the discussion.

## Arab Spring

The Arab Spring, combined with American war-weariness, created a new mindset where it was no longer sufficient for extremist movements to try to incite conflict with the West to overcome current regimes, or to get the US to withdraw. The wave of excitement generated by the Arab Spring created a new feeling of empowerment among Arab youth. With the advent of the 24-hour news cycle and viral social media, disenfranchised people in that part of the world saw a new ability to overcome the status quo.

However, this new energy was not united. In fact, jihadist organizations in many respects failed to seize the moments during this revolution, and found themselves to be mainly spectators. In the end, however, the Arab Spring only partially addressed grievances. Additionally, neither the Arab Spring movement nor al Qaeda succeeded in meeting their respective promises (explicitly made or implied). With the rapid success of ISIL, suddenly this new empowered core of disaffected Arab youth had a tangible example of a state that professed to be the first actual step in re-establishing the glory of the caliphate. ISIL, therefore, had not only an environment that fostered a sense of empowered youth, but also a vacuum of leadership and meaning in which it could thrive.

## Iraqi politics

As noted in prior sections, power in Iraq was primarily held by Shia backed factions. Iran in particular held great sway over events in Baghdad. While the Kurds represented a relatively smaller group within the population, their level of unity and organization made them a very effective bloc within the Iraqi power structure. The Sunnis, however, were not united, and were subject to actions by other factions born of fear of Sunnis returning to power.

## Sociological segmentation (converts & criminals)

Within certain parts of Western society, a few segments emerged that proved to be particularly susceptible to ISIL's narrative. One segment was made up of former prison inmates, who had supposedly been de-radicalized, but still ended up joining ISIL. Along with former radicals, gang members also showed a willingness to make the journey.

Segments that are vulnerable to ISIL extend beyond current and former criminals. For example, first-generation jihadists who were influenced by organizations such as al-Muhajiroun already identified with this counter-culture, and also proved vulnerable. These groups were eventually joined by women and youths who went to help build the new society.

In addition, converts from secular backgrounds in some cases proved to be quite impressionable and malleable. Those who have recently converted to Sunni Islam may lack the alternative or religious landmarks that come with being raised in a particular faith. Experts suggested that in some cases, these converts are often willing to relocate in order to find meaning and purpose. Taken in combination, these different factors may also create a desire to demonstrate commitment, which in turn can lead to a willingness to commit brutal atrocities to show loyalty and dedication.

Youth that are seeking glory and a sense of moral virtue, who travel with groups of friends, also represent a very idealistic group of recruits, whose journey to find virtue in this case unfortunately results in becoming involved in extreme violence.

### **Criticisms of other regimes**

Frustration with the current situations in other Middle Eastern countries may also be fomenting support for ISIL. For example, in Lebanon, a sense of frustration with Hezbollah's hegemony and actions may lead Sunnis to seek ways to create a better balance against Shia dominated groups. Others who were loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood may see ISIL as the best means for restoring Muslim glory. The proliferation of failed states in the region, including Afghanistan, Libya, Syria and Iraq, has created a level of turmoil that allows arms and other means of support to find its way to ISIL.

### **Conclusions**

While these factors certainly do not represent the sum total of all conditional dynamics that are fueling ISIL's success, they do represent additional themes that were pointed out by the SMEs that took part in this effort. Understanding the contextual background that lies behind the actions taking place can help to provide a more holistic view of the current situation.

## Appendix A: Invitation Letter to SMEs

MEMORANDUM FOR SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS

SUBJECT: (U) INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN THE “MULTI-METHOD ANALYSIS OF ISIL” EFFORT

The emergence of the crisis in Iraq and Syria raises new questions about the future of Iraq, Syria, and the region. In response, the Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) Office<sup>5</sup> has initiated a “Quick Look”<sup>6</sup> study to engage academics and experts from across the globe in understanding the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) movement. We are reaching out to you as a subject matter expert on this topic.

Our objective is to better understand the true nature of the ISIL. We need to better understand the intangible things that make ISIL so compelling and dangerous. We seek to answer the following basic questions.

*What makes ISIL so magnetic, inspirational, and deeply resonant with a specific but large portion of the Islamic population, particularly young men looking for a banner to flock to?*

*What are the narrative, ideological, cultural, emotional, and psychological bases of ISIL’s appeal?*

We have drafted an initial question list (below) to guide the conversation. Please note that no one person has the answer to all of these questions, and there is no right answer. However, we are interested in understanding the range of perspectives on these issues and hope you can bring your knowledge to bear on revealing new insights, understanding, and points of view.

Also included in this document is a summary of a recent meeting with Defense planners that provides additional context for this study. Please do not distribute these notes.

Meg Egan and Sarah Canna (cc'd) will be contacting you shortly to see if you are willing to spend 60-90 minutes talking to us about ISIL within the next few weeks. Please direct any questions to Meg and Sarah.<sup>7</sup>

I look forward to speaking with you.

<sup>5</sup> SMA provides planning support to Commands with complex operational imperatives requiring multi-agency, multi-disciplinary solutions that are NOT within core Service/Agency competency. Solutions and participants are sought across USG and beyond. SMA is accepted and synchronized by Joint Staff/J-39 DDGO and executed by ASD(R&E)/EC&P/RRTO.

<sup>6</sup> Quick Looks are concise, rapid, and insightful responses to immediate information needs based on interviews with leading subject matter experts from across academia, inter-agency, NGOs, and think tanks. These experts provide the breadth and depth of understanding and, at times, the unique perspectives necessary to gain a nuanced understanding of an issue, challenge assumptions, prevent groupthink, and ultimately provide decision makers with actionable insights on an issue.

<sup>7</sup> Meg Egan [margaret.j.egan2.ctr@mail.mil](mailto:margaret.j.egan2.ctr@mail.mil) and Sarah Canna [scanna@nsiteam.com](mailto:scanna@nsiteam.com)

R/

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# Question List

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## Who and what is the Islamic State (ISIL)?

1. What is ISIL's strategic objective? Is it simply to create a caliphate in Syria and Iraq or is more far-reaching?
2. What is ISIL's primary grievance?
3. What is ISIL's main narrative(s)?
  - a. How does ISIL use its narrative(s) to justify violence?
  - b. What are the meaningful stories and narratives that resonate with ISIL adherents?
    - i. What historical stories/events have a significant place within ISIL?
    - ii. What do these stories say about the larger beliefs and values of ISIL?
    - iii. How does ISIL's narrative differ from that of other Islamic extremist groups, such as al Qaeda
4. Who does ISIL consider its main audiences to be (see list below)? What message(s) does it want to convey to them and how does it do so? Can messages have different meaning to different populations (e.g., the beheading of Foley)? Other examples?
  - a. Global Sunni community (particularly young men)
  - b. Internal factions
  - c. Government of Iraq & Syria
  - d. Foreign governments (US, UK, etc.)
  - e. Populations under its control or in danger of becoming so
  - f. Others?
5. What are the self-identified ways ISIL says they are different from other groups?
6. Are there fault lines within ISIL? How likely are these fault lines to jeopardize ISIL's success?
7. How would you describe individual ISIL fighters? Are they primarily a well-educated, elitist group or are they drawn from downtrodden, victimized populations?
8. Are there any distinguishing features of ISIL in Iraq vs. Syria? Does ISIL operate differently or adjust their strategic communications in each region?
9. Are there any redlines ISIL cannot cross without alienating one or more of its key audiences?
10. Some say ISIL is sowing the seeds of its own destruction through their brutal tactics, but history is replete with examples of ruthless movements becoming triumphant. Do you think ISIL will succumb to internal pressures or does it have lasting power?
11. We are conducting a series of case studies (e.g., of al Qaeda, the Taliban, the Bolsheviks, National Socialists-Nazis) to try to gain perspective on ISIL success thus far (in terms of capturing territory, gaining resources, drawing recruits, etc.) compared to other ideologically driven

groups. Do you have any insights about the roots of ISIL success, say versus Al Qaeda's rise, or the Nazi party in the 1930s?

## Understanding the ISIL social movement

1. Is ISIL an inspirational social/ideological movement?
2. If so, what makes it so magnetic, inspirational, and deeply resonant with a specific, but large, portion of the Islamic population, particularly young men looking for a banner to flock to?
3. Why is ISIL's ideological narrative apparently so powerful?
4. Some of ISIL's support seems to derive in part from a perception that they are doing what no other group has done before them—that they are a vanguard of a historical change. Could you explain how ISIL is perceived to be different/better than other groups? What is so historic/exceptional about their rise?
5. What are ISIL's sacred values?
6. Why is ISIL seemingly so successful in tapping into common grievances amongst Sunni Muslims at home and worldwide?
7. How does ISIL use social media to convey its messages to target audiences (e.g., ISIL kittens for pre-teens, images to induce secondary traumatization, etc.)?
8. AQAP and Boko Haram have pledged support to ISIL. How and why is ISIL inspiring other extremist groups?
9. How does ISIL dehumanize other groups?

# Context for the Multi-Method Assessment of the Islamic State (ISIL) Study

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## Background

On 24 August 2014, the SMA *Multi-Method Assessment of the Islamic State (ISIL) Study* received guidance from Defense planners asking the team to refocus the effort on understanding the true nature of IS and why the movement is so compelling to so many. This document provides a partial summary of the meeting, which we hope will provide useful context to subject matter experts being interviewed for the effort. Please do not distribute this document further.

### *Key Question:*

What makes IS so magnetic, inspirational, and deeply resonant with a specific, but large, portion of the Islamic population that allows it to draw

- recruitment of foreign fighters;
- money & weapons;
- advocacy;
- general popularity; and
- support from other groups such as AQAP and Boko Haram?

There is a magnetic attraction to ISIL that is bringing in resources, talent, etc. that is emboldening ISIL in alarming ways. We do not understand the psychological, ideological, narrative emotional, cultural and inspirational (“intangible”) nature of IS.

## Recap of guidance from planners

We are facing a nightmare that we do not understand. We understand some of its contours, but we do not understand the full nature of the adversary. Understanding ISIL is not unachievable, but it will require an enormous amount of work. Before we deal with the problem, we have to understand the problem, which we currently do not.

As this conversation with SMA evolves, concern remains whether we can marshal sufficient intellectual horsepower across an enterprise to understand what we are grappling with. Our knowledge is woefully inadequate.

We need to understand the intangible things that make ISIL so dangerous. What makes IS so magnetic, inspirational, and deeply resonant with a specific but large portion of the Islamic population, particularly young men looking for a banner to flock to? While I am concerned about their IEDs or advanced weaponry (although they have a lot) and their foot soldiers & campaigning (all of which is pretty impressive)...and the fact are beating everyone on the battlefield including the Syrian army...I’m far/far more concerned about how “Inspirational” ISIL has become. It is this intangible part of the enterprise that is drawing money, foreign fighters, advocacy, and popularity. What is additionally concerning is that

ISIL is inspiring other extremist groups to emulate them. We have seen members of AQAP and Boko Haram pledge allegiance to IS.

ISIL is drawing thousands of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria. Many are coming from outside the Levant. There is a magnetic attraction to IS that is bringing in resources, talent, weapons, etc. to thicken, harden, embolden IS in ways that are very alarming. It all rotates around this intangible aspect. It also plays to some of our weaknesses. We do not deal with intangibles very well. There is a saying that you solve the problem you understand, not the problem you cannot see. Understanding the ideological and inspirational nature of ISIL is our biggest intellectual deficit.

A smart enemy will turn small achievements to their advantage. They are already trying to do so. They are claiming that the US killed innocent people in our airstrikes. They are not done with their shaping campaign and neither are we. We are going to become more and more vulnerable as our involvement increases. The problem is that we do not understand them well enough to anticipate how we are going to achieve mission success.

We need to engage in a long-term conversation in an effort to achieve a commonly held view of the psychological, emotional, and cultural power of IS in terms of a diversity of audiences. ISIL is incredibly persuasive

Some have understandably challenged this view. They say, “Look at their brutal tactics, look at the Sunni tribes who regret working with them.” They believe ISIL is sowing the seeds of their own destruction. My response is that history is replete with examples of ruthless movements becoming triumphant. If you are ruthless enough, you can discipline anyone to stay at your side. To understand how IS has become so influential and how this relates to their ruthlessness, we need people who are experts in the art of persuasion. ISIL is drawing people to them in droves. There are IS T-shirts and mugs. We need people born and raised in the region to be part of the conversation. There is no way to understand the situation without this. We are interested in experimenting to the point that we find out what does not work.

When people use words like cowardly, barbaric, murder, outrageous, shocking etc. to describe a violent extremist organization’s actions, we are playing right into the enemy’s hands. That is exactly how they want us to react. They want us to become emotional. They revel in being called murderers when the words are coming from an apostate. The rationale being that if an apostate is angry with me, then that increases my purity. That makes me more a member of the faithful. We have to remember that most of their messaging is not for us. We are not the target. They are happy to see us outraged, but they are really communicating to people we are being drawn to their banner. The audience was all of the 19-28 year old Muslim males who are thinking of joining ISIL. These guys portray that they are so hardcore that al Qaeda rejected them. They have a lot of money. They have a country. They are in striking distance of 2 of what are arguably the most important 4 geographic icons of the Muslim culture—Baghdad and Damascus. ISIL creates the perception that they are offering frustrated and disenfranchised Muslim youth a purpose and calling that no one else can.

We do not understand the movement and until we do, we are not going to defeat it.

We do not want to make this study too big. We do not want to understand everything about IS. It is too large. We want to understand the intangible aspects. We can find other ways to learn about patterns of life or physical actions. We have a gaping hole in our capability to understand why.

What we are asking for is a little bit of competitive analysis. Why is ISIL as inspirational as it currently appears to be? Try to orchestrate a set of products from difference organizations to answer this question. Then give them to us to digest. We will learn some things we do not know now.