The Meaning of ISIS Defeat & Shaping Stability
Highlights from CENTCOM Round 1, 2 and 3 Reach-back Reports[1]

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Conclusion

ISIS will be defeated militarily. However, whether it is ultimately overcome by containment or by deploying ground forces to apply overwhelming force, the path to mitigating violent extremism in the region is a generations-long one. Military options are insufficient to protect US interests and stabilize the region. It will require significant strengthening of State Department and non-DoD capacity to help build inclusive political institutions and processes that protect minority rights in Syria and Iraq. Only if these flourish will ISIS -- the organization and the idea it represents -- have failed and the region been put on a sustainable path to stability.

Since September 2016 the Strategic Multi-layer Assessment (SMA)[2] team has pulsed its global network of academics, think tank scholars, former ambassadors, and experienced practitioners to respond to three rounds of questions by USCENTCOM.[3] We received responses from 164 experts from institutions in the US, Iraq, Spain, Israel, the UK, Lebanon, Canada, France and Qatar. [4] The result was 41 individual reach-back reports, each of which consists of an executive summary and the input received from the experts.

This report summarizes key points from the first three rounds of questions. It compiles what the experts had to say about three critical questions: 1) Will military defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq eliminate the threat it poses? 2) What are the implications of ISIS defeat for regional stability? and 3) What should the US/Coalition do to help stabilize the region?

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[2] Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment (SMA) provides planning support to Commands with complex operational imperatives requiring multi-agency, multi-disciinary 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.

[3] The complete list of expert contributors to Rounds 1-3 reports can be found at the end of this report.

[4] Each of these reports as well as compendia of reports organized by theme is available at: http//nsiteam.com/sma-reachback-cell.

Question #1: Will physical defeat of ISIS eliminate the threat?

No. Military defeat will not eliminate the threat: ISIS ideology will remain salient, lessons-learned will help refine activities of next-gen jihadis.

The unequivocal response from over 60 experts who responded to relevant questions is, in a word, "No." While there is always a chance that loss of its territory would eliminate both the ISIS organization and ideology, the experts believe that the salience of ISIS's violent extremist ideology and teachings and, just as importantly, the example its successes offers to would-be extremists around the globe (e.g., its business-like and adaptable leadership structure, innovations in communicating messages locally and abroad, rapid mobilization and organization of fighters from around the globe)—will persist for some time. There are also lessons to be learned from ISIS failures that groups like Al Qaeda and future violent jihadists can use to refine their own strategies and tactics. In short, even if ISIS the organization seems to disappear, we should expect its ideas and practices to remain.

Specifically, two types of ISIS information can, and most likely will, continue to be transmitted following military defeat: *inspirational* information regarding the group's ideology and teachings, and *educational* information that conveys the innovations and lessons that others might take from ISIS's processes and tactics. The experts cited two main propagation vectors: human and cyber.

People will continue to circulate inspirational and educational ISIS information.

After the defeat of ISIS, fighters and supporters are likely to bring their radical extremist beliefs and training with them. ISIS and ISIS-inspired ideas are likely to find a home among aggrieved Sunni populations; in areas in which the population is already familiar with, or sympathetic to, Salafist beliefs; and where there is political unrest and weakened governance or policing and porous borders. Many ISIS fighters are local and likely would prefer to stay in Iraq, Syria, or close by in Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey. This is especially the case because, as a number of experts believe, the majority is not ideologically or religiously motivated, but came to ISIS for jobs or security. However, many SMA contributors expect ISIS's remaining fighters to attempt to flee Syria and Iraq—if they have not already, and disperse across a broad area in the Middle East, Germany, the UK, France, and locations in North Africa[5] where there is already a violent extremist presence. Still, if conditions at home have not changed, former ISIS fighters could return to pre-Caliphate insurgent tactics or form urban sleeper cells to await another regional crisis to exploit.

Young men remain the target of recruitment—but the job may be easier as violent Salafism becomes "normal."

The target population for recruitment will still be young men across the Arab world and Europe. Sadly, researchers have uncovered evidence that this group is beginning to show increased complacence toward ISIS and ISIS-inspired ideas and in particular justifications of its inhumane and violent practices. Having lived most of their formative years witnessing (directly or from afar) civil wars and sectarian atrocities, it should not be surprising that the violence and dehumanizing beliefs that may have shocked their parents appear to these young men as less outrageous or even "normal." We should not forget that the group that is now ISIS has already reinvented itself twice before: first by joining with Al Qaeda in 2004 to become Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and second, although all but defeated in that guise in 2010, by reemerging in Syria, splitting with Al Qaeda, and rebranding itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The second, more insidious conduit of ISIS extremist ideology and tactics is cyberspace, which will preserve information from and about ISIS in circulation well beyond its physical presence.

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[5] Libya, Algeria, Yemen, the Sinai, and Tunisia were the most commonly mentioned areas in Northern Africa.

There are an estimated 50 million servers in the world. ISIS's broad virtual presence—the vast corpus of materials: tweets, videos, e-magazines, instruction manuals, sermons, and speeches remaining on those servers and downloaded onto personal systems—experts believe, will be accessible on the web for decades to come. Even if these materials were found and removed, the communications specialists who created the slick look and feel and highly emotive content of its magazines and videos could easily apply these skills to recreate the same message production and distribution techniques from nearly any location on the globe.

Question #2: What are the implications of ISIS defeat for stability in the region?

The balance of expert responses that touched on this issue suggest that the impact of defeat of ISIS will at most result in a marginal reduction in regional conflict, but is more likely to prompt increased intra- and inter-sectarian warfare. This is because, despite what many in the US might like to believe, neither military defeat nor even delegitimization of ISIS's ideology would do anything to address the regional rivalries, territorial disputes, and sectarian hostility that generated the conditions within which ISIS emerged in Iraq and reemerged in Syria. ISIS was the beneficiary, not the cause, of civil conflict in Syria and Iraq. In both cases, the root causes were dysfunctional governance, a lack of economic opportunities, years of violent government repression, and political disenfranchisement of Sunnis and other minorities by non-Sunni governors. Neither physical nor ideological defeat of ISIS addresses any of these grievances. SMA experts argue that support for ISIS among Sunnis in Syria and Iraq was largely driven by these social grievances, not by religion or ideology. If nothing changes in the lives of these populations—if their security and economic opportunities do not improve and if the governments that replace ISIS in Mosul, Raqqah, and elsewhere are discriminatory toward them—we should expect sectarian violence to continue.

The fight against ISIS has shifted local and regional politics and power structures. In Syria, experts argue that sectarianism, the attractiveness of Salafism and Sunni-Shi'a animosity have surfaced where there had been little before. In Iraq, the relative prestige, influence, and wealth of certain families, clans, or militias has grown in many cases at the expense of traditional power brokers. If not managed carefully—for example, if mass civilian casualties are allowed in Mosul and Raqqah or sectarian forces commit atrocities against other groups, if minority voices or Islamists are excluded from post-conflict settlements, or if Syrians and Iraqis see little evidence that their governments will undertake meaningful reform—the military defeat of ISIS would have removed a common enemy and signaled to groups (e.g., various Kurdish factions or Shi'a militias in Iraq, Syria Democratic Forces in Syria) that US/Coalition assistance may soon be in short supply and it is time to solidify control of territory gained (or regain areas lost) as a result of the counter-ISIS fight. The political battles to do so could easily lead to civil warfare in Iraq and escalation in Syria.

Similarly, the defeat of ISIS in and of itself will have done little to eliminate the reciprocal security threat perceptions and thus temper the behavior and persistent use of regional proxies by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Likewise, Pakistan's actions will remain primarily a reflection of the perceived threat from India, and despite changes in tactics, and the threat

posed to Turkish security and sovereignty by Kurdish groups will remain its focus regardless of whether ISIS is defeated.

To be fair, multiple political reform and national reconciliation programs have been put forward in Iraq. However, none has yet produced signs of meaningful change and/or evidence to challenge the belief of many Iraqis that the government plans to revert to the "Shi'a first" status *quo ante bellum* following ISIS defeat. A number of factors serve as impediments to effective reconciliation efforts in Iraq including: weak support for President Abadi among hardline Shi'a who see little reason to share power with Sunni Iraqis, the lack of a dominant Sunni leadership or a common Sunni agenda, interference in Iraqi politics by regional actors (e.g., Saudi Arabia-Iran, Turkey-Kurds) who use Iraq to pursue their own agendas, and the Iraqi Government's sizeable budget deficit that leaves limited resources for reconciliation and reconstruction efforts.

Without efforts to address underlying causes of conflict, Syria and Iraq remain weak, conflict-prone, and attractive terrorist havens— regardless of ISIS defeat.

Without significant non-kinetic efforts to manage the other conflicts in and around Syria and Iraq, even removing ISIS would be insufficient to erase the attractiveness of the area as a weakly-governed, conflict-prone terrorist safe haven. Again, ISIS's defeat does little to address the core issues that caused civil conflicts in both Syria and Iraq. Without political and governance reforms we should expect elimination of ISIS to bring the serious political issues and long-standing rivalries in domestic Iraqi affairs into high relief. It is very possible that even if militarily necessary and ultimately successful, Iraqi Sunnis would perceive operations to defeat ISIS as yet another Western attack on Sunni Islam. Without prior credible political reforms to convince them to the contrary, the result could be to further alienate Sunni Arabs and undermine international efforts to help stabilize Iraq. If this is the case, the battle against ISIS fighters may have been won, but the war against political and sectarian violence in Iraq and Syria and extremism and regional instability would have been lost.

Question #3: What should the US/Coalition do to help stabilize the region?

Close the US "Say-Do Gap"—at this point in US relations in the Middle East, actions speak much, much louder than words.

After decades of involvement in war from Kuwait to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, it should not be surprising that many people in the region see the US as much of a threat to their security as ISIS. Tellingly, the experts report that the narrative that "the US/West is at war against Islam" remains very prominent and credible across Syria and Iraq, and the US is not even seen as a stable or consistent friend by the Kurdish or Sunni tribal groups it supports. In an environment of mistrust and fear, actions are the most potent messages and no amount of "counter-messaging" will change an antagonistic local narrative that appears to be reinforced by US actions. What experts referred to as the US "say-do gap" diminishes US credibility in the region. Unfortunately, at this point, there may be little US military forces can do to change this. Three areas where USCENTCOM may help shape events to encourage stability are offered below.

1) Carefully manage Coalition partners, antagonists and rivals

SMA experts often observed that the ways in which affairs in post-liberation areas are handled will be as important as how the battle for liberation was fought. The US and Coalition partners appear to be doing a good job of managing the latter in Iraq, for example, by helping to keep Iraqi security forces at the front of the battle and otherwise managing which units

4

are fighting in Mosul. Many experts feel that it is probably too late for the US to have much influence over the future of Syria; however, it should attempt to manage the same kinds of sensitivities (and encourage Russia and Turkey to do the same) in Raqqah. In both cases, it is imperative to that the expectations of fighting forces and newly liberated populations are managed and anticipated jockeying for control of liberated territory is curtailed.

External rivalries and agendas are important sources of local actions in Syria and Iraq. In particular, the animosity between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the practice of interference in the security and political issue of other states (directly as in Yemen or via proxies as in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere) is one of the surest ways to reignite regional conflict. Encouraging Saudi Arabia to work toward slightly warmer relations between itself and Iran may help to temper some of the competition, mutual mistrust, and perceived threat that has perpetuated regional conflict for years.

2) Provide and facilitate humanitarian and reconstruction aid

The experts tended to agree that providing assistance for basic human needs like shelter, food, water, and emergency healthcare must be an immediate priority following liberation of ISIS-controlled areas. However, quickly establishing mechanisms to deliver a more comprehensive range of social services (e.g., sanitation, rule of law, and justice) and facilitate reconstruction will be equally important to stabilize the locations and populations traumatized by ISIS and the warfare to defeat it. Given Iraq's budget deficit, huge amount of destruction and displacement much more aid than has been promised by the international community will be required. USCENTCOM may find some ways to assist in establishing immediate and longer-term social services while following two principles: provision of social services and reconstruction must be perceived locally as 1) equitable and not favoring one group over another and 2) free from corruption.

3) Encourage local and decentralized post-ISIS governance

Again, experts generally were not optimistic about US ability to influence events in Syria. However, many felt that USCENTCOM and other US government entities have a role to play in encouraging post-liberation calm for example by helping to negotiate multi-group security arrangements, prohibit retribution, and help to determine and monitor procedures for return of displaced persons. A theme frequently repeated by experts was the hyper-locality of the roots of conflict in Syria and Iraq. Two of the endemic challenges to stability in the Near East and Gulf region are intra- and inter-sectarian and intra- and inter-ethnic antagonism and aggression, and we would be wise to appreciate that the relationships between kinship groups and civil society and opposition groups are more fluid and more fraught than we often think. The Sunni, the Kurds and Shi'a in Syria and Iraq are not unitary actors but subject to strong intra-group tensions. In fact, some experts argue that intra-group conflicts are the greater threat to regional stability than the more obvious between-groups rifts. Experts fear that Sunni leaders' efforts to consolidate political power could spark tribal conflict and competing perspectives on Iraqi governances could provoke violence between the Shi'a mainstream and hardliners.

As a result, reformed governance structures must be equally local and empowered to address residents' grievances effectively. One of the greatest fears of Sunni Iraqis is that Shi'a militias will again be allowed to harass and abuse them. Care must be taken to insure

that particularly in Iraq, the identities and agendas of all post-ISIS political groups are accounted for. One way to do this is to bring all actors to the table in any resolution or reconciliation talks. If their interests are not served, actors not at the table can easily play the spoiler role.

Paradoxically, decentralization is one of the most direct ways for the Iraqi central government to gain the legitimacy it needs to remain strong and stable. One of the main challenges here will be the disincentive to the Abadi Government—unless pushed by the threat of increased violence—of devolving sufficient power to Sunni and Kurdish areas to provide for acceptable local governance. Prime Minister Abadi or other "moderate" Shi'a leader in Iraq walks a thin line between the hardline elements within the Shi'a support base and international political pressure to decentralize power in Iraq to better represent Kurdish and Sunni voices. There may be little the US can do to encourage policies that are stabilizing, or even discourage those like legal inclusion of Shi'a militias in the Iraqi national security forces, that are less than optimal for stabilizing civil conflict in Iraq.

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Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois is Executive Vice President at NSI, Inc. She has also served as co-chair of a National Academy of Sciences study on Strategic Deterrence Military Capabilities in the 21st Century, and as a primary author on a study of the Defense and Protection of US Space Assets. Dr. Astorino-Courtois has served as technical lead on a variety of rapid turn-around, Joint Staff-directed Strategic Multi-layer Assessment (SMA) projects in support of US forces and Combatant Commands. These include assessments of key drivers of political, economic and social instability and areas of resilience in South Asia; development of a methodology for conducting provincial assessments for the ISAF Joint Command; production of a "rich contextual understanding" (RCU) to supplement intelligence reporting for the ISAF J2 and Commander; and projects for USSTRATCOM on deterrence assessment methods.

Previously, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a Senior Analyst at SAIC (2004-2007) where she served as a STRATCOM liaison to U.S. and international academic and business communities. Prior to SAIC, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a tenured Associate Professor of International Relations at Texas A&M University in College Station, TX (1994-2003) where her research focused on the cognitive aspects of foreign policy decision making. She has received a number of academic grants and awards and has published articles in multiple peer-reviewed journals. She has also taught at Creighton University and as a visiting instructor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Dr. Astorino-Courtois earned her Ph.D. in International Relations and MA in and Research Methods from New York University. Her BA is in political science from Boston College. Finally, Dr. Astorino-Courtois also has the distinction of having been awarded both a US Navy Meritorious Service Award and a US Army Commander's Award.