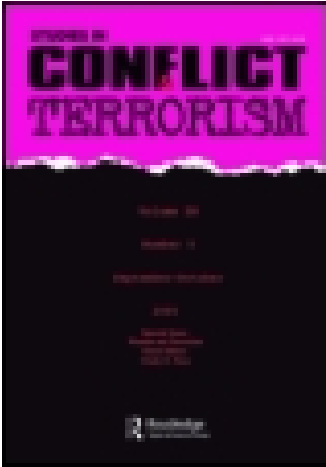


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### Countering the Islamic State: U.S. Counterterrorism Measures

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## Research Note

# Countering the Islamic State: U.S. Counterterrorism Measures

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*This research note discusses the tactics and strategies of the United States to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) from the onset of Operation Inherent Resolve beginning on 8 August 2014 and continuing into early 2015. Through both kinetic and non-kinetic actions, the United States and its coalition has sought to degrade and defeat ISIL. But how effective have these measures been with regard to the group's ability to maintain control over parts of the Iraqi population and territory? ISIL's fast growing affiliate network poses a unique challenge and this study suggests that the kinetic measures of Operation Inherent Resolve have weakened ISIL's tactical capabilities but U.S. efforts to stem the group's recruitment have not been as successful.*

Until the fall of Mosul on 6 June 2014 the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), also known as the Islamic State (IS), had predominantly limited its operations to attacking the Assad Regime and other resistance factions within the Syrian territories. However, ISIL's capabilities soon allowed its fighters to quickly overrun and capture large swaths of Iraqi territory including areas outside Mosul and entire districts in the provinces of Diyala, Salahaddin, and Anbar. The retreat of the U.S.-trained and equipped Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) from highly populated Sunni districts allowed ISIL to advance to 35 kilometers outside of the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. ISIL's success in this advance depended heavily on its understanding of the Iraqi demographics, having operated previously during the U.S. occupation as a part of Al Qaeda, known as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). The tactical advance toward Baghdad, coupled with ISIL's capture and beheading of American citizens, pressured the United States and its allies to take actions against this imminent threat. Due to ISIL's effective tactics and strategies incorporating local Sunni insurgent groups, the U.S.-led campaign has undertaken both counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies that incorporate both kinetic and non-kinetic measures to ultimately "degrade and destroy" ISIL. In 2015 these measures successfully slowed the advance of ISIL in Iraq,

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and the March offensive to retake Tikrit has thus proved to be the first successful large-scale ISF offensive against ISIL.

This article will discuss the counterterrorism measures of the U.S.-coordinated campaign against ISIL during the time period from fall 2014 until early spring 2015. This study utilizes four main parameters to focus its analysis. First, the analysis is limited to the fight against ISIL in Iraq. While ISIL holds strategic bases in Syria, especially its “capital,” Raqqa, this article prioritizes the fight against ISIL in Iraq due to U.S. strategic interests in Iraq. Additionally, while fighting ISIL relies on counterterrorism measures, this analysis will not engage in the debate of the definition of terrorism because the semantics of the definition of terrorism are outside of the immediate threat ISIL poses. Moreover, this article will not discuss counterinsurgency efforts due to the different tactics and strategies being used. Finally, this research is based on open source information and therefore it will not address the efficacy of any covert countermeasures against ISIL.

### **Kinetic Engagement**

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant threatens Iraq, the Middle East, and the rest of the world due to its ability to quickly seize territory, its comprehensive recruiting abilities, and its ranking as the most well-funded *jihadi* terrorist organization with its daily income of US \$1 to 2 million.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the United States formed a coalition to fight ISIL. Composed of twenty-eight North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members, twenty-three NATO partners, and eight independent countries, fifty-one countries are contributing in various ways to the fight. Directly related to counterterrorism, Albania, Australia, Bulgaria, Canada, The Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, The United Kingdom, and the United States pledged military support including weapons, ammunition, and equipment.<sup>2</sup> Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Norway, Singapore, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States have sent military advisors to train allies in Iraq and Syria.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, fourteen countries pledged aircraft to counter ISIL in Syria and Iraq. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iraq, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States are all conducting airstrikes specifically in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> (There are also thirty-six countries that guaranteed humanitarian aid to the people of Iraq and Syria.<sup>5</sup>) The Iraqi government offered its full support and cooperation to this coalition in the ongoing combat operations.

In order to combat ISIL, the U.S.-led coalition has undertaken several varying efforts within “Operation Inherent Resolve.” Perhaps most well known are the kinetic tactics. In 2014 the United States conducted 1,411 sorties with at least one weapon release<sup>6</sup> and coordinated over 163 strikes with its allies. As of 19 November 2014, 561 strikes were conducted in Iraq and 445 in Syria. Strikes in Raqqa, Kobani, Mosul, Ramadi, Tal Afar, Fallujah,<sup>7</sup> and others targeted more than 2,300 ISIL targets including 700 ISIL-occupied buildings, 380 fighting positions, 260 vehicles, and 180 “black market oil-related targets.”<sup>8</sup> These numbers increased to 75 tanks, 285 HMMWVs, 441 staging areas, 1,689 buildings, 1,166 fighting positions, 151 oil infrastructures, and 1,977 other targets for a total of 5,784 targets damaged or destroyed as of 8 April 2015.<sup>9</sup> Secretary of State Kerry characterized these strikes as “astonishingly accurate” in a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing on 17 September 2014.

In spite of the success of these strikes, the strikes have also inspired ISIL to reevaluate and modify its modus operandi. Prior to the U.S.-led aerial targeting, ISIL used “rapid action marches” to overwhelm and overrun Iraqi towns and cities with its superior numbers, despite ISF’s superior and more modern weapon capabilities.<sup>10</sup> ISIL attacks also

utilized Iraq's road network to bring a large number of vehicles and personnel to the attack location a rapidly coordinated movement. However, since strikes began, ISIL has been forced to move its fighters in smaller tactical teams. Therefore, the strikes continue to inhibit large-scale attacks like the "hundreds of armed utility vehicles" that attacked Mosul on 6 June 2014,<sup>11</sup> but forcing ISIL fighters into smaller groups will obscure obvious targets and will make any further progress from the air more difficult.<sup>12</sup> Due to the targeting of ISIL training and meeting facilities in both Syria and Iraq, the strikes have had a second unintended consequence of driving ISIL into Turkey to plan their attacks. Reports indicate that when the strikes commenced in June, ISIL cells planned attacks on Kobani, Syria from inside Turkey,<sup>13</sup> and because the United States does not have the authority or political will to begin striking targets inside Turkish airspace, the strikes will not halt all ISIL attacks.

In addition to changing the location of its planning, ISIL has also reportedly set up training camps for youth, some of whom were kidnapped from captured towns.<sup>14</sup> While the released videos remain unverified, the training camps are shown to be located in Ninewa province in Iraq and in Aleppo and Raqqah in Syria. These camps allegedly train children in hand-to-hand combat, weapons handling, and infantry tactics as well as teach Quran and Hadith. In total, ISIL has twelve known training camps in Iraq and fifteen in Syria.<sup>15</sup> While reports have not been verified on the actual purpose of these camps, their emergence could be interpreted as either propaganda to ISIL followers or ISIL's reaction to heavy losses and its need to replenish troop numbers. The answer may be a combination of both cases but ultimately, the continued emergence of new camps is a direct consequence of the U.S.-led strikes on ISIL.

In combination with coordinated strikes against ISIL, the United States and its allies have undertaken various intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions (ISR), starting in June 2014. Flying thirty to thirty-five flights a day in manned and unmanned aircrafts has substantially assisted the fight against ISIL by tracking troop movements and collecting intelligence for strikes.<sup>16</sup> This intelligence is then transferred to Iraqi and Kurdish ground troops via the U.S.-Iraqi joint operation command in Baghdad. However, sources from the Department of Defense have reported that with no U.S. combat troops on the ground, the ISR missions can only achieve limited success because of the difficulty of identifying ground activities of ISIL.<sup>17</sup> One source stated: "Unless ISIS is actually flying a flag that says ISIS across the top if it . . . these guys are trying to determine with everything that we have available given the restrictions that are placed on us . . . how do we positively identify where we're going or who we're going to hit?"<sup>18</sup>

However, the Air Force's Distributed Common Ground System (DCGS weapon system) is capable of "produc[ing] information from the data collected in the skies in just minutes" and is substantially helping in the collection of intelligence.<sup>19</sup>

Accurate intelligence and airstrikes have resulted in the decline of the organization's morale and its ability to control its ranks. Intelligence and successful attacks have created paranoia among ISIL members and the group has begun executing some of its own fighters for allegedly providing information to the U.S. and Iraqi forces. Just as the continued targeting of Al Qaeda brought paranoia to the group and helped to fracture it from the inside, U.S. strikes and intelligence are producing the same paranoia among ISIL.<sup>20</sup> The group has also reacted to increased targeting by issuing new directives for its members to avoid detection. The group distributed a manual, written in Arabic, that details how to remove metadata from online content in order to limit leaks of any intelligence that could potentially be useful to the U.S. intelligence community.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, ISIL also developed the hashtag "*Himlat Takteem Ialami*," the "media restraint campaign," in order to

stop its members and supporters from posting names, locations, or any other identifying material on social media sites.<sup>22</sup> The group also banned all insecure Wi-Fi usage, making its use punishable by death.<sup>23</sup> These ISIL countermeasures will increasingly challenge the U.S.-led coalition to improve its intelligence-gathering mechanisms in order to address these operational security measures, but thus far the ISR actions are taking a toll on ISIL.

Moving forward in the fight to rout ISIL, military advisors and partnerships with the ISF, especially the so-called Golden Division, will prove essential in conducting strategic attacks on ISIL in Iraq. Iraqi security forces need to amend and build stronger relations with local populations, specifically in western and northern Sunni areas, in order to push ISIL out of highly populated urban centers, which are being used as safe havens across parts of Anbar and Ninevah. Furthermore, the Coalition military advisors that have been sent to support the ISF will play an important role in advising on operations against ISIL. While the ground troops' mission in Iraq is comprised of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, one of the main challenges is to win battles on the ground by utilizing the militias as a "parallel force" but not to elevate these militias and further isolate Sunni populations. Thus far, the largely Iranian backed and financed Shi'a militias have fought ISIL in both Iraq and Syria and, as their recent victory in Jurf al-Sakher attests, they have "emerged as the most effective fighting forces against ISIL in Iraq."<sup>24</sup> With an estimated 1 million Shi'a fighters involved in the fight, U.S. Coalition advisors need to engage with these militias in order to insure they do not become the reason that starts another sectarian civil war reminiscent of the 2006–2008 period. They also need to take care to not view the militias as purely Iranian proxies; this view will further destabilize the region and antagonize Saudi–Iranian relations. Overall, both the militias' take-no-prisoners tactics<sup>25</sup> as well as their political power make them a possible risky liability to the future of Iraq if these groups are not brought into the fold of the non-sectarian central government and its overall strategy to reintegrate former fighters into the ISF.

## Non-Kinetic Engagement

### *Communications*

Aside from kinetic engagements, the United States also targets ISIL in various non-kinetic ways. One critical area to counter is ISIL communications abilities. However, currently, targeting the communications of the group remains extremely difficult due to the decentralized nature of its global outreach. The group utilizes numerous communication platforms including Snapchat, Kik, Twitter, Ask.fm, Facebook, Youtube, Whatsapp, and others.<sup>26</sup> Its multiplatform social media messaging targets a broad recruitment audience in at least 23 languages<sup>27</sup> and is part of the reason for ISIL's estimated 31,500 fighters.<sup>28</sup> ISIL has also reached out to computer-savvy youth through hacking networks that have conducted pro-ISIL attacks on over two hundred websites. These hacks included banners that read, "I love you ISIS" and are targeted at seemingly arbitrary websites such as the University of New Brunswick Student Union.<sup>29</sup> While some hacks appear amateur, members such as Junaid Hussain, aka "Abu Hussain Al Biritani," who hacked Tony Blair's e-mail before joining ISIL, have helped improve ISIL's hacking abilities and ISIL now targets banking information as a source of funding.<sup>30</sup>

Countering social media sites remains a critical part of stemming the tide of recruitment to ISIL because almost all public cases of recruitment involved social media messaging. For example, a woman in Virginia was arrested after corresponding on Facebook with an ISIL agent who could allegedly help her travel to Syria.<sup>31</sup> Federal Bureau of

Investigation (FBI) agents were able to discover her profile and created a fake profile to intercept her before she left the country. Similarly, the recent set of three teens from Chicago who met “Abu Qaqa,” an ISIL supporter, on Twitter and tried to travel to Turkey after leaving notes for their parents at their family home demonstrates ISIL’s successful utilization of social media. In order to counter ISIL’s Internet presence the U.S. government is using several strategies, both covert and overt. Publically, the Department of State is trying to counter the social media presence of ISIL through numerous outreach campaigns within the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) with its Digital Outreach Team. This team, under the Think Again/Turn Away initiative, reaches out to audiences in Arabic, Urdu, Punjabi, and English on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Using English, the team posts from the Twitter handle @ThinkAgain\_DOS. This account has 21,700 followers<sup>32</sup> and posts images and tweets that counter ISIL as well as other extremist groups. In Arabic the CSCC has three Twitter accounts, a YouTube account, and a Facebook account.

While these accounts may be successful in some of their preventative efforts, looking at specific posts on these platforms shows that countermessaging is not an exact science. First, the United States can undertake countermessaging on open sites such as Twitter or Facebook but platforms such as Snapchat and Whatsapp, which are private, are much more difficult to monitor and to stop recruitment efforts. Second, the Arabic Twitter accounts have a much smaller number of followers than the English Twitter, which means the Arabic presence of the CSCC is insignificant. The “*Fareek A-Tawasoul*” (Communications Team) Twitter account, as of 9 April 2015, had 2,411 followers<sup>33</sup> and while more than just these followers may look at the account, if the number of researchers and like-minded people are subtracted, the true amount of potentially radical persons following and being positively affected by @DSDOTAR’s *Fareek A-Tawasoul* account is presumably very low.

As Facebook is seemingly more popular in the Middle East than Twitter, the Digital Outreach Team’s 146,445 likes on its Arabic page may demonstrate some success in disseminating counter messages against ISIL.<sup>34</sup> This account posts Arabic news sources, which may also be more successful at influencing people’s views, as the audience may view sources as more local and holding a less pro-Western bias. However, the countermessaging strategy remains difficult to evaluate, as metrics of views and followers do not equate to proof that people were deterred from becoming extremists. Additionally, the efficacy of U.S. social media presence and messaging remains controversial. For example one post from the @DSOTAR handle, writes, in Arabic “What is the difference between members of DEASH and hyenas?” And then it shows a video with a clip of hyenas killing a zebra merged with a clip of ISIL members beheading a hostage.<sup>35</sup> This video is meant communicate that ISIL members act like animals. However, to a troubled, youthful, predominantly male audience this message might elevate ISIL in their eyes as a force that dominates its enemies and shows no mercy toward its adversaries and therefore this video could be counterproductive and might function as pro-ISIL propaganda.

Another challenge the United States faces in its online ISIL countermeasures is the speed with which information is published and exchanged online. The decision to use the Apache helicopter in Iraq as well as the resignation of Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel both illustrate the way ISIL attentively watches U.S. media and quickly responds to developments with propaganda and strategic responses. In the case of the Apache helicopters, once this information was released an ISIL supporter known as Nasser al-Sharia published a manual on how to shoot down the helicopters on social media.<sup>36</sup> This Arabic manual explained the weakest points of the helicopter as well as which types of weapons

would be most effective in shooting down the helicopters. Ultimately, because the American people were informed of the additional tactic in the fight against ISIL, ISIL knew too and was able to quickly react online. Secretary Hagel's resignation in November was also met, within minutes, with celebratory Tweets from ISIL supporters and the hashtag, translated from Arabic, of "The Islamic State topples the American Defense Minister" and a picture with Hagel and blood red writing that read in Arabic, "Who's next?"<sup>37</sup> insinuating that ISIL had successfully forced the resignation of the U.S. Secretary of Defense.

The twenty-four-hour news cycle enabled ISIL to use Secretary Hagel's resignation as an example of its successes to its supporters and U.S. countermessaging could not counter this propaganda as quickly as it was produced. However, the dissemination about ISIL via the press has not been all bad. The press has published some accounts from former ISIL members who returned back to their countries due to the dire conditions they faced while working for ISIL. These accounts may help counter the glorified light that many have come to view ISIL in. For example, in one account, a man traveled from India to Syria to join ISIL only to become a *jihadi* janitor and subsequently called his father to help him escape back to India.<sup>38</sup> Another account relays the story of a French ISIL returnee who wrote, "I'm sick and tired. My iPod doesn't work anymore. . . . I have to return."<sup>39</sup> Also, recent reports from the Australian government that ISIL is using Western recruits as "cannon fodder," as suicide bombers and propaganda tools,<sup>40</sup> demonstrate how to dissuade Westerners from joining the group. Accounts like these may help stop potential recruits from joining ISIL because it is not as exceptional as many have made it out to be.

Outside of online communications one of the largest priorities for countering ISIL should be stemming the flow of recruitment, especially of foreign fighters. As of September 2014, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimated that ISIL had 20,000 to 31,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, of which at least 15,000 are foreign fighters.<sup>41</sup> The International Center for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence updated these numbers in February 2015 saying that ISIL had at least 20,000 foreign fighters.<sup>42</sup> The combination of battlefield successes, declaration of a caliphate, and a prolific online presence has facilitated this mass recruiting. However, the rhetoric of the Coalition partners, including the United States, has exacerbated the way ISIL has been able to portray itself as exceptional. Statements from the White House to the King of Jordan and the King of Saudi Arabia have painted ISIL as an exceptional *jihadi* organization. For example, the White House stated in a statement that ISIL was "an imminent threat to every interest we have"<sup>43</sup> and Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Forces Committee Senator Inhofe stated:

We're in the most dangerous position we've ever been in as a nation. . . . ISIS, they are really bad terrorists, they're so bad even Al Qaida is afraid of them. . . . They're crazy out there and they're rapidly developing a method of blowing up a major U.S. city and people just can't believe that's happening.<sup>44</sup>

Additionally, across the globe leaders have characterized ISIL as an extremely unique and powerful *jihadi* organization. David Cameron declared that Britain needed to use its "military prowess" to defeat "this exceptionally dangerous movement"<sup>45</sup> and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia stated "if we ignore them, I am sure they will reach Europe in a month and American in another month."<sup>46</sup> Even after the Coalition undertook the targeted strike campaign Jordan's King Abdullah II stated that ISIL poses the threat of "a third world war by other means."<sup>47</sup> These statements, in addition to the sensationalized press coverage, and ISIL's continuing efforts have had two key effects on the spread of ISIL's ideology.

First, statements that characterize ISIL as exceptional inspire potential jihadists to join ISIL because it is the foremost important and successful terrorist organization in their eyes. Joining a *jihadist* organization has some similarities to joining other, less extreme organizations; recruits want to work for the best, most successful, most well funded organization and Coalition statements are helping to frame ISIL as the best. The profile of foreign fighters is young males between the ages of 17 and 30 years old<sup>48</sup> and the exceptionalist rhetoric of the Coalition partners plays well with the adventure of *jihad* that ISIL describes in its propaganda. For example, an ISIL threat made in August with pictures of the Old Republic Building in Chicago and the White House read, in Arabic, “#AmessagefromISILtoUS We are in your state, We are in your cities, We are in your streets, You are our goals anywhere.”<sup>49</sup> Combined with the fearful rhetoric of policymakers and pundits, these threats become a calling card that entice both groups and individuals to align themselves with what is functionally being described as the most dangerous terrorist group the West has ever faced, a reputation that ISIL hopes to maintain.

Furthermore, characterizing ISIL as such a formidable threat has given the group a prominent position within the *jihadi* community. In an attempt to also gain credibility numerous other lesser-known *jihadist* groups have declared their allegiance, or *baya*, to ISIL and the recent successful strikes by the U.S. Coalition have not stopped this trend. For example, the Mujahidin Indonesia Timor (Mujahidin of Eastern Indonesia, or MIT), Abu Sayyaf,<sup>50</sup> the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, Jund al-Khilafah, the Islamic State in Gaza, the Ahrar al-Sunna in Baalbek Brigade<sup>51</sup> all pledged their official allegiance, *baya*, to ISIL in recent months. All of these groups are small, relatively unknown *jihadist* groups and this article hypothesizes that their declarations of allegiance to ISIL is a strategy to elevate the profile of the groups to the international jihadist stage. (Notably, the Sunni Takfiri militant group known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis in Egypt declared official *baya* to ISIL in November.<sup>52</sup> This group could be particularly dangerous to the fight against ISIL because Egypt plays a key role in the idea of an Islamic Caliphate in the region.<sup>53</sup>) Most recently an ISIL affiliated group in Libya garnered international infamy when its members executed 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians.<sup>54</sup>

Policymakers should take note of the trend that ISIL is developing an associate—core network similar to Al Qaeda. It seems today that ISIL has not taken advantage of the many groups that have pledged *baya* to it yet but with defeats in Iraq this trend could change. Therefore, policymakers should modify their rhetorical stance on ISIL in order to discourage the continued association of *jihadist* groups across the globe with ISIL. Al Qaeda’s threat evolved as it changed into a global loosely affiliated network of associate regional groups and ISIL has the potential to pose a similar threat. Just as Al Qaeda remains a serious source of terrorism from its central command but also from the way it “push[es] others in extremist Sunni communities to mimic its efforts and to supplement its capabilities,”<sup>55</sup> ISIL’s prolific propaganda poses the same threat to Muslim communities across the globe. Instead of fear-inducing rhetoric the United States and its allies should prioritize creating the perception that ISIL faces certain, inevitable defeat<sup>56</sup> while also continuing to strengthen their engagement with Sunni communities in Iraq and more globally as well.

### **Financing**

Outside of recruiting, disrupting ISIL finances remains a significant challenge for U.S. counterterrorism efforts. In order to combat this massive financing scheme the Treasury

Department has placed targeted sanctions on all those who trade ISIL oil, those who donate to ISIL, and all known ISIL leadership. However, the challenge is that the antiterrorism finance laws set up after 9/11 were set up to target law international terrorist organizations that move money over international borders and ISIL almost entirely self funds from inside Iraq and Syria.<sup>57</sup> ISIL is the wealthiest jihadist terrorist group earning \$1 to \$2 million a day, down from \$2 to \$3 million earlier this year,<sup>58</sup> from oil sales, smuggling, ransoms, selling energy from captured electricity plants, and taxes administered in areas under its control. Kidnapping alone raised \$20 million thus far in 2014.<sup>59</sup> (They also are rumored to have seized \$400 million from the Mosul central bank but accounts now vary on the accuracy of this report.) The group's treasury is estimated to contain \$45 million and outside donations account for less than 5 percent of ISIL's finances.

Using post-9/11 counterterrorism finance laws will only go so far in attempts to bankrupt the group. Captured and declassified ledgers from the group's time when it was known as AQI demonstrate that the group resiliently takes advantage of all funding schemes available. They also have shed light on how ISIL spends its money and how therefore best to target its funds. Between 2008 and 2009 the group spent "nearly all of the money it made very rapidly on its operating expenses, such as members' salaries and legal costs incurred on behalf of its detained members, and to fund military operations and attacks."<sup>60</sup> The group also used, and continues to use, *hawalas*, "informal value-transfer institutions through the Middle East, South Asia, and parts of Africa," which move money abroad in unofficial, difficult-to-track methods.<sup>61</sup>

Thus far the U.S. Treasury Department (DoT) has designated "terrorist financiers and logisticians supporting ISIL" to target with sanctions, such as the twelve "foreign terrorist fighter facilitators" on 24 September 2014. Out of these twelve only two were designated for their actions in support of ISIL.<sup>62</sup> They were Tarkhan Tayumurazovich Batirashvili, a "Syrian-based Georgian," senior ISIL commander, and Shura Council member and Tariq Bin-Al-Tahar Bin Al Falih Al-'Awni Al-Harzi, an ISIL financier and the Amir for "the border region between Syria and Turkey."<sup>63</sup>

Outside of sanctions, the DoT has directed the finance strategy against ISIL by discouraging the payment of any ransoms and extortion. However, the DoT's tools are not designed to counter extortion and ultimately reducing the hold ISIL has over local businesses and communities will be the job of ground forces.<sup>64</sup> DoT is also working with the intelligence community to "analyze financial pocket litter and intelligence collected in counterinsurgency raids and used that new information as targeting data feeding the next round of raids."<sup>65</sup> This analysis includes Bank Secrecy Act reports filed by U.S. banks<sup>66</sup> in order to monitor ISIL financial activity. In order to collect information effectively DoT should insure its partnerships with Kurdish and Iraqi partners to garner the most accurate information. Outside of the United States, the United Nations has also urged states to seize oil trucks from disputed territories and halt the trading of antiquities from Syria and Iraq.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, the United States should take steps to ensure that ISIL does not repair its relations with its former partner terrorist group, Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN).<sup>68</sup> Partnering with JaN, due to its status as an Al Qaeda affiliate, would open new Al Qaeda-linked funding avenues to ISIL that it will need once its oil resources have been recaptured by Iraqi forces.

### ***The Long Haul***

Outside of the immediate current counter terrorism efforts, the United States faces an uphill battle with the current discord, corruption, and sectarian tensions within Iraq.

Reports of 50,000 “ghost soldiers” as well as embezzlement and resale of military goods in civilian black markets,<sup>69</sup> underscore the need to combat corruption and professionalize the Iraqi Security Forces. Similarly, fears of sectarian reprisals among traumatized populations complicate hopes of uniting all of Iraqi society against ISIL. For example, when ISIL attacked Mosul some reports indicate that many of the Sunni soldiers of the 2nd Division deserted first “due to fear of ISIL retaliation against them and their families.”<sup>70</sup> Advisors, the Iraqi military, and the central Baghdad government must take steps to mend sectarian fractures, because they could use repaired sectarian relationships as a tool to fight ISIL. The United States and its allies, especially Iraq, should target and positively engage with key members of the Sunni community especially tribal leaders to fracture the weak bonds between Sunni tribes and the ISIL terrorists.<sup>71</sup> Different groups joined ISIL for different reasons and successful counterterrorism efforts should exploit these differences to separate those less radical recruits from the battle-hardened *jihadists*. The origins of ISIL demonstrate that the group took advantage of Sunni discord in Anbar in 2012 and recruited disaffected former Ba’ath Party members who felt marginalized and reduced to poverty with the new Shi’a-dominated central government. Intelligence officials in June reported that former Ba’athists and Saddam-era military commanders, including Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri (Saddam’s former deputy), were involved in attacks near the Beiji oil refinery and the city of Samarra.<sup>72</sup> If the United States can work with new Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to mend ties with Iraqi Sunnis then ISIL will lose one of its recruitment sources. Furthermore, turning the tide with Sunni tribes in Anbar could possibly help recreate the “Sunni Awakening” of 2008 when Sunni tribes rose up against Al Qaeda and helped drive the group underground.

Another challenge the United States faces in its fight against ISIL is defining success and its goals of “Operation Inherent Resolve.” President Obama has stated the U.S. objective is to “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.”<sup>73</sup> While the president also acknowledged that “it will take time to eradicate a cancer like ISIL,” questions remain regarding the just how long it will take to defeat ISIL. Total success will not come quickly but with 71 percent of the American public’s view that ISIL is a “top threat,”<sup>74</sup> it appears that President Obama will have the public’s support to continue directing counterterrorism measures against ISIL. Secretary Kerry succinctly defined the Administration’s view of success in a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing saying:

The military action ends when we have ended the capacity of ISIL to engage in broad based military activity that threatens the state of Iraq, that threatens the United States, that threatens the region. That’s our goal and that means ending their ability to live in ungoverned spaces, have a safe haven, and be able to control territory and move at will to try to attack the United States or other places.<sup>75</sup>

However, domestic resolve may falter with some of the challenges of the counterterrorism campaign against ISIL. As of 12 March 2015 U.S. kinetic operations have cost \$1.83 billion, averaging \$8.5 million daily<sup>76</sup> and, in a period of austerity and drawdown, tax payers may not accept these costs. Recently, some members of the Senate expressed frustration with the U.S. campaign’s limited nature, comparing it to the 2003 conflict against Saddam Hussein where the United States “has a thousand sorties per day.” Clearly, the nature of the fight is very different but Congressional support will be critical to the continuation of counterterrorism efforts in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, the recent

release of the executive summary of the Senate Intelligence Committee's inquiry into the CIA detention and interrogation program will most likely feed ISIL's propaganda and risk more terrorist attacks and increased recruitment.

Geopolitics will also continue to play a role in the United States' war against ISIL. Regionally, less-than-enthusiastic partners such as Turkey complicate U.S. ability to cut off ISIL oil exportation lines as well as recruitment pathways. (Most foreign fighters travel through Turkey into Syria.) Additionally, Iran's continued presence in the region as a Shi'a power complicates U.S. actions in Iraq. Iran continues to supply Iraqi Shi'a militias and Kurdish peshmerga fighters with weapons and funding and reports have confirmed that the Iranian Air Force has begun airstrikes in Diyala Province and is flying near American jets and striking in areas already targeted by the U.S. Coalition.<sup>77</sup> Thus far the Obama administration has confirmed that the "net effective is positive" and that they will continue to monitor the situation. Therefore, speculation is growing about U.S.–Iranian cooperation and how these steps could affect the P5+1 talks. Overall, the United States will need to continue weighing its coalition's actions to take into account regional dynamics and other strategic interests in geopolitics.

## Conclusion

Degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL will be a difficult task for the United States and its allies. However, through several counterterrorism measures the United States has been able to make strategic gains in limiting ISIL's access to funding, its recruitment pool, and its strategic territory. The United States should continue its targeted strikes campaign while also working with its allies to develop a precise long-term strategy. Continuing to interrupt ISIL's finances will be critical to corraling both its territorial gains and its ability to support its self and members. Also, monitoring and intersecting online recruitment efforts will stem recruitment efforts and will be more successful if the US confidently discusses ISIL as a group whose days are limited in Iraq. ISIL successfully captured several key parts of Iraq but the United States, with its allies, has the tools to stop ISIL and help create a road of stability in Iraq.

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