Is a Non-Lethal Approach Appropriate to Defeat ISIL?

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The manner in which the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) employs violence and terror on the local populace of the Middle East, coupled with the terrorist group’s ability to leverage social media, places achieving the Obama Administration’s counter-terrorism strategic end state at risk due to the administration’s reliance on a lethal approach—namely an air campaign. This study utilizes case studies and literary reviews to determine appropriate non-lethal approaches to degrade and defeat ISIL. Upon gathering this information, a non-lethal strategy was developed that targeted ISIL’s critical vulnerabilities. Further, this study examined the risk and counterpoints that challenged the employment of a non-lethal strategy to defeat the terrorist group. Upon evaluating the risk, the diplomatic and economic risk associated with employing the strategy outweighed the gain, therefore, the employment of a non-lethal strategy was deemed inappropriate. Acknowledging this reality, this study—while not supporting a lethal approach to defeat ISIL—strongly advocates for the employment of a blended lethal non-lethal approach that leverages a Middle Eastern whole of government approach.
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Abstract

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The manner in which the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) employs violence and terror on the local populace of the Middle East, coupled with the terrorist group’s ability to leverage social media, places achieving the Obama Administration’s counter-terrorism strategic end state at risk due to the administration’s reliance on a lethal approach—namely an air campaign. This study utilizes case studies and literary reviews to determine appropriate non-lethal approaches to degrade and defeat ISIL. Upon gathering this information, a non-lethal strategy was developed that targeted ISIL’s critical vulnerabilities. Further, this study examined the risk and counterpoints that challenged the employed of a non-lethal strategy to defeat the terrorist group. Upon evaluating the risk, the diplomatic and economic risk associated with employing the strategy outweighed the gain, therefore, the employment of a non-lethal strategy was deemed inappropriate. Acknowledging this reality, this study—while not supporting a lethal approach to defeat ISIL—strongly advocates for the employment of a blended lethal non-lethal approach that leverages a Middle Eastern whole of government approach.
Is a Non-Lethal Approach Appropriate to Defeat ISIL?

“We’re going to out-guerrilla the guerrilla and out-ambush the ambush...And we’re going to learn better than he ever did because we’re smarter, we have greater mobility and firepower, we have more endurance and more to fight for... And we've got more guts.”¹ The expansion of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) is not only placing the stability of governments and the security of the populace of the Middle East at risk, but this expansion is arguably placing critical U.S. interests, such as strategic alliances and natural resources, at risk as well. The intent of this expansion is for ISIL to establish an Islamic Caliphate in the Middle East. The manner in which ISIL intends to establish an Islamic Caliphate is through fear, intimidation and terror, which “could threaten the territorial integrity of Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel.”²

Many senior leaders assert that if ISIL goes unchecked then it is a matter of time until the violence and radical ideology spills out onto American streets. This assertion was supported by LTG Mike Flynn when he made the following statement at an annual National Defense Industry Association special operations meeting, “The enemies arrayed against the U.S. are varied, but “fueled” by a vision for worldwide domination, achieved through violence and bloodshed. They [ISIL] want to silence all opposition.”³ Senator John McCain attributes the expansion of ISIL to the decision to withdraw U.S. Forces from Iraq, when he stated, “It’s the situation that we have allowed to deteriorate because we didn't leave troops behind.”⁴ This suggests that the decision to withdraw U.S. Troops from Iraq in 2011, coupled with a fairly weak Iraqi government and deteriorating security situation, created a power vacuum, which when coupled with the civil war in Syria, gave birth to the current ISIL problem facing the Middle East.
In response to the expansion of ISIL’s influence throughout the Middle East, the Obama Administration implemented a counter-terrorism policy designed to “degrade and ultimately destroy the extremist group.” This strategy runs parallel with the Bush Administration’s efforts in 2002, when the United States declared that its primary national security objective was “to disrupt and destroy terrorist organizations of global reach.” The destruction of ISIL will secure the U.S. and its allies the ability to protect vital economic interests and maintain key diplomatic relations within the Middle East. Achieving the Obama Administration’s strategic end state will also create an environment that bolsters democracy within the Middle East. This version of democracy may not resemble what “the west practices,” but may strengthen strategic relationships with Middle Eastern leaders, the U.S., and its allies.

Although the Obama Administration authored this counter-terrorism policy, many senior governmental leaders suggests that the leadership of the U.S., NATO, and Middle Eastern strategic partners should re-examine the administration’s counter-terrorism policy against ISIL. This re-examination will determine if the counter-terrorism policy against ISIL is feasible, suitable and acceptable. The current ways that support the Obama Administration’s counter-terrorism policy fall into four categories: “1. A systematic campaign of airstrikes against ISIL, 2. Increased support to forces fighting ISIL on the ground, 3. Drawing on our [U.S.] substantial counter-terrorism capabilities to prevent ISIL attacks, and 4. Providing humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians displaced by ISIL.”

The systematic campaign of airstrikes against ISIL resembles U.S. military’s actions in Kosovo in 1998-1999. Arguably, many military leaders of the Kosovo War
credit U.S. and coalition success to the bombing campaign against Milosevic’s strategic military targets. The current U.S. strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIS, as highlighted above, does not include the use of U.S. ground troops, but favors air strikes and a reliance on Iraqi forces and other Middle Eastern partners. However, given the current state of Iraqi forces and the Syrian opposition, coupled with the limited effect of airpower, it is unclear to many U.S. senior leaders as to the role air power can play against such an elusive and complicated adversary as ISIL.

Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster argues against an exclusive air campaign when commenting on the Vietnam War:

The notion that airpower alone could solve the complex military and political program of Vietnam was based in ignorance and advocacy by airpower zealots... It remained unclear how bombing targets in North Vietnam and using massive airstrikes in the South against an enemy who was intertwined with the noncombatant population would help to establish conditions conducive to ending the war.8

McMaster’s point counters this study’s leading passage made by General Westmoreland, Commander U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV), which implied that overwhelming firepower coupled with “guts” and intelligence is enough to defeat an insurgency. Taking issue with that implication, McMaster’s assertion was reinforced Richard Lim by the following, “[The] reliance primarily on airpower is not likely to be sufficient to degrade and destroy ISIS, especially since it has acquired large swathes of territory. In fact, neither airpower nor land power can be effective alone. The effectiveness of airpower declines as ISIS targets inevitably disperse.”9

In the near term, ISIL’s strongholds may be affected by an air campaign; however, unforeseen consequences of the air campaign could be the fuel that expands
ISIL’s influence throughout the world. This expansion could be attributed to a perception by ISIL sympathizers that the air campaign is “an attack on Islam.” This perception, in addition to employing an air campaign against an adversary that operates within densely populated cities and exploits social media, could contribute to “exaggerated” civilian casualties reporting. These unintended consequences place the Obama Administration’s counter-terrorism policy against ISIL at risk.

Because of the risk associated with the Obama Administration’s counter-terrorism policy, perhaps discarding the lethal approach associated with the current counter-terrorism strategy against ISIL and adopting a non-lethal approach to achieve the President’s strategic end state would be more successful. This study will examine the research question of, “Is a non-lethal approach appropriate to degrade and defeat ISIL?” and will utilize supporting research questions and literary reviews to determine if a non-lethal approach is appropriate to degrade and ultimately destroy the extremist group.

Purpose

“Nuclear weapons cannot deter all threats . . . As examples, non-states and trans-national actors . . . cannot be bombed away. Dealing with these and other similar problems requires serious mind set changes.”¹⁰ The purpose of this study is to prove or disprove that a non-lethal approach is more appropriate to defeat an adversary such as ISIL. At initial glance, assumed by many senior military leaders, given the violent nature of ISIL, a purely non-lethal approach is not feasible to degrade and ultimately destroy them. As suggested in the passage above, a mindset change must take place to decisively defeat an ambiguous and volatile adversary such as ISIL. To assist in
answering this study’s central research question, this study will utilize the following supporting research questions:

1. What role does a “Strongmen” play in disrupting an extremist organization’s recruitment and freedom of maneuver?
2. How does the local populace “resist” an extremist organization’s influence?
3. How does education play a role in disrupting extremist recruitment and freedom of maneuver?
4. What incentives can undermine an extremist organization’s influence?
5. How are governments penetrating the extremist organizations?

Information from the research questions and examples from periodical reviews will show several non-lethal approaches to defeat a violent extremist organization and develop a non-lethal strategy. Further, in support of the counter-terrorism strategic end state, this study will investigate four objectives: disengagement, de-radicalization, disruption, and isolation. This study will also address counterpoints and risks associated with the strategy.

Defining the Terms

This study is based on the Obama Administration’s strategic end state of degrading and defeating ISIL. To defeat an organization that operates in a manner similar to ISIL is extremely difficult and diplomatically, militarily, and economically costly. Therefore, in this study the destruction of ISIL defined as relegating the group to a criminal organization. The relegation of ISIL as a criminal organization requires local and regional policing, not a U.S. and coalition military response.

In addition, it’s important to understand ISIL’s goal. ISIL, as mentioned earlier, desires to establish an Islamic Caliphate within the Middle East.
The term “Caliphate” comes from the Arabic term for successor, Khalifa, meaning those who assume the role that Muhammad did as a political leader, but not as a messenger of God, as Islam holds that Muhammad was the last messenger. The Islamic legitimacy of the caliph ideation itself is controversial; its Qur’anic basis is questionable, and the very notion would seem to contradict the belief that Islam is a religion between believer and God, not a sanction for religious governance.\textsuperscript{11}

In support of the Obama Administration’s strategic end state countering ISIL, this study has developed and defined the supporting objectives: deradicalization, disengagement, isolation, and disruption. According to Lawrence Rubin, disengagement is defined as “the behavioral change away from involvement with terrorist groups and activities that may or may not accompany an ideological change.”\textsuperscript{12} He goes on to define deradicalization as “the behavior and ideological reorientation of a group or individuals who uses violence to pursue political goals.”\textsuperscript{13} A focus of this study is to utilize non-lethal methods to facilitate the population and the violent extremist to disengaging or becoming deradicalized.

United States Army Field Manual 3-0 defines isolation as “to deny an enemy or adversary access to capabilities that enable the exercise of coercion, potential advantage, and freedom of action.”\textsuperscript{14} In addition, United States Army Terms and Military Symbols (ADRP 1-02) defines disruption as “a tactical mission task in which a commander integrates direct and indirect fires, terrain, and obstacles to upset an enemy formation or tempo, interrupt his timetable or cause enemy forces to commit prematurely or attack in piecemeal fashion.”\textsuperscript{15} Although the manner in which disruption is defined supports a more tactical approach, the coordinated convergence of the elements of national power will achieve a strategic disruption effect on ISIL.
Joseph Nye’s characterized hard power as “the use of coercion and payment,” soft power as “the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction,” and smart power as “combin(ing) the tools of both hard and soft power.”

Given the human dynamic of this conflict, the employment of landpower is critical. Landpower is defined as, “the ability…to gain, sustain, and exploit control over land, resources, and people.” Landpower is further characterized as:

The ability to: impose the Nation’s will on an enemy, by force if necessary; engage to influence, shape, prevent, and deter in any operational environment; establish and maintain a stable environment that sets the conditions for political and economic development; address the consequences of catastrophic events—both natural and man-made- to restore infrastructure and reestablish basic civil services and secure and support bases from which joint forces can influence and dominate the air, land, and maritime domains of an operational environment.

Throughout this study, terms such as “U.S. Forces,” “Coalition Forces,” “Middle Eastern strategic partners,” and “inter-agency partner” will be used. U.S. Forces are defined as military forces under the command and control of the Commander-in-Chief of the United States and the office’s subordinate commanders. Coalition Forces are defined as the twelve nations of the Atlantic Pact together with Greece, Turkey, and the Federal Republic of Germany, that make up the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Middle Eastern strategic partners are defined as Middle Eastern governments politically aligned with the U.S. regarding its policy against ISIL and who are willing to employ men, money and materials to effect ISIL influence throughout the Middle East. The term inter-agency partners are defined as civilian agencies that have unique intelligence, development and diplomacy objectives in support of a particular country.
Methodology

This study will utilize Melissa Jane Kronfield’s paper, Killing Them with Kindness: 

*A softer approach to preventing violent extremism and countering radicalization in the war on terrorism* a basis for examining three case studies. The intent of examining the three case studies, Middle East, South East Asia, and Europe, is to focus on answering the supporting research questions and the trends gathered from Kronfield’s three case studies will create the conceptual framework needed to develop a follow-on non-lethal strategy.

In addition to the examination of the case studies, this study will utilize other factors, identified through periodical reviews, to determine if a non-lethal approach is appropriate to degrade and defeat ISIL. This study will examine ISIL’s grand and military strategies, the organization’s capabilities, and its vulnerabilities. Understanding ISIL’s strategy, coupled with the information gathered from the non-lethal case studies and periodical reviews, will assist in developing a notional non-lethal strategy. This strategy will focus on the uses of smart power against ISIL’s identified vulnerabilities. In addition, this study will utilize a series of “commander’s visualization tools” to enable the reader to better understand how non-lethal actions play a role in support of the elements of national power. The visualization tools will show ISIL’s vulnerabilities, the non-lethal methods within a specific line of effort, how actions within each line of effort are in support of a specific objective, and how each objective supports the overarching strategic end state of degrading and ultimately destroying ISIL.

Lastly, this study will examine the risk and counterpoints that would hinder the successful execution of the strategy and determine if a non-lethal strategy is appropriate to degrade and defeat ISIL.
Non-Lethal Approach Case Studies

The Middle Eastern Non-Lethal Approach

“Preventing violent extremism and countering radicalization in the Middle East blends together a unique mix of coercion, co-option and financial incentives to cajole terror suspects into renouncing violent extremism.”19 Henry and Kronfield both assert that there is a need for coercion and cooperation to facilitate compliance with a “belligerent” non-state actor. Henry’s work supports the idea that “negotiations work where there is an equal blend of coercion and cooperation.”20 After examining the Middle Eastern case study, it appears that the use of influential people (Imams, former militants, and religious scholars) created an environment for locals and former militants to comply with the state.

1. What role does a “Strongmen” play in disrupting the extremist organizations’ recruitment and freedom of maneuver?

The research question above speaks to the spirit of the following passage, “Prisoners undergo religious rehabilitation, working with qualified Muslim clerics, scholars and professors to learn mainstream (or state sponsored) version of Islam through a six week long religious course, culminating with a final exam upon completion.”21 To prevent further expansion of violent extremist activities by former militants, the government of Saudi Arabia instituted an “Aftercare Program.” This Aftercare Program enabled the former extremist to “remain engaged with medical and religious officials while beginning the process of reintegration back into society through family visits, team building exercises and art therapy.”22

2. How does the local populace “resist” the extremist organization’s influence?
Although there were no outright examples that pointed to answering the question above, based on the information gathered in Kronfield’s paper, one could discern that the responsibility of family members to keep the “former militant” focused on being a productive citizen, coupled with arranged marriages, played a part in resisting the extremist’s ability to influence select populations.

3. How does education play a role in disrupting extremist recruitment and freedom of maneuver?

In addition to a traditional hard counter-terrorism approach, the Saudi government also advanced a Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Aftercare (PRAC) strategy that utilized counseling, dialogue, and education to prevent violent extremism and to counter radicalization. The Saudi program is a multi-pronged strategy focusing on the rehabilitation and reintegration of individual terrorists, as well as the prevention of further radicalization in society by addressing educational and media related content.

4. What incentives can undermine an extremist organization’s influence?

“Upon their final release, detainees continue to work with rehabilitation officials, remaining under strict surveillance by the state, but also receive incentives to remain on track, including educational opportunities, vocational training, stipends, and even arranged marriages.”

5. How are governments penetrating the extremist organizations?

“State sponsored television airs programs that emphasize the negative aspects of radical Jihad and feature stories of repentant militants.”

“Due to the increasing role of the Internet in the radicalization process, the Saudi government launched the al Sakinah or Tranquility campaign, aimed at undermining extremists online.” Furthermore, “similar to how the country’s counseling program seeks to help detainees abandon extremist beliefs through
face-to-face discussions, the Sakinah Campaign works to erode the intellectual support for extremism online.”

The Southeast Asian Non-Lethal Approach

With a particular emphasis on ‘social harmony,’ preventing violent extremism and countering radicalization in Southeast Asia has a distinct set of characteristics, emphasizing societal interests, community morals, and family values in an effort to rehabilitate and reintegrate militants. In Singapore, the Religious Rehabilitation Group (RRG) was created in 2003 following a wave of arrests that disrupted terrorist cells across the country.

1. What role does a “Strongmen” play in disrupting the extremist organizations’ recruitment and freedom of maneuver?

In this scenario, the “Strongman” assumed the role of an “all-volunteer force of Islamic scholars and teachers who study the radical ideology of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) and engage terrorist detainees and their families in counseling sessions.”

2. How does the local populace “resist” the extremist organization’s influence?

In addition, “an Aftercare Service Group (ASG) provided for post-release care, though it was not made mandatory and, therefore, the onus of continued rehabilitation falls upon the community, who are responsible for keeping former detainees from returning to terrorism.”

3. How does education play a role in disrupting extremist recruitment and freedom of maneuver?
“Authorities not only enlist family members in the rehabilitation of detainees, but also ensure that detainees and their families were cared for through educational, financial and vocational opportunities.”

4. What incentives can undermine an extremist organization’s influence?

“The state must reestablish trust and legitimacy (through incentives) to foster the cooperation of former militants/terrorists.” “Terrorist detainees are provided with better living conditions than most prisoners, are not under constant surveillance, and have available to them a vast array of personal luxuries including, in some cases, cell phones.” “They are also offered counseling services, though very few have elected to accept.”

5. How are governments penetrating the extremist organizations?

"Unlike Saudi Arabia, Iraq, or Singapore, state or religious representatives do not engage in a “formal theological dialogue” with detainees; rather that task is left to “insiders” or former militants who have publically recanted their extremist ideologies and cooperated with authorities." “This is because the program, as such, is less focused on religious rehabilitation than the cultivation of intelligence for the disruption of further attacks and the arrest of more terrorists.” “With little financial or administrative support from the government, police use a strategy of humane treatment to build trust between themselves and detainees, consulting with psychologists to fully immerse themselves in detainee culture, language and ideology.” “This “re-humanization” process is enough for some detainees to begin to reject extremism upon discovering the state is not their enemy.”
The European non-lethal approach

Europe has a long history of dealing with extremists from across the political spectrum. This includes the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Spain’s *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* (ETA), the West German Red Army Faction (RAF), the Italian Red Brigade, and an array of single-issue groups, environmentalists, neo-Fascists, neo-Nazi, and racist organizations. More recently, European governments have had to also address the threat posed by radical Islam. This history of dealing with the problem of terrorism on the continent has led to the creation of a distinctly European approach to preventing violent extremism and countering radicalization. It is heavily preventive in nature, less focused on prisoner rehabilitation, and makes use of local communities and civil society for the purposes of individual targeted interventions during the pre- or early radicalization stages.40

1. What role does a “Strongmen” play in disrupting the extremist organizations’ recruitment and freedom of maneuver?

“The British government seeks to partner with ‘moderate’ Muslim organizations, recognizing their legitimacy and authority in combating radical Islam through the employment of the teaching of mainstream Islam.”41

2. How does the local populace “resist” the extremist organization’s influence?

“The British government has, ‘increased the capacity of communities to resist violent extremism, and address grievances that violent extremists exploit.”42

“The British government empowers local groups to create prevention strategies suited for specific communities while simultaneously conducting in-depth research into attitudes, demographics, and media consumption to effectively target those most at risk.”43 Although it may be premature to evaluate the British government’s counter-radicalization efforts, “it is clear, however, that Muslim secularists are increasingly successful in finding ways to challenge jihadist ideologies.”44 “The British government pursues preventive strategies in
prisons, by selecting and closely monitoring the behavior of prison *Imams* and requiring all Islamic materials, as well as sermons, to be delivered exclusively in English to ensure they are not radical in nature.45

3. How does education play a role in disrupting extremist recruitment and freedom of maneuver?

In an effort to engender dialogue with Muslim communities, the government also sponsors Muslim outreach activities, campus debates and customized educational materials focusing on youths. Officials pay special attention to combating Islamophobia in society by using non-inflamatory terminology in an effort to create a non-emotive lexicon when discussing violent extremism and radicalization. The British government also seeks to partner with 'moderate' Muslim organizations, recognizing their legitimacy and authority in combating radical Islam through the employment of the teaching of mainstream Islam.46

4. What incentives can undermine an extremist organization’s influence?

Although this aspect is not covered in Kronfield’s paper, Henry references to how incentives can undermine extremist influence:

…the establishment of an incentive based environment, which places the local populace and soft core insurgent in a “self-induced negotiative environment [dilemma],” is very dangerous to the survivability of the hard core insurgent and his cause. …the *promises* delivered by the Strongman cannot stand by themselves and must be reinforced by other aspects of this strategy. The employment of the informational swarm, within an incentive based environment, has the potential to validate the promises of the Strongman.47

5. How are the governments penetrating the extremist organizations?

This aspect also was not covered in Kronfield’s paper, however, Henry states the following regarding the penetration of an extremist organization:

In the environment of compliance, the negotiation strategy will potentially “chip away” at the veil of secrecy in which the insurgent operates. The “hard core” insurgent will then view the insurgents as a potential “pentiti” [a rat]—a term used to describe former Italian Red Brigade operators who broke the omerta (code of silence) and turned informant. The "pentiti-
like atmosphere," though dangerous to the hard core insurgent, has the potential to facilitate violent and undermining conditions within the insurgency.\textsuperscript{48}

Analysis of the Case Studies

...eliminating the 'spiritual' leaders of a militant movement could be perceived as a media/psychological victory for a government," it actually makes, "a comprehensive de-radicalization process less likely to succeed. Those leaders are necessary to legitimatize de-radicalization and initiate a genuine dialogue with their followers.\textsuperscript{49}

For the most part, the case study findings focused on violent extremists while detained and during post detention activities. A consistent theme was the employment of the “Strongman,” “after care programs,” and an information operations campaign. These methods support the objectives of disruption, isolation, deradicalization and disengagement.

Richard Lim asserts that "clear signals of engagement between the government and the local population are critical to winning support away from terrorist groups. “The Indonesian government took specific actions to pursue local religious authorities, appoint sympathetic leadership and incorporate local elements into the military force. By taking these actions, the government mitigated DI's appeal among the local population, which was a critical factor in achieving victory."\textsuperscript{50} Lim further promotes his concept by stating, “The past decade of war has provided many lessons learned for engaging local leadership. It is critical to identify individuals who are trusted by the local population."\textsuperscript{51}

Iraq's Muqtada al-Sadr reinforces the power and influence of a credible strongman.

...an example of a Strongman that could reduce hostilities and tension in Iraq is Muqtada al-Sadr. Al-Sadr, Shiite religious cleric and leader of “The Mahdi Army,” exemplifies the characteristics of a Strongman. Al-Sadr leads and commands through physical and religious coercion; as an output he is well respected throughout his "area of responsibility." It is
reported the al-Sadr’s “army” consist of 6,000-10,000 “soldiers.” Furthermore, although al-Sadr has directed insurgent activities against the state, the US and collation forces, within the past year, it was reported that al-Sadr has advocated and supported an amnesty program within Sadr City. The amnesty program was supported by a “weapons for reward” environment and other civil affairs type activities.52

These methods serve to disrupt and, in some instances, defeat terrorist behavior. Additional methods to impact ISIL in a non-lethal manner mainly on impacting the objectives of disruption and isolation. In addition, although the methods examined in the case studies focused on detainee and post detainee operations, the focus on the local population and “outside donors” is just as important when attempting to defeat a violent extremist group non-lethally.

When conceptualizing ISIL, given its covert and violent nature, one must visualize the organization as a “denied area.” The use of information operations, as demonstrated in the Saudi Arabian case, is paramount. Further, incentivizing populations to discard or resist ISIL, as demonstrated in the European case study, further undermines their efforts to expand throughout the Middle East. As mentioned by Admiral Olson, “…this approach not only builds partner nation capacity and regional stability, but it also deters the tacit and active support of sanctuaries that foster and develop future terrorists.”53 The approach that he speaks of is that of U.S. Forces advising and assisting their partnered forces to build capacity and capability. Building partner nation’s capacity to self-govern (diplomatically, militarily and economically) will have an impact on ISIL’s freedom of maneuver throughout the Middle East. This approach speaks to U.S. Forces, namely United States Army Special Forces, conducting advisory and assistance activities in support of Foreign Internal Defense (FID) operations.
To impact ISIL’s freedom of maneuver, U.S., coalition, and Middle Eastern strategic partners must attack, what is deemed by this study, as ISIL’s “center of gravity.” The center of gravity of ISIL is its ability to receive funding from illicit trafficking of goods, namely oil, to neighboring countries. Also, the support that ISIL receives from foreign fighters further advances their efforts. This point was reinforced by GEN Joseph Votel, Commander of the United States Special Operations Command, as he described how “the foreign fighter flow into the Middle East in support of ISIS is staggering…over 19,000 foreign fighter from more than 90 different countries have traveled to Syria and Iraq.”54

To counter these activities, several actions can be taken to disrupt and isolate ISIL Operations. First, conduct training exercises within areas that ISIL have historically used to transit illicit goods and fighters. Second, diplomatic engagements with countries known to support illicit trade or harboring foreign fighters. Additionally, the U.S. must be prepared to impose strict economic sanctions, or worse, on those countries that disregard the demands issued during diplomatic engagements.

What must ISIL do to Establish a Caliphate?

In order to establish a Caliphate in the Middle East, ISIL must establish the proper environment, as articulated within ISIL’s grand strategy. This portion of the study will examine the terror group’s critical requirements, capabilities, and vulnerabilities.

To establish a Caliphate in the Middle East, the following requirements are necessary to set the proper conditions.

An initial requirement is to first break down state boundaries and generate conditions for civil war, described as “Destabilizing Taghut,” or idolatry. In addition, the organization’s desire to establish the Islamic state of Iraq and al-sham as an Islamic emirate corresponds with the phase of Tamkin, or consolidation. Further, ISIL wants to bring together like-minded people to
fight and live within the emirate. Last, ISIL has expressed its expansive intent and vision for how it will interact with the rest of the Muslim world by declaring the Khalifa, or Caliphate, which ISIS describes as the final phased objective. 

The manner in which ISIL plans to establish the proper conditions associated with establishing a Caliphate is primarily through actions and activities focused on the organization’s ability to instill fear and terror. The critical capability to create fear and terror rests with the group’s military arm. Although the terrorist group has prospered tremendously from illicit trafficking and has establish itself throughout the world by leveraging social media, the organization has a heavy reliance on its ability to project its military capabilities to achieve its stated objectives.

Given this critical capability, the group desires to establish control of urban terrain in the Sunni heartland of Iraq that connects to the core physical strength of ISIS in Syria, forming the territory of the Islamic Caliphate. Further, ISIL wants to control critical infrastructure that increases the wealth and international leverage of the Islamic caliphate. In addition to establishing control of critical infrastructure, ISIL wants to create a border exclusion zone in Iraqi Kurdistan and the ethno-sectarian mixed provinces of Diyala, Baghdad, and Babil in order to separate the Islamic caliphate from Iran.

To accomplish this, ISIL feels that it must destroy the offensive capability of the Iraqi Security forces and the Syrian regime. Furthermore, as demonstrate in recent history, ISIL seeks to destroy Iraq by denying the capital as a seat of government and as a defensible Shi’a city and by ensuring that the government of Syria does not recover its legitimacy. It is critical that ISIL expands the terrain and claim is as part of the Islamic caliphate by seizing outlying cities in Syria and Iraq such as Rutba and Sha’er and eventually create additional exterior lines of communication. Last, it is important for ISIL to extend the Islamic caliphate into areas of northern and central Syria currently occupied by the Syrian opposition and Jabhat al-nusra and eliminate resistance.
Although ISIL possesses a significant military capability, many senior leaders and respected scholars assert that the manner in which ISIL incites fear and acquires militant and funding support is a vulnerability that the U.S., coalition and Middle Eastern strategic partners can exploit through non-lethal activities. One vulnerability is that “ISIL fighters are known to murder and enslave Shi’ites simply for being Shi’ites.”\textsuperscript{57} “Beyond this savagery, IS[IL] has also announced plans to destroy all major Shi’ite shrines in the territory it captures. IS[IL] leaders have further stated their intentions to destroy the shrines of Iraq’s leading Shi’ite holy cities of Karbala and Najaf.”\textsuperscript{58}

Anti-ISIL forces can exploit ISIL’s willful disregard for human life and sacred monuments through ways contained in the information element of national power. This includes the use of social media, the use of the “Strongman,” and establishing incentives against supporting violent extremist activities.

The organization’s political credibility and authority could be compromised internationally.

ISIL’s brutality may have been a short-term advantage for the victory in the north, where it terrorized unmotivated government troops who fled without fighting, but this strategy has long term problems. In spite of this brutality, Shi’ite Iraqis and other non-Sunni Arab groups are now more strongly motivated to fight since IS has proven that there is no place for them or their religion in any future Iraq under their control.”\textsuperscript{59}

Furthermore, “the durability of the IS[IL] alliance with other Iraqi Sunni groups, including former Ba’athists and some tribal leaders, is also subject to uncertainty. This is an unnatural coalition held together more or less exclusively by fear and hatred directed at the Baghdad government, Iraq’s Shi’ite militias, and Iran.”\textsuperscript{60} Along this theme, “IS[IL] grandly claims to be a universal movement under Baghdadi, the leader of all Muslims, but this assertion is hardly credible. While the IS[IL] message has been
effective among some discontented Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, it is unclear if it will have strong resonance in other countries.  

It is a common believe among senior military leaders, such as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, that ISIL’s over reliance on its ability to conduct “offensive operations” has placed the terror group in a significant logistical disadvantage. General Dempsey has stated “they’re stretched right now—stretched to control what they’ve gained and stretched across their logistics [and] lines of communications.” This is a key vulnerability that the U.S., coalition, and Middle Eastern strategic partners can exploit to weaken ISIL’s military capability.

The manner in which ISIL conducts illicit trafficking of men, money and materials is probably its greatest vulnerability. Understanding this, the U.S. Treasury is attempting to “track the Islamic State’s shipments from its Syrian and Iraqi oil wells along well-worn smuggling routes across the border into Turkey.” Further, key members within the U.S. Treasury assert, “There [in Turkey] the oil can be sold on the black market for as much as $60 a barrel — a deep discount from the standard rate of about $80, but still a windfall for the terrorist group.”

The manner in which ISIL executes illicit trafficking to support their source of funding, is similar to how the organization recruits, enlists and exploits the freedom of movement of foreign fighters. This is another vulnerability that can be exploited. Understanding not only what ISIL wants to achieve, but critical vulnerabilities associated with the organization, supports a non-lethal strategy to degrade and defeat them.

A Non-Lethal Strategy to Degrade and Defeat ISIL

General Martin Dempsey said “it would take 12,000 to 15,000 ground troops to effectively pursue ISIS in Iraq and Syria…and that U.S. ground troops might be
necessary to fight ISIS in the future. Although some senior military and governmental officials may argue that more troops on the ground can provide victory over ISIL, opponents to a “boots on the ground” approach, coupled with the Obama Administration’s air campaign approach, argue that these two factors can serve to increase ISIL’s violent terrorist activities and recruitment activities throughout the Middle East. With that in mind, the development of a non-lethal strategy must focus on substituting the category of the systematic air campaign with a non-lethal, whole of government approach that will work in concert with the three remaining categories associated with the counter-terrorism strategy (increase support to forces fighting ISIL on the ground, drawing on our [U.S.] substantial counter-terrorism capabilities to prevent ISIL attacks, and providing humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians displaced by ISIL).

There are a multitude of non-lethal ways to degrade and defeat a violent extremist group. Based on ISIL’s desire to expand throughout the Middle East through the uses of its military capability, this strategy will focus non-lethal activities to isolate ISIL. Understanding that there are “pockets” of sympathetic communities around the world, this strategy seeks to disengage those communities from the militant influence. Further, this strategy will focus non-lethal efforts on de-radicalizing the “operational militant” and the “reformed militant.” Last, to hinder ISIL’s freedom of movement, in a physical or virtual sense, this strategy will employ non-lethal operations to disrupt and frustrate the violent extremist group.

Understanding the implementation of the “Strongman,” senior military and governmental leaders must
...avoid the trap of assuming that groups we, the U.S., have recognized necessarily represent the populations that matter. Our experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and many other places over the past decade should have taught us not to rely on the advice, still less the leadership, of expatriates or leaders based outside of the countries in conflict. At the end of the day, populations look first to those leaders who stay and fight with them.\textsuperscript{66}

The U.S. cannot be the “ugly Americans,” by placing their “guy” into position. It is important that the strongmen identified not only support the policies of the “west,” but speaks for the people as well because he is of the people. The following graphically depicts the implementation of a non-lethal strategy and associated lines of effort to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL.

Figure 1.

ISIL’s violent approach in the Middle East has enabled the organization to advance their efforts to create a Caliphate. Nevertheless, the very capability that this organization exploits is a major vulnerability. ISIL’s barbaric tactics employed against innocent Shi’ites, coupled with their terrorizing Iraqi government troops have
emboldened select Shi’ite Iraqis and other non-Sunni Arabs to counter their violent activities. The figure below demonstrates a smart power approach.

Mr. David S. Cohen, Treasury intelligence strategist and global enforcer, is noted in saying, “That oil is finding its way to someone who is refining it and selling it, and presumably has some relationship with the formal financial sector, and that person is quite vulnerable to our sanctions as well as to our economic diplomacy.”

The manner in which ISIL exports oil on the black market is a strong source of revenue for the organization. Yet, the manner in which the oil is shipped and the organization’s ability to manage millions of dollars of funding, without being detected, places ISIL’s source of economic power at risk. That being the case, ISIL’s center of gravity, through funding from illicit trafficking, is its ability to purchase weapons and other essential goods. Disrupting or preventing funding from the black market and the freedom of maneuver of foreign fighters will have a severe impact on ISIL’s will to fight.
The following graphically illustrates the ways in which this strategy will achieve the stated objectives of disruption and isolation.

![Graph illustrating ways to disrupt ISIL](image)

**Figure 3.**

ISIL has exercised command and control over what appears to be complex, synchronized military operations conducted over a vast amount of terrain. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff suggested that the manner in which ISIL is conducting their operations is placing at risk their ability to command and control, and logistically support, these efforts. The aggressive manner in which ISIL is conducting military operations to gain physical and human terrain to establish the Caliphate appears to be successful in the short term. However, the enduring effect of these operations will have a dire impact on the organization’s future activities. Nevertheless, the implementation of a whole of government approach, in an interdependent manner, working several lines of operation simultaneously, will have the desired impact against ISIL as demonstrated in the graph below.
Successful programs in the Middle East and Southeast Asia therefore have a distinctly religious component to their programs because rehabilitation and reintegration back into mainstream society requires the acceptance of mainstream values and therefore acceptance of a mainstream (or state-sponsored) version of Islam.\textsuperscript{68}

ISIL is perceived by many poor, uneducated Middle Eastern males as being well-supported by select Sunni organizations and that their understanding of Islam cannot be challenged. Nevertheless, the alliance between ISIL and other Sunni groups, coupled with their belief that the organizations “aligned” with Baghdadi (the leader of all Muslims), appears to be fragile. This fragile nature comes from an unpopular perception, from many adjacent Muslim countries, that ISIL’s tactics are not consistent with the true nature of Islam. The visualization tool below is focused on “attacking the alliance.” The employment of methods to undermine and discredit ISIL’s perceived understanding of Islam and its alliance to Baghdadi will force the organization to employ
increased violence against the populace of the Middle East to remain internationally “relevant.”

Although the strategy and associated lines of effort provide a sampling of the critical factors that support a non-lethal approach to degrade and defeat ISIL, it comes with risks and counterpoints. The following portion of this study will illustrate the factors that place a non-lethal approach to defeating ISIL at risk.

Risk/ Counterpoints

No matter how feasible, acceptable, and suitable a strategy appears to be, all strategies have risk and counterpoints associated with them. This strategy is no exception.

The first risk identified is that after being engaged in “13 years of war and an estimated $1 trillion in wartime spending,” it is logical to assume that the U.S. population is not ready to commit their sons, daughters, and treasure to another conflict that is not a current existential threat to the U.S. In a RAND study entitled, How
Terrorist Groups End, the analysis determined that successful counter-insurgency campaigns last an average of 14 years while unsuccessful ones last an average of 11 years. In fact, about a quarter of insurgencies defeated by a government last more than 20 years. This point is further advanced with the following passage,

Patience and national will must be maintained in order to defeat insurgencies since, on average, they require about a dozen years to defeat and may even reconstitute after the fact. Administration officials are only beginning to acknowledge that the campaign against ISIS is likely to extend into the next presidency."

In order to mitigate the impact of the aforementioned risk, the Obama Administration, and future administrations, must be totally transparent with it citizens. This transparency must consist of how the actions and activities relate to protecting the national interest of the U.S., our allies, and our Middle Eastern strategic partners.

Although the Obama Administration has demonstrated a desire to employ the counter-terrorism policy against ISIL, scholars and select military senior leaders suggest that the U.S. is not prepared to fight such an adversary. This assertion is advanced in the following passage,

The historical data support much of the present national discourse and provide warnings about the realities of the current struggle against ISIS—realities for which the United States is unprepared. With its [ISIL's] extremely high capacity to fight and to govern, ISIS is as serious a threat to American interests as any terrorist group we have seen. When it comes to such groups, history teaches that the United States cannot waste any time in assisting the Iraqi, Kurdish and Syrian rebel forces to expand their own capacity to fight and govern, since ultimate success, historically, rests upon the local actors to defeat the enemy.

To mitigate this risk, a whole of government approach to advising and assisting not only the military arms of the Iraqis, Kurds, and Syrians but also investing in assisting the local populations and governments to resist ISIL influence. This advisory and
assistance method provided to partner nation militaries, local populations and
governments appears to be working in places such as Afghanistan and Colombia.

Another risk identified is that, if the non-lethal strategy has the desired impact on
ISIL, “it may potentially trigger a Sunni–Shi’ite civil war in the heart of the Middle East,
which would result in violent spillover and profoundly affect the global economy…and
almost guarantee a massive humanitarian crisis as whole populations in the region
would be subject to severe atrocities.”⁷³ If ISIL perceives that it is losing the support
base of the population, it may turn to a stronger form of coercion against the population.
That being the case, the U.S. may discard the non-lethal strategy to prevent additional
human suffering. To mitigate the risk mentioned above, the employment of “the
Strongman,” through social media, illustrating the human atrocities occurring at the
hands of ISIL will reduce their position of credibility among Westerners and Muslims
alike.

In spite of what appears to be an appropriate manner to degrade and defeat ISIL
through non-lethal means, this strategy within a volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous
environment has some challenges. Adhering to a strictly non-lethal approach would
make the employment of U.S. troops, money, and materials even more costly to the
U.S., coalition and, unfortunately, Middle Eastern strategic partners, as well. Given the
information contained in this study, a non-lethal approach is not appropriate to degrade
and defeat ISIL. Understanding that a non-lethal approach is not a suitable manner to
defeat ISIL, this study advocates a blended lethal and non-lethal approach. Although
the information contained in this study has determined that a non-lethal approach is not
feasible to defeat ISIL, there still remain United States Government senior leaders and scholars who still believe that a bombing campaign is not feasible, as well.

Recommendation

A blended lethal and non-lethal approach supporting: the increased support to forces fighting ISIL on the ground; substantial counter-terrorism operations to prevent ISIL attacks; and humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians displaced by ISIL, is more appropriate strategy to achieve the Obama Administration’s strategic end state against ISIL. The three categories mentioned above, like the lines of operation portrayed in this study, nest with the strategy’s objectives and end state.

The manner in which U.S. and coalition forces can implement such a strategy is through the employment of landpower. U.S. and the coalition abilities to advise and assist Middle Eastern strategy partners can not only increase a partner nation’s capability and capacity to provide self-governance, but can also serve as a clear sign of commitment to prevent future conflicts. Increasing the capacity and capability of strategic partners to solve their own problems must be the primary focus of the U.S. and Coalition Forces. That being the case,

The current United States strategy includes providing support to the Iraqi and Kurdish forces as well as to opposition forces in Syria’s civil war. History indicates that, in the long term, victory will rest more on those forces’ ability to defeat ISIS and develop their own capacity for governance than on U.S. intervention. Therefore, the United States must increase assistance to Iraqi and Kurdish forces and the Syrian opposition in both warfighting and governance capabilities.74

Any uses of lethal force must be by Middle Eastern military elements that are advised and assisted by U.S. and coalition forces, not U.S. and coalition forces planning, resourcing and conducting combat operations against ISIL. In spite of the tactical victory achieved by the west against ISIL, there is always the possibility of it being
undermined by the news cycles that the adversary can exploit. The U.S. and coalition forces cannot and should not solve Middle Eastern problems; Middle Eastern’s must solve Middle Easterners problems.

If U.S. or coalition forces utilizes lethal force, the employment of force must be in response to an in-extremist situation or in force protection role. By employing lethal operations in this manner, the U.S, coalition and Middle Eastern strategic partners are better prepared for the “battle of the story.” In addition to the prudent use of lethal operations, staying ahead of the battle of the story and targeting critical ISIL vulnerabilities, U.S., and coalition senior leader must maintain the “situational awareness” of the international community on the successful Middle Eastern whole of government activities taking place to counter ISIL. “There must be no daylight” between activities taking place in support of advising and assisting Middle Eastern strategic partners and the U.S. population who have deployed loved ones in harm’s way.

The trust factor between the government of the U.S., and its citizens must remain uncompromised. Any misinformation can provide ISIL the opportunity for exploitation. This exploitation can have catastrophic effects on the efforts of the U.S., coalition, and strategic Middle Eastern partners committed to the fight. In closing, a well-blended lethal and non-lethal approach, emphasizing operations against ISIL’s vulnerabilities is critical in achieving the U.S. Commander-in-Chief’s stated objectives to degrade and defeat ISIL.

Endnotes

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10 Henry, “What is the role of negotiations when countering an insurgency?, 5.


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21 Kronfield, Killing them with kindness, 10.

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25 Ibid.

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