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Rejecting the ISIL Tumor

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Abstract

This strategy research project will argue that the United States should re-balance its strategy from a focus on a short-term war against ideologically inspired groups, to a long-term strategy that assists Islam with rejecting the ideology that feeds the disease of Islamic terrorism. Likening fighting Jihadi-Salafi terrorism to fighting cancer, the U.S. can improve its collaborative approach by enhancing the Informational instrument of U.S. power. The present strategy has failed to prevent ISIL and other such groups from metastasizing globally. Risk has increased to American citizens at home and abroad. Risk is evident with long-term stability within the Middle-East manifested through the Shia-Sunni civil war and regional geopolitics. The U.S. should rebalance its strategy to better contain and stabilize the ISIL tumor. The U.S. can marginalize ISIL's social media messaging and its ability to grow regionally, then globally through cyber initiatives. Finally, by resourcing the new Global Engagement Center in the DOS to serve as the soft-power arm of U.S. strategy, the U.S. can enable the Muslim world to reject the cancer of Jihadi-Salafism.

Rejecting the ISIL Tumor

Islamist Terrorism is a cancer on Islam, and Muslims themselves must fight it at our side.

—Marine Le Pen¹

This strategy research project will argue that the United States should re-balance its strategy from a focus on a short-term war against ideologically inspired groups, to a long-term strategy that assists Islam with rejecting the ideology that feeds the disease of Islamic terrorism. Afflicting one of the world's great religions, the most prominent strain of this Islamic terrorist phenomenon is the Islamic State and the Levant, or ISIL.

Secretary of Defense Ash Carter's January 22, 2016 address to the 101st Airborne Division likened ISIL to a cancer within the body of Islam. As Carter describes, "and like all cancers, you can't cure the disease just by cutting it out: you have to eliminate it wherever it has spread, and stop it from coming back."² Suggesting nonlethal operations are critical to complement the lethal ones, Carter underscores the importance of countering the extremist ideology that inspires, recruits, and directs Islamic terrorism globally.

The ideological war is long in character, connects ideologically motivated Islamic extremists across the Middle East and "is metastasizing in areas such as North Africa, Afghanistan and Yemen."³ If past patterns serve as harbinger predictors of future behavior, future groups that share ISIL's ideology will rise from its ashes once ISIL is defeated. For it is ultimately up to Muslims to reject the ISIL tumor that corrupts their youth, threatens their lives and darkens their future as a people. The United States' strategy can better support Muslims to battle the cancer that grows within their society.

Then President Barack Obama established the current policy to fight violent extremism during his September 14, 2014 speech to the United Nations. It is now outlined in the February 2015 National Security Strategy. The United States maintains that “ISIL must be degraded and ultimately destroyed; the World and Muslim Community must explicitly, forcefully and consistently reject the ideology of al Qaeda and ISIL.”⁴ The President directed this policy towards fighting the immediate threat ISIL poses to the stability of the Middle East, and ostensibly to their inspired surrogate and lone wolf attacks in the West. Though clearly stated, this strategy fails to adequately and “consistently reject the ideology.” Said another way, it fails to balance actions intended to combat the ideology in lieu of other objectives.

U.S. strategic objectives to fight ISIL include: “targeted counterterrorism operations through strikes and raids, collective military action with responsible partners, area denial of safe havens and fiscal support, humanitarian support to displaced civilians, domestic force protection and increased efforts to prevent the growth of violent extremism and radicalization through messaging and foreign fighter flow.”⁵ Though the war against ISIL and similarly inspired groups presently takes place in Iraq and Syria against largely Sunni Arab Muslims, the US “rejects the lie that America and its allies are at war with the religion of Islam.”⁶ While true, this strategy ignores that the threat also happens to be Islamic: a small but dangerous cancer within one of the world’s great religions that spreads at an alarming rate. Moreover, the short-term war to degrade and destroy ISIL is arguably making progress, while the long-term strategic objective to reject Salafi-Jihadi ideology is not. A more strenuous application of the information instrument of national power must compliment the military, diplomatic and

economic ones in this war. U.S. strategy can do better to rebalance all the instruments available to fight this metastasizing disease.

Diagnosing the Threat

ISIL's ideological underpinning is specifically regarded as Jihadist-Salafism: an Islamic terror-based ideology that uses violence and terrorism to obtain power. In this regard, ISIL is very Islamic in nature.⁷ While an aspect of this threat manifests as a struggle within the Islamic world for power between the distinct Sunni and Shia sects, the ideology that fuels the cancer is in fact Sunni. Sunnis reflect the large majority of Muslims (roughly 80%), particularly in the Middle East. They account for a number of contemporary Jihadi-Salafi groups.⁸ Jihadis are Muslims that grow frustrated with non-violent means to effect political change and turn to *jihad*, or armed struggle, to overcome their adversaries through militant means. Salafi Muslims, or Salafism, are a mostly non-violent minority group within Sunni Islam that follow a strict and puritanical interpretation of the holy Quran dating back to the 18th century to counter European colonialism.⁹ "Jihadi-Salafis condemn in categorical terms the modern world order because its values are not rooted in Islam, but rather in the Infidel West."¹⁰ "The ultimate goal of Jihadi-Salafis is to make Muslims as powerful as they once were, before the relatively recent dominance of the West over the globe."¹¹ The most prolific Jihadi-Salafi group in recent times is al-Qaeda. ISIL is merely the latest metastasizing of Sunni-based Jihadi-Salafi Muslims. Inciting regional instability, ISIL accelerated ancient religious enmity between Sunni and Shia and exacerbated regional power politics between Persians and Arabs.¹²

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, arguably the strongest Sunni state in the Middle East, and Iran, the largest Shia state, appear locked in a geopolitical power struggle.

“ISIL and al-Qaeda have established themselves in Iraq and Syria (and Yemen) in part because of the dynamics of regional sectarian conflict. This conflict is, in turn, driven in part by the struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran that is steadily drifting toward a rather warm Cold War.”¹³ Arabs and Persians have been at odds since the Arab Empire supplanted Persian dominance in the 7th Century AD. Quietly supporting groups like al-Qaeda and ISIL, (and others), to attack Iranian-backed Shia militia in Iraq and Syria, Saudi Arabia is doing its best to stunt Iran’s growing power. The Saudi and “Arab goal is to roll back Iranian influence where possible and, otherwise, to demonstrate Arab will and power. Saudis have seen utility in building a theological firewall to check Iranian influence – making strategic use of Sunni animus toward Shia, which is viewed as a synonym for Iran.”¹⁴ Iran, who views ISIL as an existential threat, cultivates Shia Arabs in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as a means to combat Saudi support for ISIL and other Jihadi-Salafi groups. Iranian backed Hezbollah, in addition to Shia Popular Mobilization Forces, (PMF), in Iraq, are overtly and covertly supported by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

Attracting fighters globally, this proxy-war between Sunnis and Shia feeds sectarian fervor and elevates ISIL’s level of importance to Sunnis. Foreign fighters are flowing in from both sides, fighting for both sides, with many innocents caught without a side. Accelerating hostilities in the Middle East allow the ISIL cancer to spread to like-minded Sunni groups to Africa, Eurasia, and the Pacific. As scholar Will McCants explains, “in early 2015, the number of Sunni foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq had reached twenty thousand, most of whom had joined the Islamic State. The number of Shia is also comparable. In the Sunni/Shia sectarian apocalypse, everyone has a role to

play in a script written over a thousand years ago - No one wants to miss the show.”¹⁵

For those that cannot travel to Syria, ISIL surrogate groups and disenfranchised lone wolf attackers wage their own local jihad against western powers, in particular the United States.

Weighing Risk

By not addressing the ideology that fuels the violence, the U.S. risks the safety of its citizens both at home and abroad. By demonstrating a myopic focus on lethal operations, the U.S. also risks Middle East instability devolving into chaos through sectarian conflict. Operation Inherent Resolve, (OIR), in Iraq and Syria might destroy the main ISIL tumor, but the U.S. chances confronting another ISIL-like hybrid once it is gone. More alarming, America and the West face continued attacks on its soil from lone wolves. ISIL inspires fear, hatred, and attempts to force an overreaction by the West that in turn worsens the strategic environment from a Western perspective. Finally, the U.S. risks serious overreach with the ongoing war in Syria that may trigger greater regional instability once ISIL is long defeated.

Modern physicians apply a collaborative approach to integrate four basic protocols to treat a variety of cancer: they can cut it out, they can medicate it, they can choose to radiate it, and they can teach the body to reject it. Cancer takes many forms, but modern clinical strategy includes a team of surgeons and doctors “that apply an integrative approach to cancer care that treats the disease with surgery, chemotherapy, radiation and other therapies, while supporting the patient’s strength, stamina and quality of life with evidence-informed therapies. These therapies include a combination of surgical oncology, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, hormone therapy, genomic testing, and immunotherapy.¹⁶ Presently, the military coalition is “cutting out” the

cancerous ISIL tumors in Iraq and Syria, “radiating” Iraqi towns and cities from ISIL’s influence and “medicating” the host (Iraq) with diplomacy, but the unabated spread of disease is evident. ISIL is in a strict defensive posture and losing ground. Divested of the upper Euphrates River Valley, ISIL’s fiscal solvency is at risk because of its halted black-market oil sales. ISIL is losing in Mosul and is in open retreat to Raqqa. However, ISIL collectively stirs the passions and allegiances other Jihadist-Salafist groups in Algeria, Somalia and Yemen, in addition to inspiring jihadists globally. As depicted by the Institute for the Study of War’s January 2016 edition, the cancer continues to metastasize:

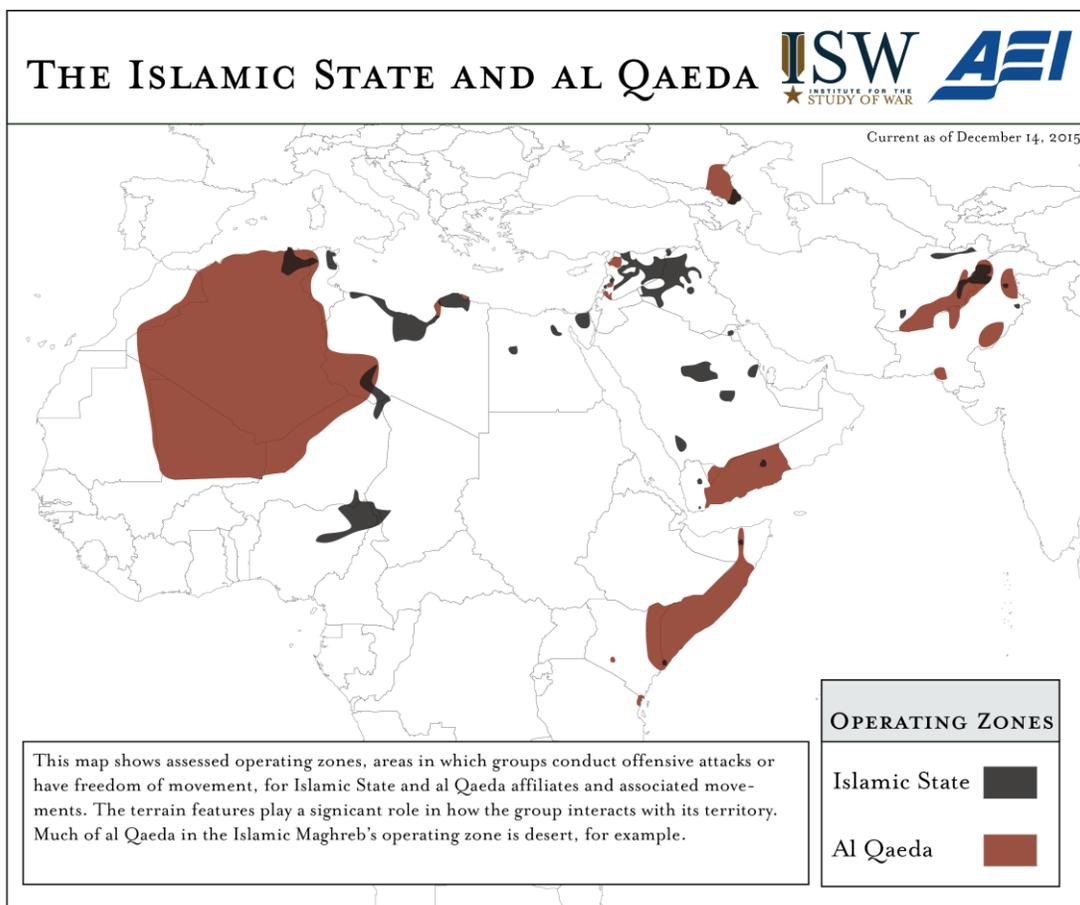


Figure 1. ISIL and al-Qaeda Operating Zones, as of December 14, 2015.¹⁷

Seen above, both al-Qaeda and ISIL are in global competition among the *ummah*, or Muslim community, for preeminence as the lead jihadist organization: both have spread in the form of affiliates and similar Jihadi-Salafi groups have pledged allegiance to them both. ISIL's adroit social media campaign continues to invite the loyalty of recruits in Europe, the Americas, Africa, as well as the Middle East. Disturbingly, increased international attention towards ISIL has allowed al-Qaeda to quietly regain momentum. As scholars Jessica Stern and J.M Berger describe, the competition between al-Qaeda and ISIL portends dire consequences for the West:

The two groups are locked in a battle for supremacy and for the loyalties of unaffiliated groups and the members of existing organizations...The two compete, to some extent, for loyalty, funds and recruits...But most important, this conflict is about vision. The "winner" of the war between al-Qaeda and ISIL will wield tremendous influence over the tactics and goals of the next generation of jihadists...The West has too often found itself fighting the last war, when the next war is taking shape before its eyes. Faced with the expansionist, populist rise of ISIL, we cannot afford to make the same mistake.¹⁸

Exacerbated by the military coalition successes on the battlefields of Syria and Iraq against ISIL, increased attacks against the West and American citizens are consistent and predictable. Both ISIL and al-Qaeda seek dominance and the rightful position as "leader of the faithful."

When the U.S. poorly addresses the ideology, ideologues radicalize others to prosecute violence locally. The world was shocked by the multiple attacks in Paris, France in the past several years.¹⁹ Lone wolf attacks in the United States all contribute to the paranoia Americans exhibit in light of this threat.²⁰ Just as cancer cells threaten the human host, radicalized ideologues threaten the healthy tissue of vulnerable populations. "In total, more than 1,200 people outside of Iraq and Syria have been killed in attacks inspired or coordinated by the Islamic State."²¹ After nearly every attack,

Americans and Europeans abroad appear rightfully angry, fearful and exasperated that their countries have failed to stem the frequency and intensity of these attacks. Figure 2 below from the New York Times demonstrates the operational reach of these attacks:

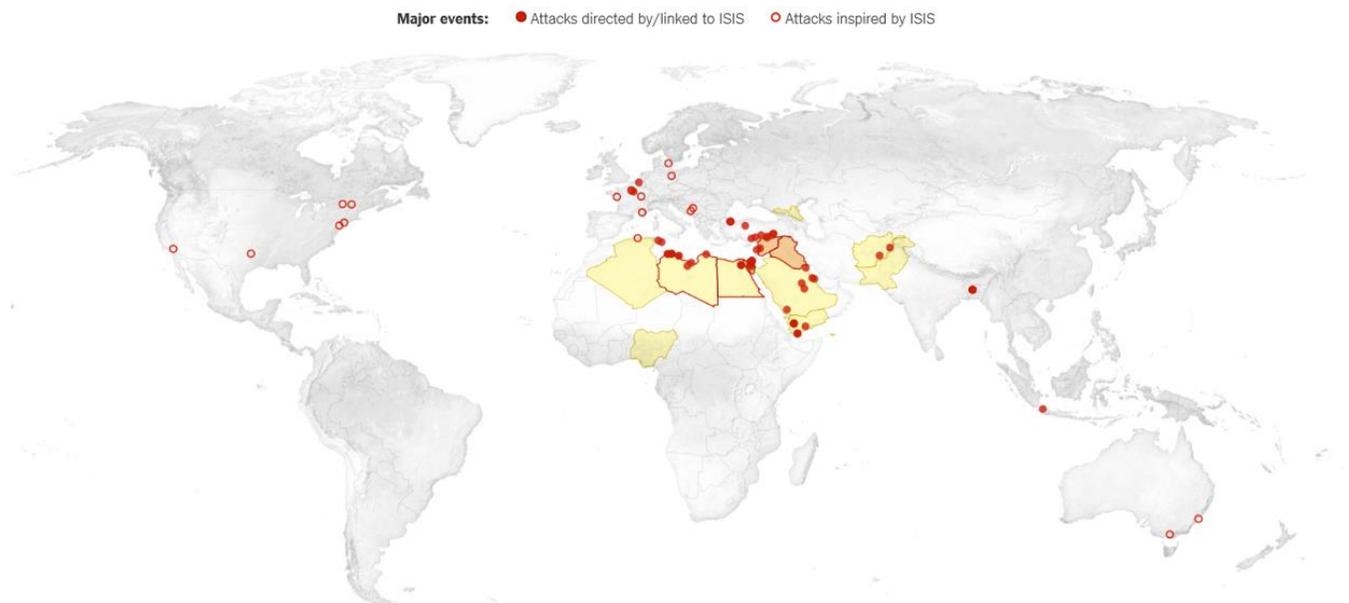


Figure 2. ISIS Inspired Attacks around the World (as of March 22, 2016)²²

Present methods, or “ways” used by U.S. strategy to abrogate ISIL inspired attacks have realized some success, yet attacks continue to occur with lethal consistency. “The world should brace for continuing waves of suicide attacks and hostage-taking assaults. Since the success of Paris in November 2015, ISIL affiliates or inspired supporters have copied these tactics. ...It’s dying breath won’t come with the fall of Raqqa – more likely it will be from the explosive, fiery demise of its suicide bombing cadres.”²³ The war in Syria and Iraq appears to be enduring. With it, the West risks being “baited” into another war abroad, or worse, overstepping into regional conflict that results in a broader war between great powers.²⁴²⁵

The U.S. must avoid this misstep. It must also shape post-OIR hostilities to ensure it can win the peace with other regional stakeholders after ISIL is destroyed. Were the U.S. to rebalance its strategy to confront the Jihadi-Salafi ideology, it could make progress with treating the cancer that eats away at the soul of Islam.²⁶

Rebalancing Strategy to Reject the ISIL Tumor

By retooling the instruments of national power, the U.S. could confront the cancerous ideology that fosters violent Islamic Jihad. To alter the “ways” by which it might do this, the U.S. should consider the following: contain the Sunni-Shia sectarian war and stabilize the Saudi-Iranian cold war that serve as ground zero for Jihadist-Salafism; interdict and marginalize the hate-based messaging that fuels recruitment; and attract and inspire Muslim society to evoke change towards democratic institutions through soft-power. Using a more balanced means of its national power, the U.S. can collaboratively arrest the cancer of Jihadist-Salafism within the Middle East and, over time, help train the body of Islam to reject it as a counterproductive option to achieve their goals.

Contain the Local Tumor

Already cutting out the ISIL tumors to Iraq and Syria, the U.S. can accelerate its work to contain the budding Jihadi-Salafi tumors elsewhere in the Middle East by focusing on the Sunni-Shia divide. Considered by many to reflect a contemporary Islamic Reformation, the Sunni-Shia civil war within Islam is getting worse. A more thoughtful integration of military, economic and diplomatic power is essential. The U.S. should concentrate its efforts to reconnect disenfranchised Iraqi Sunni Tribes back into the governance process and work to support the Syrian Sunni Arabs left to rot in western Syria. Iran heavily influences the Government of Iraq (GoI) and, as such,

actively deprives Sunni involvement in the political process. After 2011, Shia Iraqis regarded their Sunni countrymen as an existential threat. They isolated and persecuted Sunnis in western and northern Iraq and targeted their leadership. As the 66-nation coalition works with Iraq to defeat ISIL within its borders, the U.S. should continue to pressure the GoI to be more inclusive of Sunni moderates.

Empowerment of the Sunni tribes within the Iraqi governance process is presently insufficient. First, the U.S. must broker an agreement with the GoI for defining the term “moderate.” No Shia governing body is comfortable defining this concept, but Iraqi Parliament and its Prime Minister must accept levels of Sunni instability to garner political “buy-in.” Second, moderate Sunni Iraqi inclusion into the governance process may deny ISIL influence in western Iraq. Good governance addresses Sunni grievances locally and stimulates Sunni confidence in the Iraqi regime to protect them from extremists that threaten their tribal seats of power. As McCants posits: “Until Shia governments in Syria and Iraq reach an accommodation with their Sunni citizens, the international coalition against ISIL can only constrain its growth.”²⁷

Increased military pressure in Eastern Syria facilitates a positive information campaign. The U.S. and western powers can restore stability and enhance the perception of safety by protecting vulnerable Sunni populations from coercion and exploitation. Jabhat al-Nusra, the Sunni-based al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, derives its power from the Sunni populations in eastern Syria. ISIL draws its power from territorial control of Raqqa and portions of land it holds in eastern Syria. By excising these tumors through simultaneous and successive operations in Syria, “the conditions on the ground can be altered to change the popular narrative that the West has abandoned Syrian

Sunni Arabs in favor of Iran, Assad, and Russia.”²⁸ The expanding fight into Raqqa to defeat the so-called Islamic Caliphate must also include operations to counter the surrounding support for Jabhat al-Nusra. With the liberation of oppressed Sunni populations living in terrorist occupied zones, the U.S. can work to change their quality of life. This includes providing aid and the needed support to alleviate suffering. Reinforcing the strength of their tribal base may lead to eventual long-term governance solutions. Finally, the demonstrated protection afforded to the Syrian Sunni population sends a message globally. This message says the U.S. does not forsake Sunnis for their Shia brethren. Containing the hate-based cancer of Jihadi-Salafism within the Sunni-Shia divide at ground-zero in Iraq and Syria requires a nuanced application of the instruments of DIME.

Medicate the Tumor: Shrink its Size Locally

Next, the U.S. must work to stabilize the growing Saudi – Iranian Cold War. To reduce ancient Persian-Arab enmity, the U.S. should consider rewards and punishments to influence both nation-states. Moreover, the U.S. can physically assuage Arab anxiety in the Middle East and change the present optic on the “Arab street.” A combination of increased humanitarian aid to stem the refugee crisis and economic leverage through targeted sanctions can curb the Iranian and Saudi proxy support for terrorist organizations.

Diplomatic and economic engagement require creativity with respect to both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Recent U.S. disengagement from the region encouraged Saudi sponsorship of proxies to protect its power and interests. “Viewed from Iran, ISIS and Saudi Arabia constitute a single anti-Iran and anti-Shia continuum.”²⁹ Furthermore, the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JPCOA), the United States’ nuclear deal with

Iran, arguably empowers Iranian nuclear ambitions while increasing Saudi fear of Persian encroachment. As such, “the two most important U.S. policies in the Middle East, the nuclear deal with Iran and the war on ISIS, cannot be separated.”³⁰ Since the settled nuclear issue was once the heart of Iranian and U.S. contention, the U.S. now has the opportunity to leverage Iran economically to stem their cultivation of Arab Shia and covert militant support of Shia governments in Iraq and Syria. Coercive economic measures, properly targeted, can leverage Iran. The nuclear deal removed many coercive economic measures on Iran; however, these sanctions were tied to its nuclear program. Much to Iran’s dismay, several economic sanctions unaffiliated with its nuclear ambitions remain in place today. “Sanctions on Iran are viewed as successful and replicable: policymakers can now look to financial sanctions and other coercive economic measures as tools of strategic messaging, deterrence, constraint, and behavior change.”³¹ By either adjusting or removing existing sanctions, the U.S. can influence Iranian behavior. Coincidentally, when realizing a decreased regional Iranian-backed Shia threat, the U.S. can then diplomatically pressure Saudi Arabia to decrease their sponsorship to Sunni terrorist proxies employed to fight those same Shia-backed governments.

U.S. economic pressure on Iran could abate their malicious cultivation of Shia Arabs to fight as militia against the Sunni in both Iraq and Syria. Combined with diplomatic pressure on Saudi Arabia to cease their sponsorship of regional Jihadi-Salafi proxies, U.S. statecraft could regionally re-incorporate disenfranchised Sunni populations back into the political fold. While simultaneously stabilizing agitated

geopolitics in the Middle East, the U.S. can comprehensively target ISIL's adroit, hate-based internet messaging.

Interdict and Marginalize the Cancer's Ability to Metastasize

To reduce ISIL's ability to metastasize, the U.S. can better focus its cyber capabilities to interdict and marginalize the poisonous ideology that fuels ISIL's global support. Unlike al-Qaeda that does much of its cyber-related communication in secrecy, ISIL is prolific with digital media resources to attract recruits. Appealing to the passions of young Sunni world-wide, ISIL inspires militant jihad as a divine mandate. Catering to millennials, ISIL's social media propaganda allows it to spread its ideology and inspire true believers to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the fight.³² Google's Jared Cohen explains,

The Islamic State's marketing tools run the gamut from popular public platforms to private chat rooms to encrypted messaging systems such as WhatsApp, Kik, Wickr, Zello and Telegram. At the other end of the spectrum, digital media production houses such as the Al-Furqaan Foundation and the Al-Hayat Media Center – presumably funded by and answering to the Islamic State's Central Leadership – churn out professional-grade videos and advertisements.³³

ISIL cultivates many more supporters on a point-to-point basis that view apocalyptic end as a better alternative to their present circumstance. Denying and reclaiming this digital terrain remains critical, but "most digital efforts against ISIL have been reactive, too limited, focusing on specific tactics, such as creating counternarratives to extremism in lieu of generating a comprehensive strategy."³⁴ The U.S. should create a comprehensive campaign utilizing public and private partnerships to deny ISIL's social media market. By "marginalizing their operations on the internet to the Dark Web, or the part of the internet requiring only the most skilled digital users to encrypt it, ISIL becomes globally constrained. They become shamed and relegated to

the part of the web most attributed to criminal networks, drug trafficking, and the sex trade.”³⁵ Consequently, ISIL’s pious message becomes soiled by association.

This initial step in a new digital campaign includes “targeting ISIL’s digital leadership and nonhuman digital users.”³⁶ By forging partnerships with Google, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and other private digital companies, federal law enforcement could create a methodology to target ISIL’s central digital leadership, “identifying and suspending the specific accounts responsible for setting strategy and giving orders to the rest of its online army.”³⁷ The developing public-private synergy could eliminate the accounts of the largest amount of ISIL’s digital fighters, “the non-human users that comprise tens of thousands of fake accounts meant to automate the dissemination of ISILs content and multiply its message.”³⁸ Denying reproduction of its narrative and eliminating the digital terrain its leadership use to communicate would force coordination into discredited Dark Web obscurity. Citing the example established in the United Kingdom, Cohen demonstrates how the British Counter Terrorism Internet Unit worked with private companies to remove millions of hate-based messages and suspended tens of thousands of accounts linked to ISIL.³⁹ The cyber effort in the U.S. government is not coordinated with the private sector to effectively replicate this. Were it to do so, much of ISIL’s outreach to global audiences could be asphyxiated. Limiting access to its cancerous ideology also limits its ability to attract recruits and organize action.

The second step of a digital campaign to interdict and marginalize includes targeting the finite audience actively pursuing Jihadi-Salafi Islam. Rather than creating broad anti-ISIL messages, cyber efforts ought to focus solely on users who participate in Jihadi-Salafi sites and minimize their ability to communicate. These individuals

already support ISIL's ideology. Their patterns on the internet and social media can and should be targeted to the degree required to minimize their capacity for coordination, information and planning. As Cohen once again explains,

An anti-extremist video viewed by 50,000 of the right kind of people will have a greater impact than one seen by 50 million random viewers. Given the diversity of the Islamic State's digital rank and file, betting on the counternarratives alone would be too risky. To combat extremists who have already made up their minds, the campaign should target their willingness to operate in the open.⁴⁰

This targeting method requires a better organized digital strategy. Lastly, government and private sectors should consider cooperative efforts to target the social media users that fit the profile of lone-wolf attackers in the West.

One of the strategic ends of our present counter-ISIL strategy is to expose ISIL's true nature. While much has been done to broadly advertise their unbridled brutality and perverse Jihadi-Salafi theology, this fails to dissuade and ironically attracts the vulnerable souls mired in identity crisis. These potential lone-wolves require more than a mere counter-ISIL messaging plan. Their symptoms of loneliness and disenfranchisement are best treated with protocols used to counter depression and anger. As Cohen clarifies, "moderate religious messages may work for the pious recruit, but not for the lonely American teenager who was promised multiple wives and a sense of belonging in Syria. He might be better served by something more similar to suicide prevention and anti-bullying campaigns."⁴¹ Arguably, those who follow the Jihadist Salafist path are lost in life. Longing for purpose and a desire for leadership, these lost souls seek alternatives for their present life. Social media and internet messages tooled to target them with compassion and empathy may prove more effective in dissuading their behavior than with anti-ISIL political messages. Another counternarrative that may

gain traction with this audience are testimonials of former disillusioned ISIL veterans. Exposing the so-called Caliphate, with its false social realities, losing war, and sociopathic regime is not exploited fully through digital means. Such efforts demand a cogent plan consistently focused through cooperative public and private partnerships. Such a plan might start with the new Global Engagement Center (GEC), an interagency entity in the U.S. Department of State (DoS) charged with coordinating U.S. counterterrorism digital messaging to foreign governments.⁴² This new organization is a step in the right direction. The GEC uses a “whole-of government approach to counter violent extremism,” but is narrowly focused on counter-messaging only.⁴³ As an interagency entity, it can arguably be empowered to garner private partnerships and widen its cyber capacity to help wield soft-power initiatives to alter behavior by, with, and through the Muslim world.

Empower the Islamic Body to Heal Itself

The U.S. should inspire and attract Muslim society to embrace alternatives to violent extremism. This soft power approach requires organization, leadership and resources not present within our current strategy. The U.S. can assist Islamic leadership to contend with the enormous “youth bulge” in the Middle East. The U.S. might also resource progressive grass-roots movements in the Islamic world that encourages women’s rights, and supports non-violent action to evoke democratic change in autocratic Middle Eastern regimes. Though many nations in the Middle East may bristle at the notion of supporting women’s rights and democratic institutional change, many have little choice, as progress is already evident. Currently, such a soft power approach does not balance with the hard power method of military intervention, air strikes, and economic sanctions against Islamic countries that support VEOs. Other than the GEC

within the DoS, no such strategy is optimized to counter ISIL in this fashion. The U.S. ought to build upon this organization to create entrepreneurial opportunities, support education and incentivize investment. This new hybrid GEC could work with Islamic countries to attract their youth to achieve unrealized opportunities and develop a collective sense of hope.

The youth bulge in the Middle East is a daunting issue. It affords ISIL and other groups a nearly unlimited supply of recruits seeking an Islamic utopia in lieu of their present circumstance. “When you consider that one billion Muslims are under the age of thirty, the pool from which the extremists recruit, you realize the full scope of the problem.”⁴⁴ These young men and women are in many cases locked into poverty, dismayed with their government’s corruption, and afflicted with a collective case of post-traumatic stress. As scholar Farah Pandith explains: “Since 9/11, Muslim youth have experienced a profound identity crisis unlike any in modern history. They have craved answers, seeking purpose and belonging. The extremists understand that to gain recruits, they must cater to their audience. They are winning because right now, their narratives are louder and reach more youth than any other.”⁴⁵ By working with and through Islamic governments in the Middle East, the U.S. can help safeguard future generations of Muslims that might otherwise fall victim to Islamic Jihad. This soft-power initiative requires U.S. strategy to adopt options that include selecting appropriate leadership, organizing an interagency approach and appropriating the resources to be effective.⁴⁶ Indicated previously, an option can be built around the recent GEC initiative, and it can connect with international governmental organizations (IGOs), such as the United Nations, to lead and plan the resources to create global networks. These

networks would focus on education, entrepreneurial opportunities, mentorship, medical support and political inclusion that facilitate a brighter future for Islamic youth. Instead of fostering an “us against them” narrative, which ISIL adopts, the U.S. could influence an “us for you” campaign. By pooling the strengths of American industry and academic institutions, an enhanced interagency GEC could work through countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iraq and Syria to create global outreach initiatives. As Pandith argues:

This means our embassies can work to create first-of-their-kind global networks, like Generation Change, a network of Muslim change-makers who were committed to pushing back against extremist ideology. I’m talking about getting credible voices to inoculate their communities against extremist techniques and appeal. I’m talking about helping parents understand extremist tactics so they can educate their children about this threat. I’m talking about working with mental health professionals to understand the adolescent mind and to develop programs that can help stop radicalization.⁴⁷

U.S. strategy needs a comprehensive organization to attract a very promising and very young Muslim population in crisis. Not only will this degrade the narrative of extremist messaging, but counters it with opportunities for a better life. Thus far, U.S. efforts regarding any soft power approach have been under-resourced and uncreative. Yet another soft power initiative not seriously explored involves mobilizing the other fifty percent of Islamic society that thus far has been categorically ignored – women.

One of the most powerful influencers in the lives of all Muslims is women. Counterintuitive, since initial western perceptions suggest that many women in Muslim societies are repressed, silenced, and abused. In reality, women in Islamic society play a crucial role with developing and influencing their husbands, sons and daughters with lifelong values and beliefs. Jihadi-Salafi groups understand this. And groups such as ISIL, “seek to claim the loyalty of women – to provide sexual pleasure, to keep house, to

procreate, to help actualize the model of domestic life that ISIL idealizes, and most recently, to serve as ideological messengers over the world.”⁴⁸ To counter this approach, this same U.S. soft-power based organization could identify opportunities in the Muslim world to reinforce women’s rights movements to effect positive change in their lives and in the lives of their families.

In the last 20 years, female Muslim non-violent action has gained momentum. Whether in the western Sahara to obtain human rights, in Saudi Arabia for larger freedoms to drive and dress, in Iran for political inclusion, and in Liberia supporting the Mass Action for Peace movement, women have moved autocratic regimes towards democratic habits and pluralistic societies. Non-violent action is broad-based civic action that encourages wide-spread popular participation to alter political, social and economic conditions. When considering effectiveness, “major non-violent campaigns globally have achieved success 53% of the time, compared to violent campaigns that realize success only 26% of the time.”⁴⁹ “Moreover, even after a failed non-violent campaign, 35% of the time a democratic outcome becomes the reality in that regime because it invokes fourth and fifth order processes for positive change.”⁵⁰ In Iran, for example,

Women of all ages and walks of life, from those sporting hip headscarves to those in black chadors, have been in the vanguard of protests, displaying immense courage, facing beatings, detention and even death. The experience of women’s rights activists in organizing non-violent action under harsh conditions of repression, most recently the One Million signatures campaign, has been parlayed into the Green Movement.⁵¹

Muslim women in Liberia, in partnership with Christian women, were the tipping point credited with ending Charles Taylor’s repressive regime that brought cessation to

the Liberian Civil War in 2003. They did this through mass protests, civic action, media engagement and sex strikes.

By enabling global outreach and support through technology, access to resources, education and economic leverage against repressive regimes, the U.S. could enable the non-violent mobilization of women to fight repressive regimes and counter the message of domestic slavery championed by ISIL. Encouraging Islamic regimes with aid packages and trade incentives to support ongoing broad-based women's initiatives, the U.S. could instigate the active support for non-violent change towards democratic institutions within the Middle East.

To defeat the idealism of the radical ideologue, the U.S. should contain the tumors already in existence, stabilize the environment that fosters their growth, deny and marginalize their ability to metastasize, and inspire Islamic society to seek alternatives to Jihadi-Salafi doctrine. The United States must be prepared to increase economic aid and military presence in some areas. In others, it should enact economic and diplomatic options. The U.S. should consider motivating public and private partnerships in the information domain to enable cyber courses-of-action.

The Means to Balance U.S. Strategy

Resources, or means to realize the changes required to alter current U.S. strategy to combat ISIL's ideology fall into the categories of organization, money, and time. At present, the GEC is a promising, though incomplete start. "The Center's overarching goal is to expose ISIL's true nature – and that of other extremist organizations – thereby diminishing their influence and decreasing these organizations' allure in the eyes of potential recruits and sympathizers."⁵² However, the GEC does not implement a comprehensive non-lethal strategy that includes the full range of

investment, education, health, and political empowerment for Muslims to counter violent extremism. “We could reorganize our U.S. government effort to provide appropriate levels of funding and personnel. And most important, we would put a senior person accountable to either the president or Congress in charge of this effort.”⁵³ This appears to cost more taxpayer dollars and requires significant time to realize positive change through the Islamic world. American political impatience for fast results and fiscal conservatism realities for this alternative appear bleak. The operational cost associated with fully resourcing this organization would be significant. It is notable, however, that this cost would pale in comparison to the operational costs associated with more U.S. troops levied to deploy and fight ISIL militarily. Furthermore, the results that this organization would generate over time would more than pay for the start-up fees associated with it.

Lastly, the time to achieve results is relative to the resources applied to the problem. By focusing on the information instrument of power, appropriately organizing and funding its initiatives, and working through the Islamic world using a multi-domain approach, results might be seen more readily than they have thus far. Said another way, the U.S. cannot afford to not do something in this regard. To do nothing but stay the present course would place our citizens at risk of becoming victims of a metastasizing cancer that grows daily with greater velocity and frequency. To act in a coordinated manner to combat the ideology through Muslim society can pay dividends for our people and may “inoculate future generations of Muslims in the Middle East from radicalization.”⁵⁴

Conclusion

The United States cannot win the war of ideology – the Muslim world must do this. While the military, economic, and diplomatic instruments exert much energy to defeat the cancer of ISIL, the information instrument of U.S. power lacks sincerity. Without America's combined diplomatic, informational, military and economic might, Islamic society risks failing to do this by itself. Tumult within the Middle East is manifesting into an Islamic Reformation within Islamic society. Under the backdrop of ancient cultural rivalries and the contemporary information renaissance, Islamic terrorism in its present form of Jihadi-Salafism threatens the West both at home and abroad. This cancer cannot be treated alone by merely cutting part of it out, radiating some of it, and medicating its remainder. It must be more collaborative and inclusive of the information instrument of U.S. power.

The U.S. must be prepared to recalibrate its current strategy. Failure to rebalance it risks prolonged and existential threats to Americans and invites miscalculation for more wars amongst ungoverned spaces within the Middle East. This rebalance requires leadership, reorganization, resources, time and most importantly, patience. To achieve balance, empowering public and private partnerships and appropriating stronger soft-power initiatives should be considered. Combine these actions under the present U.S. Strategy to degrade and destroy ISIL, and the body of Islam can be taught to inexorably reject this cancer over time.

Endnotes

¹ Marine Le Pen, "To Call this Threat by its Name: France was Attacked by Islamic Fundamentalism," *New York Times*, January 18, 2015.

² Ash Carter, “Ash Carter: It’s Time to Accelerate the ISIL Fight,” *Politico*, January 22, 2016, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴ “The United States must address the cycle of conflict – especially sectarian conflict – that creates the conditions that terrorists prey upon; along with the Arab and Muslim world, focus on the extraordinary potential of their people – especially the youth,” President Barack Obama, “U.S. Policy for Fighting Violent Extremism,” public speech, The United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 14, 2104.

⁵ Barack H. Obama, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: The White House, February 2015), 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ “The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic, Very Islamic. Yes, it has attracted psychopaths and adventure seekers, drawn largely from the disaffected populations of the Middle East and Europe. But the religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam. Virtually every major decision and law promulgated by the Islamic State adheres to what it calls, in its press and pronouncements, and on its billboards, license plates, stationary and coins, ‘the Prophetic methodology,’ which means following the prophecy and example of Muhammad, in punctilious detail. Muslims can reject the Islamic State; nearly all do. But pretending it isn’t actually a religious, millenarian group, with theology that must be understood to be combatted, has already led the United States to underestimate it and back foolish schemes to counter it.” Graeme Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” *The Atlantic*, March 2015, 5.

⁸ “Jihadi-Salafi groups include the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the Taliban, Jabhat al-Nusra, the Islamic State, and newly aligned ISIL affiliates such as Boko Haram in Nigeria,” referenced from article by Dr. Bernard Haykel, “ISIS: A Primer,” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, June 3, 2015, 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ Bernard Haykel, “The Seventh Annual Ernest May Memorial Lecture: The History and Ideology of the Islamic State,” in *Blind Spot: America’s Response to Radicalism in the Middle East*, ed. Nicholas Burns and Jonathan Price (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 2015), 24.

¹² “Disagreeing with the hereditary ascension to the Caliphate after the Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632 AD, ‘the Islamic State regards Shiism as innovation, and to innovate on the Quran is to deny its initial perfection. That means roughly 200 million Shia are marked for death by ISIL.’ Shia backed governments in Iran and Iraq, combined with Iranian supported Shia fighters, fight an internal war for what some consider “the soul of Islam” itself. Suggesting a growing Islamic Reformation, this war has fomented since the 7th century. The rise of ISIL can be viewed as the natural fall-out associated with America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab Spring phenomenon that occurred in 2011 and the accelerating power-politics of the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran.” Wood, “What ISIS Really Wants,” 9.

¹³ Frederick Kagan et al., *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and Al Qaeda*, Report 1 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, January 2016), 33.

¹⁴ Vali Nasr, "Extremism, Sectarianism, and Regional Rivalry in the Middle East," in *Blind Spot: America's Response to Radicalism in the Middle East*, ed. Nicholas Burns and Jonathan Price, 64.

¹⁵ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, 112.

¹⁶ Cancer Treatment Centers of America, "Discover Integrative Cancer Treatment," <http://www.cancercenter.com/ctca-difference/integrative-cancer-treatment/> (accessed December 20 2016).

¹⁷ Kagan, *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and Al Qaeda*, 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁹ "Charlie Hebdo in January 2015 and the Bata Klan Theater in December 2015, Bastille Day in Nice, July 2016." Paris France terrorist attacks, referenced by Karen Yourish et al., "Where ISIS Has Directed Attacks around the World," *New York Times*, July 16, 2016.

²⁰ "2013 terrorist attack on the Boston Marathon, December 2015 in San Bernardino, the Orlando Nightclub Shooting in June 2016, and the Ohio State attack in November 2016." Terrorist Attacks in America attributed to ISIL, referenced by *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ Clint Watts, "Horroric ISIS Attacks during Ramadan Disguise a Retreating and Fracturing Terrorist Group," *The World Post*, July 8, 2016.

²⁴ "The risk of missteps post-OIR in both Iraq and Syria are evident. Unfortunately, the U.S. and its 66-nation coalition arguably wage OIR without unity of purpose. The U.S. is the only nation that has destroying ISIL as its number one priority. The other 65 are fighting for other reasons best defined by honor, prestige, territorial rights and economic reasons." Office Call with Senior Leader, Operation Inherent Resolve, Iraq, June 3, 2016.

²⁵ "Iraq fights to secure its borders and eliminate Sunni extremists as a viable threat to Baghdad. Kurds of all flavors (and they all don't agree with each other) are fighting for an independent state. European allies are fighting to secure the oil reserves in the Upper Euphrates Valley. Iran fights proxies to secure Iraq as a Shia buffer against Sunni nations to its west. Short of those nations contributing to OIR, nobody appears to coordinate its actions and all are fighting in a region that is rife with sectarian war, rich in oil resources, and a large frustrated youth bulge supplying the human capital. Russia and China both want to keep Assad in power in Syria. The U.S. demanded his removal as its original policy position. Poor coordination in a protracted war could lead to a regional war between great powers." Larry P. Goodson, "How the Syrian Civil War Became the Great War for the Soul of the Middle East," lecture, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle, PA, July 12, 2016.

²⁶ Ibid., 1.

²⁷ McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, 157.

²⁸ Jennifer Cafarella, Harleen Gambhir, and Katherine Zimmerman, *U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and Al Qaeda, Report Three – Jabhat Al Nusra and ISIS: Sources of Strength* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, February 2016), 7.

²⁹ Nasr, *Blind Spot: America's Response to Radicalism in the Middle East*, 66.

³⁰ Ibid., 67.

³¹ Zachary Goldman and Elizabeth Rosenberg, "American Economic Power: The New Face of Financial Warfare," *CNAS*, June 2015, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/economic-statecraft-american-economic-power-and-the-new-face-of-financial-warfare> (accessed January 3, 2017).

³² "ISIL's vast digital army includes output of more than 90,000 social media messages per day and boasts as many as 46,000 Twitter accounts in 2004," article by Jared Cohen, "Digital Counterinsurgency: How to Marginalize the Islamic State Online," in *Blind Spot: America's Response to Radicalism in the Middle East*, 128.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., 130.

³⁶ Ibid., 131.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ "In 2014, the British Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit, (CTIRU), worked closely with such companies as Google, Facebook, and Twitter to flag more than 46,000 pieces of violent or hateful content for removal. That same year, YouTube took down approximately 14 million videos. In April 2015, Twitter announced that it suspended 10,000 accounts linked to the Islamic State on a single day. Such efforts are valuable in that they provide a cleaner digital environment for millions of users.", Ibid., 132.

⁴⁰ Al-Qaeda already operates behind encryption and rigid privacy settings for fear of being tracked. Likewise, ISIL's rank and file should be forced to adopt similar behavior," Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² "The Global Engagement Center was established pursuant to Executive Order 13721, signed on March 14, 2016, which states that 'the Center shall lead the coordination, integration, and synchronization of Government-wide communications activities directed at foreign audiences abroad in order to counter the messaging and diminish the influence of international terrorist organizations,' such as ISIL. Designed to be agile, innovative organization, the Center

uses modern, cutting-edge technology and takes advantage of the best talent and tools throughout the private sector and government.” U.S. *Department of State: Diplomacy in Action, Global Engagement Center Home Page*, <https://www.state.gov/r/gec/index.htm> (accessed January 26, 2017).

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Farah Pandith, “Extremism in the Middle East,” in *Blind Spot: America’s Response to Radicalism in the Middle East*, 32.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁹ Maria Stephan and Erica Chenowith, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,” *International Security* 33, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 8.

⁵⁰ Maria Stephan and Erica Chenowith, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 215-216.

⁵¹ Fariba Davoudi Mohajer, Roya Taloui, and Shaazka Beyerle, “The Iranian Woman’s Movement: Repression Versus Nonviolent Resolve,” in *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East*, ed. Maria J. Stephan (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009), 295.

⁵² *U.S. Department of State: Diplomacy in Action, Global Engagement Center Home Page*.

⁵³ Pandith, *Blind Spot: America’s Response to Radicalism in the Middle East*, 40.

⁵⁴ Ibid.