



Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies

Occasional Paper

Inherently Unresolved

Regional Politics and the Counter-ISIS Campaign

Edited by Jonathan Eyal and Elizabeth Quintana



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Editors' Note

Jonathan Eyal and Elizabeth Quintana

The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 out of the civil wars in those two countries has caused great consternation among the international community. It is clear that an organisation based on such a violent and expansionist ideology cannot be left unchecked. Spurred on by the slaughter and siege of the Yazidi tribe near Mount Sinjar in Iraq, a US-led coalition launched a military offensive to halt the advance of the group and to bring immediate aid to those who had fled their homes and were stranded on the mountain. However, the counter-ISIS campaign has become mired in the broader regional – and, indeed, global – dynamics at play.

One year on, there have been some successes in pushing ISIS back in Iraq and Syria thanks in large part to US-backed Kurdish forces. However, Turkey will not tolerate any further expansion of Kurdish-held territory, control of Syria has fragmented between the regime and an array of armed groups, and Iraq is increasingly likely to split along sectarian lines. As ISIS moves west from its stronghold in Raqqa, it continues to take land from forces fighting for Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's regime, while also running into the externally supported jihadi groups and other rebel forces.

Action in support of any of the myriad groups on the ground, such as Kurdish forces or 'moderate' Syrian rebel forces, risks distorting further the already-fluctuating balance of regional interests, potentially unleashing a whole host of unforeseen consequences. Nor are major regional players – such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey – the only external actors to be considered in seeking a solution to the crisis: smaller states such as Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Egypt obviously have a stake in the stability of the Middle East, as do major powers beyond the region, such as the US and Russia. Beneath this lies the undercurrent of the Sunni-Shia divide, manifested in recent years in a Saudi–Iranian proxy war that has found a new outlet in the conflict presently engulfing Syria and Iraq. A further key factor is the Kurds, who have fought hard against ISIS and have arguably the greatest chance for a breakaway state in their recent history (Turkey's opposition notwithstanding).

In sum, there is a very real risk of Balkanisation of the region (despite the fact that most Syrians strongly resist the idea), and preserving the unity of today's states is becoming increasingly difficult. The real concern is that an intervention which began as a counter-insurgency campaign could now become something much deeper, with – ironically – ISIS the only real winner.

This occasional paper, the first of two exploring international efforts to counter ISIS,¹ will lay out the political backdrop to practical efforts to tackle the group. It begins with a survey of the regional conditions that have facilitated the rise of ISIS, the potential role of the US in finding a solution to the crisis, and points for consideration if a longer-lasting solution to the threat of ISIS –

1. The second occasional paper assesses military efforts to counter ISIS, particularly the UK's contribution.

and the conditions that spawned it – is to be found. The paper then provides a brief outline of the emergence of ISIS, before exploring the perspectives of the various actors within Iraq, and then of the Gulf States, Iran and Russia.

There are no easy solutions, not least because of the kaleidoscopic interests at stake. With US commanders warning that the campaign may last at least a decade,² more needs to be done to bring both regional and global actors to the table. In relation to Syria in particular, it is vital for the US, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, among others, to move beyond the current paralysis over the future of Assad's regime and seek a sustainable, non-sectarian settlement. This would be a significant step towards defeating ISIS. Given the multifarious dynamics at play, however, this will certainly not be a straightforward path and, with events on the ground continuing to outstrip the pace of the diplomatic response, the international community must accept it is in it for the long haul.

Note on Nomenclature

There are numerous ways of referring to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Al-Sham (ISIS) at various points of its historical evolution, and many of these are informed by the political preferences of various actors. While the editors acknowledge all of these viewpoints, and the perceived political connotations of each term, for ease and consistency this occasional paper uses the acronym 'ISIS' throughout, except where it is necessary to identify the group at different points in its history, when the contemporary term employed by the group itself is used.

2. Aaron Mehta, 'Odierno: ISIS Fight Will Last "10 to 20 Years"', *DefenseNews*, 17 July 2015; Dan de Luce, 'Is the U.S. Ready for an Endless War against the Islamic State?', *Foreign Policy*, 27 August 2015.

I. Introduction: ISIS – Borne of the Middle East's Unresolved Problems

Jonathan Eyal

There are good reasons why the US administration needed almost a month to weigh its options when the ISIS crisis first erupted in Iraq in June 2014. None were good: doing nothing risked Iraq's rapid disintegration, but sending in US troops raised the spectre of 'mission creep', precisely the sort of military adventure the current US president has always been keen to avoid. Yet when Obama did reach his initial decision on how to respond to the crisis, this amounted to splitting the difference between these options by 'going small' on all of them. The US is assisting Iraq with intelligence, advisers and air support to target the ISIS fighters who are now threatening regional stability. However, the US will not otherwise get involved in directing the Iraq conflict; that task is supposedly left to the political actors on the ground.

At first sight, this new strategy is both eminently reasonable and logical. However, it is also unsustainable in the long term, for the map of the Middle East is now changing in profound and irreversible ways, with the US increasingly relegated to the role of an arbiter between competing factions.

It is tempting, but almost always wrong, to blame the US for all the ills in the Middle East, given its longstanding support for the region's venal and cruel regimes whose rule contributed to the current troubles, and its leading role in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. For bad governance, dictatorship and obtuse rulers – as well as extreme poverty coupled with extreme wealth – are enduring regional problems which would have resulted in a political eruption even if outside powers ignored the Middle East altogether. In short, blaming the US provides a welcome distraction from dealing with the far more significant developments now tearing the region apart.

While the rise of ISIS is, in some ways, associated with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the roots of the extremist movement are really to be found in the broader, deep-rooted conditions: the failure of the current state of Iraq; the collapse of the regional order; economic decay; and the broader lack of tolerance and political education in the Middle East.¹ It is these conditions that must be tackled to destroy the appeal of the group, and those that may come after it.

Although there are no immediate or comprehensive solutions to the challenge of ISIS, managing the situation by limiting the organisation's reach and ability to cause mischief is a perfectly legitimate pursuit and one which can be pursued both with greater vision and vigour. However, in doing so, the underlying regional dynamics must always be borne in mind.

1. See Christoph Reuter, 'The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State', *Der Spiegel*, 18 April 2015.

The Past is Another Region

The first of these dynamics is the grossly misnamed 'Arab Spring', the wave of uprisings which began in late 2010 with the promise of democracy only to end up in chaos. The revolutions did not just topple a number of Arab leaders; they also shattered the old method of ruling.

The Arab monarchies of the Gulf have, at least to date, successfully insulated themselves from the revolutionary trend, partly because they enjoy a historical national legitimacy but also because, in most cases, they have used their oil wealth to buy popular consent. Others, such as Tunisia, have struggled to create a new political order or, like Egypt, have returned to the old, military-dominated political model. However, for the majority of the other states affected by this turmoil, national disintegration seems the only outcome.

Libya is now, in effect, divided between three factions, each operating its own government.² Syria is torn apart by about ten major fighting factions,³ with decision-making happening at the local rather than the national level, where President Bashar Al-Assad maintains largely nominal control. In addition, even if ISIS is eventually driven out of neighbouring Iraq, making the country function again as a single entity seems an aspiration beyond anyone's reach.

Although it is tempting to pretend that, sooner or later, a modicum of stability will return to Iraq, this is, sadly, unlikely. As in Syria, where it is unlikely that a centralised regime will ever again exercise complete control over the country, the problem is no longer merely one of creating a more 'inclusive' government. Rather, the difficulty lies in forging a new justification for the continued existence of states which were originally cobbled together by the old colonial powers of Britain and France, which have persistently failed to provide good governance, and which have in recent years been kept together largely by repression and fear.

Creating such a new national consensus is fiendishly difficult in the best of times, but is rendered much more difficult given the other long-term trend now affecting the Middle East: the Muslim Sunni–Shia confrontation. Again, many outside observers are tempted to dismiss this as a temporary phenomenon, a 'sectarian clash'; instead, however, it is far more akin to a national liberation movement, as repressed groups throughout the region attempt to redress a longstanding imbalance in governance.

The catalyst for this movement was undoubtedly the 1979 revolution in Iran which, for the first time, gave Shias the inspiration of emancipation. However, the Sunni–Shia confrontation which now convulses Iraq is also largely home-grown and, as in Lebanon, largely irreversible. Almost exactly a century after the current Middle East was carved up from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, the region is about to reinvent itself.

2. Alison Pargeter, 'The Threat Posed by Daesh in Libya', *RUSI Newsbrief* (Vol. 35, No. 3, May 2015).
 3. Clarion Project, 'Who's Who in the Syrian Civil War', fact sheet, <<http://www.clarionproject.org/factsheet/whos-who-syrian-war>>, accessed 1 September 2015.

Yet it is important to recall that the current turmoil is also due to the failure of state-sponsored Islamism, in both its Iranian and Saudi versions, which has been going on for decades. It is this that has enabled a neo-jihadi movement to stake its claim of leadership in the heartland of the Muslim world.

The first experiments with electoral democracy in 2012 and 2013 helped various Islamist groups, often linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, to win pluralities in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt – while the Turkish branch of the movement achieved a record third-round victory in 2011, just as the Arab upheavals were underway, by winning the support of half the electorate.⁴ For a brief moment, those victories appeared to have marginalised the more radical jihadi movements by creating the hope – some might say illusion – that Islamists could win power through non-violent means and in the context of democratic politics. However, the military coup d'état in Egypt in July 2013 and the containment of Islamists in Morocco and Libya opened a new space for a more radical jihadi message, which ISIS represents.

We are therefore witnessing profound shifts which cannot be stopped or controlled, as well as some violent manifestations which, if they cannot be defeated, can at least be contained.

No Counsel of Despair

What can outside powers, and particularly the US, do when faced with such a strategic tsunami? Surprisingly, a great deal. The first step is to accept – tacitly to start with, but ultimately also publicly – that some of the existing Arab states will not survive in their current borders. As the horrors of the Balkans during the 1990s demonstrated, trying to keep failed states together is often more bloody than accepting their disintegration and is not always very glorious either.

The multi-ethnic model of states is under attack. Nobody should relish such developments: the tracing of new borders is often accompanied by 'ethnic cleansing' – the expulsion or murder of those who do not 'fit' new political realities. This has already happened in Lebanon,⁵ and is happening every day in Syria and Iraq.⁶ The choice which faces the US and other foreign governments is whether to confront such realities head on.

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4. Constanze Letsch, 'Recep Erdogan Wins by Landslide in Turkey's General Election', *Guardian*, 13 June 2011.
 5. Robert Fisk, 'Lebanon's Dispossessed Come Home: Robert Fisk in Damour on the Scars of an Orgy of Ethnic Cleansing', *Independent*, 16 May 1993.
 6. Abdulrahman Al-Masri, 'Is There "Systematic Ethnic Cleansing" by Kurds in North-East Syria?', *Middle East Monitor*, 21 June 2015, <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/middle-east/19356-is-there-systematic-ethnic-cleansing-by-kurds-in-north-east-syria>>, accessed 1 September 2015; Zeina Khodr, 'Syria Deal: "Population Swap" or "Sectarian Cleansing"?', *Al Jazeera*, 15 August 2015; Michael Weiss and Michael Pregent, 'The U.S. is Providing Air Cover for Ethnic Cleansing in Iraq', *Foreign Policy*, 28 March 2015; Amnesty International, 'Ethnic Cleansing on a Historic Scale: Islamic State's Systematic Targeting of Minorities in Northern Iraq', 2014, <https://www.es.amnesty.org/uploads/media/Iraq_ethnic_cleansing_final_formatted.pdf>, accessed 1 September 2015.

Whether they like it or not, foreign governments will also have to accept that the Middle East will continue to be fertile ground for terrorism. ISIS is not merely a terrorist organisation, but a terrorist army intent on holding on to territory and creating a state, although neither of these concepts are in the mould of the Western, 'Westphalian' tradition. Even if ISIS is smashed, the ungoverned spaces which have spawned this murderous organisation will surely spawn others as well.

However, while some parts of the Middle East may be relegated to semi-permanent mayhem, other parts could yet face brighter prospects. Helping Egypt and Tunisia to achieve better governance is still a perfectly feasible objective, thereby exempting these countries from the sorry end suffered by Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

There are also a few new realities which need to be acknowledged if the region is to experience more positive outcomes.

It is true that the Middle East cannot simply be left to its own devices, in the hope that the current violence will 'burn itself out', not least because it is too close to, and bound up with, Europe, and too dangerous in terms of weapons and population pressures to be cauterised or quarantined. However, this does not mean that every Middle Eastern conflict requires a Western-led military intervention, nor that military force is always the right response. Indeed, the 'spray' approach to international crises – simply bombing those we do not like – will not achieve any more in the Middle East today than it did in the Balkans during the 1990s.

Since no Western government is now interested in a long-term commitment in the Middle East, it is obvious that working with regional powers is the only viable approach. Yet this carries its own risks. The dangers of enlisting Iran's support in defeating ISIS are well documented and will be examined further in this occasional paper. Equally important, however, although not always well articulated or acknowledged in Western analyses, are the long-term difficulties of enlisting Turkey's support. For despite the firm promise to 'stand in solidarity with Turkey', as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg put it recently,⁷ many of Turkey's European allies share grave doubts about President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's regional military strategy.⁸

Until now, Turkey has kept out of the wars in its neighbourhood – at least formally – largely because it feared that the disintegration of Syria could give Kurdish ethnic minorities an opportunity to establish their own state and that, in turn, could offer a separatist temptation to Turkey's own Kurds, who account for at least a fifth of the country's population.⁹ Matters changed in July 2015, as Turkish jets started pounding ISIS targets before quickly expanding its

7. Jens Stoltenberg, 'Press Point', press conference, Brussels, 28 July 2015.

8. John-Thor Dahlburg, 'NATO Backs Turkey during Rare Emergency Meeting', *Business Insider*, 28 July 2015.

9. On Turkey's often bewildering Iraq gyrations and the reasons for these, see Aaron Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order*, RUSI Whitehall Paper 83 (London: Taylor and Francis, 2014).

air strikes to target the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the militant Kurdish separatist group also listed as a terrorist organisation in the West.

With the second-largest standing army in NATO after that of the US,¹⁰ Turkey does not need active Alliance support; all Turkey asks for is the West's political backing, plus the opportunity of calling upon NATO forces should fighting around Turkey's borders intensify – as per the discussion at the July 2015 NATO emergency meeting. The diplomatic feelers taking place at Alliance headquarters in Brussels as a result of Turkish requests for support in the Middle East are just a sideshow, for behind the scenes Turkey already appears to have struck a separate military deal with the US which will intensify the military operations of both countries. Under the deal, the US will have use of Turkey's Incirlik air base for operations against ISIS, while in return the Obama administration has agreed to the establishment of 'safe zones' in northern Syria adjacent to the border with Turkey, where 'moderate Syrian opposition forces' will be allowed to operate.¹¹ This would help to stem the flow of Syrian refugees into Turkey.

However, it is obvious that Turkey's long-term intention is to use this deal not just to fight ISIS, but to suppress Kurdish nationalism: by getting US approval for the establishment of a buffer zone, the Turks are in effect ensuring that even if a separatist Kurdish region is established inside Syria, the Kurds will not enjoy any territorial link with their ethnic brethren inside Turkey. Suspicions of a deal of this nature have been strengthened by Turkish President Erdogan's decision, at the end of July, to rule out any dialogue with ethnic Kurdish movements, and by his threat that any Turkish law-maker with possible links to terrorist groups may be stripped of his or her parliamentary immunity and prosecuted.¹² This has been interpreted as a direct threat to the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), the Kurdish-supported political movement inside Turkey, which surprised observers by doing very well in the country's recent general election and may end up holding the balance of power there for years to come – if it is not suppressed or destroyed by Erdogan's authoritarian machinations.

For the moment, NATO member states have decided that unanimity with Turkey is their best approach, although a number of European countries led by Germany have called on the Turkish government not to abandon dialogue with the Kurds,¹³ fearing that violence within the country may return to levels experienced prior to the two-year ceasefire broken by the government in July. However, as long as Turkey enjoys US support, its government is unlikely to listen to what the Europeans are saying. Moreover, President Erdogan is a master in the art of using an external threat to settle scores with domestic opponents.¹⁴

10. *NATO Review*, 'Defence Expenditure and Size of Armed Forces of NATO and Partner Countries' (Vol. 49, No. 3, Autumn 2001), p. 34.

11. Simon Tisdall, 'US Deal with Turkey over ISIS May Go Beyond Simple Use of an Airbase', *Guardian*, 24 July 2015.

12. Tulay Karadeniz, 'Turkey's Erdogan: Peace Process with Kurdish Militants Impossible', *Reuters*, 28 July 2015.

13. Raziye Akkoc and Richard Spencer, 'Turkey Urged by NATO to Show Restraint as Erdogan Says Kurdish Peace Process "Impossible"', *Daily Telegraph*, 29 July 2015.

14. Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy*.

The true message for Western governments is that while Turkey and Iran must be part of the solution to any trouble in the Middle East, they are also part of the problem: no long-term regional arrangement is feasible without their involvement; however, giving either Turkey or Iran too much in such a deal would only invite further trouble. This may not be evident to Western politicians in a hurry. Yet in today's Middle East, a quick solution is worse than no solution, and a division into new spheres of influence is unlikely to be any more sustainable than the old colonial divisions.

Balancing Western involvement with local engagement, remembering history but not being bound or hobbled by it, and respecting existing borders but not being confined by them are all major challenges. None of them can be met unless the US overhauls its entire approach to the region from one of a mere upholder of the status quo to that of an active arbiter between the Middle East's key new players. It may take some time before ISIS is defeated, and even longer before the terrorist organisation is consigned to the dustbin of history. Still, reducing the impact of the regional ailments which have helped create this murderous organisation (draining the swamp in which it swims, to use a common cliché) remains an achievable task.

The US Role

Although the Obama administration is still eager to claim credit for recently concluding a nuclear agreement with Iran, there is a feeling throughout the Middle East that the price Washington may end up paying for this deal could be far higher than it anticipates.

Whether by intent or by accident, and whether justifiable or not, it is clear that in pushing through the Iranian agreement Obama has shaken the US's traditional bonds with the Arab states and Israel. This unique 'feat', which no previous US president in living memory accomplished, occurred because in tackling only the nuclear dimension, Obama ignored Iran's growing conventional power in the Middle East, which is as menacing to key regional states as its potential acquisition of a nuclear bomb.

President Obama can reclaim his Middle Eastern allies by ensuring that the agreement's provisions are complied with and that there is no direct linkage between *engagement* with Iran on the nuclear question and the *confrontation* of Iran about its destabilisation efforts throughout the region. The fear throughout the Middle East, however, is that the US can live quite happily with an Iran which is a threshold nuclear power, and that the region will be condemned to a new deadly arms race over which the US will no longer be able to exercise its traditional control.¹⁵

Of particular importance to the region's future is the US relationship with Saudi Arabia, for the current rift between the two may tear up the extant strategic map. Despite their close alliance which underpins most of the Middle East's other security arrangements, the US and Saudi Arabia are no strangers to crises. Riyadh's leadership of the 1973 Arab oil embargo in

15. Christopher Harress, 'Iran Nuclear Deal Will See Arms Race Continue as Middle East Fears Increase', *International Business Times*, 15 July 2015; *The Economist*, 'Proxies and Paranoia', 25 July 2015.

protest at US support for Israel almost resulted in a war between the two: secret documents declassified in the early 2000s indicate that both the US and British governments were planning to seize Saudi oil fields if the embargo had continued.¹⁶ Later, the involvement of so many Saudi citizens in the 9/11 attacks also caused bilateral relations to nosedive.

However, the latest spat between Washington and Riyadh is both more profound and complex, for it stems from diametrically opposed assessments of where the Middle East is heading, coupled with a Saudi belief that developments in the region threaten the kingdom's very survival. As seen from Saudi Arabia, the uprisings which swept through the Middle East and North Africa over the past few years not only traded stability for chaos, but also served as a reminder of just how fickle the US can be. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak spent three decades serving US interests, yet Washington was quick to disown him in the face of the 2011 protests in Cairo.¹⁷

More dismayingly still, Washington also rushed to embrace the Muslim Brotherhood as Egypt's new leaders not because it knew much about the organisation, but largely because the Brotherhood seemed destined to become the Middle East's new rulers. The Saudis encouraged and subsequently bankrolled the military coup which removed the Brotherhood from power in Egypt two years later.¹⁸ They are unlikely to forget that the US was ready to join hands with a political movement whose entire existence was devoted to the overthrow of the monarchies in the Arab world.¹⁹

Nor is Saudi Arabia likely to forget what it regards as a series of humiliations in relation to Syria, all allegedly engineered by the US. The Saudis were initially reluctant to provide military support to the anti-government rebels in Syria because the kingdom's interior minister, Muhammad bin Nayef, believed – as did most Western governments at that time – that the money and arms may end up in the hands of jihadists who could then destabilise the entire region.²⁰ Saudi Arabia only began funnelling substantial quantities of weapons to the rebels in late 2012 – and it did so largely at the behest of the US, which wanted the logjam in the Syrian war broken and was worried about the involvement of Qatar, which was supporting Islamist rebel brigades.²¹ Yet again, however, the Saudis discovered that doing Washington's bidding does not guarantee any influence over what it then chooses to do. The Saudis were informed in late August 2013

16. Lizette Alvarez, 'Britain Says U.S. Planned to Seize Oil in '73 Crisis', *New York Times*, 2 January 2004; Paul Reynolds, 'US Ready to Seize Gulf Oil in 1973', *BBC News*, 2 January 2004.

17. Christopher Boucek, 'U.S.–Saudi Relations in the Shadow of the Arab Spring', Q&A, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 21 June 2011, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/06/21/u.s.-saudi-relations-in-shadow-of-arab-spring>>, accessed 1 September 2015.

18. David Hearst, 'Why Saudi Arabia is Taking a Risk by Backing the Egyptian Coup', *Guardian*, 20 August 2013.

19. See Roger Cohen, 'Working with the Muslim Brotherhood', *New York Times*, 22 October 2012; Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, 'The Muslim Brotherhood and Democratic Transition in Egypt', *Middle East Law and Governance* (Vol. 3, No. 1–2, 2011).

20. David B Ottaway, 'The Saudi-Qatari Clash Over Syria', *National Interest*, 2 July 2013.

21. See Abeer Allam, Michael Peel and Hugh Carnegy, 'Saudi Arabia Increases Supply of Arms to Syria Rebels', *Financial Times*, 21 June 2013.

that President Obama had decided to launch air strikes against Syria's chemical-weapon stocks, only to be later disappointed by Obama's abrupt decision to accept a Russian-brokered deal.²² What was hailed in Washington as a great triumph for diplomacy was seen in Saudi Arabia as a climb-down by a US president ready to swallow any compromise, however harmful it may be to regional allies, provided it avoided another military entanglement.²³

This is also the Saudis' impression of the current diplomatic negotiations between the US and Iran under Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. They point out that the discussions have no substance,²⁴ and that the Iranians are directly involved in Iraq and Syria, where Hizbullah, their Lebanese proxy, is now openly fighting for Assad and Iran's cause.²⁵ As the Saudis see it, there is a danger that, in return for its help in defeating ISIS and reducing the violence in Syria, the US would eventually accept a division into spheres of influence with Iran – akin to the Yalta agreement which divided Europe into two halves for the four long decades of the Cold War.

Of course, these fears are exaggerated; but they nevertheless drive current policy choices. Iraq and Syria are already seen throughout the Middle East as being in Iran's orbit²⁶ – a grievous diminution of Saudi influence and regional importance that dwarfs the imperative to defeat ISIS. Yet the US administration has remained curiously tone deaf to these Saudi frustrations, despite regular talks between US Secretary of State John Kerry and his Saudi counterpart – the assumption being that such rifts will soon blow over.

Saudi Arabia is determined both to be heard and to reclaim its predominance in the Middle East. Senior figures are trying to reduce the country's dependence on the US;²⁷ with impeccable timing, France's defence minister duly secured defence contracts in June 2015.²⁸ Saudi Arabia is also encouraging Egypt's military rulers to consider reopening economic links with Russia,²⁹ while patching up its own previously tense relations with Turkey, as the two try to co-ordinate their policies towards Syria – without consulting Washington.³⁰ Every single one of these moves will complicate the US's handling of the Middle East.

22. Andrew Parasiliti, 'Saudi Prince Turki: "High Level of Disappointment" with US over Syria', *Al-Monitor*, 22 October 2013.

23. Tom Rogan, 'Like the Iranians, the Saudis Think Obama is Weak', *National Review*, 4 May 2015.

24. *CBS News*, 'Why Arab Allies are Worried over the Iran Nuclear Deal', 15 July 2015.

25. Richard Spencer, 'Iran "Taking Over" Iraq, Saudis Warn, Blaming U.S. Refusal to Send Troops against ISIS', *National Post*, 5 March 2015.

26. Jamie Dettmer, 'Mideast Concerned by Iran's Growing Influence in Region', *Voice of America*, 15 March 2015.

27. Ben Hubbard, 'Despite Displeasure with U.S., Saudis Face Long Dependency', *New York Times*, 11 May 2015.

28. Julien Barnes-Dacey, 'France's Deepening Relations with the Gulf', European Council on Foreign Relations, <http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_frances_deepening_relations_with_the_gulf>, accessed 1 September 2015.

29. See Samir Nassif, 'Russia is the Likely Winner as US and Saudi Arabia Relations Chill', *World Review*, 26 November 2013, <<http://www.worldreview.info/content/russia-likely-winner-us-and-saudi-arabia-relations-chill>>, accessed 1 September 2015.

30. Fehim Tastekin, 'Are Turkey, Saudi Arabia Working Together against Iran?', *Al-Monitor*, 5 March 2015.

Back to Basics

In sum, the Obama administration will struggle to retain close strategic ties with either Saudi Arabia or Israel. It will also struggle to adopt a coherent policy towards those revolutions still convulsing the region or the civil wars in Syria and Iraq, and it looks unlikely to succeed in forging a new, durable strategic partnership with Iran. Some of these are problems beyond Washington's control, some are sins of omission, while others are sins of commission; but all will plague the US in the near future. The trick for the US will be to navigate between these objectives and to arbitrate between competing demands – not because the country is seen as a particularly impartial player, but largely because no other outsider has comparable military power and global reach.

In the meantime, an agenda designed to defeat, if not eliminate, ISIS is perfectly feasible, without inventing a military campaign worthy of Napoleon's march to Moscow. It should consist of the following measures, some of which are already being applied, others of which are under contemplation, and yet more which need to be considered:

- Maintain the military pressure on ISIS from the air and, as far as possible, from the ground as well
- Prevent ISIS from establishing long-term control over any specific territory
- Turkey and Iran need to be engaged in the search for any regional solution. Still, the temptation of assuming any such deal will be a long-term, durable settlement should be resisted
- Not give up on the possibility of maintaining the unity of Iraq and Syria, but not be beholden or obsessed with this idea either. If the US could 'father' two brand-new states in the Balkans during the 1990s, there is no reason why Washington should not tolerate at least the informal emergence of new states in the Middle East
- Accept that, without US leadership, the multinational coalition currently in place will not survive. ISIS has to be defeated or at least kept in check not only because it is vile, not only because it is a breeding ground for international terrorism, but ultimately because its persistent existence will poison what is left of the status quo in the Middle East
- Take action beyond the pursuit of ISIS, because the questions of the Arab–Israeli conflict, of Iran's place in the region and of good governance in the Middle East remain as acute as ever.

All this will mean that the US will no longer have perpetual regional enemies; but nor will it have perpetual allies. Still, President Obama can be assured that some things will remain unchanged: everyone will blame him for the outcome, whatever that may be.

II. The Emergence of ISIS

Michael Stephens

Since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the fall from power of its last caliph, Mehmed VI, in 1922, the Arab and Islamic world has been struggling to forge a collective response to a sense of powerlessness *vis-à-vis* the Western secular order which has dominated the political affairs of the Middle East. The twentieth century saw Arab nations adopt a plethora of ideologies – of varying degrees of nationalism, communism, pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism – all of which failed to achieve the intended aim of rebalancing both the regional and global order.

In the context of these failures, the emergence of a group with the aggressive territorial and transnational goals of ISIS is not altogether surprising. Nor is it a new phenomenon; instead, it is merely the latest incarnation of a long string of experiments (sometimes secular, sometimes religious) to right perceived historical injustices, and instil a sense of power in a region that has been unable to defend its interests in the face of a dominant global order.

This deep-rooted conception of the region's lack of control over its own affairs is complicated by a growing regional power play between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The rivalry between the region's pre-eminent powers has reopened the Middle East's age-old sectarian dynamic. This has been exacerbated in recent years by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its bloody aftermath, as well as the civil war in Syria since 2011, both of which have pitted Iranian-backed state actors against Sunni-led insurgencies. The result has been the proliferation of regional militias defined along sectarian and ethnic lines, backed by the two primary regional powers.

ISIS emerged as another such regional actor. However, as with Lebanese Hizbullah, the group was able to tap into an entrenched historical legacy of resistance to foreign occupation and oppression, as well as a fear of burgeoning Iranian influence across the region – not least in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Bahrain. Capitalising on the collapse of the states of the Levant, ISIS has expressed its intent to counter these perceived trends not only through violence, but through political organisation and social control.

This goes some way to explaining why the group's ideology is attractive to so many – and why it is unlikely to be defeated in the short term. In terms of the tenets of Islam, the declared caliphate of Caliph Ibrahim (ISIS leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi) is not perfect in its formation – its legal rulings are highly controversial, its methods of governance are brutal and unjust, and a plethora of Islamic scholars have rejected the basis for the establishment of a caliphate.¹ However, ISIS's political goals resonate with many Sunnis in the region, particularly in the more conservative heartlands of the Arabian Peninsula.

1. *Al Arabiya*, 'Qaradawi Says "Jihadist Caliphate" Violates Sharia', 5 July 2014; see also <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4MTF1HXZ2Y>>, accessed 22 September 2015; and <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEyPhVdzDAQ>>, accessed 22 September 2015.

ISIS Emerges: Conflict in Syria – and a Split with Al-Qa’ida

Facilitated by the breakdown of order in Syria and Iraq over the last few years, ISIS has formed a well-organised, cohesive fighting force from elements of battle-ready Syrian Islamist opposition; parts of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI) or the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI); and remnants of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party. Through smart tactics – such as infiltrating rival groups, and long-running espionage in towns it planned one day to take over² – ISIS forced its way into majority-Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria, targeting supply points, grain stores and oil refineries, and quickly centralising all resources under its control. Many locals in these areas accepted this new control, and indeed welcomed the relative stability that the dominance of ISIS brought.³ Those who opposed the new order were forced to leave or were simply wiped out.⁴

ISIS’s meteoric rise in Syria coincided with the group’s break with Al-Qa’ida in mid-2013, which prompted a war between the two jihadist groups that left thousands dead on each side. ISIS had first infiltrated Syria in 2012 and early 2013 (when it was still known as ISI) via its support for the Al-Qa’ida-affiliated Jabhat Al-Nusra led by Abu Mohammed Al-Golani. It provided funding and personnel for Al-Nusra’s military activities, and the two groups broadly operated in alliance across swathes of central Syria for a few months. However, disagreements over a proposed merger sparked the ire of ISI leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, who declared in April 2013 that ISI was staking a claim to the mantle of jihad in Syria, reflected in its new name of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Al-Sham (ISIS). In an attempt to cool the dispute, Al-Qa’ida leader Ayman Al-Zawahiri announced in June 2013 that Baghdadi was the emir of the Islamic State of Iraq only, and that Golani retained his position of emir in Syria, thereby denying the legitimacy of the declared Islamic State of Iraq and Syria⁵ – a declaration that was completely unacceptable to Baghdadi.

In February 2014, following multiple rounds of fighting between the two groups, Al-Qa’ida formally declared that it was no longer ‘in an organisational relationship’ with ISIS.⁶ Baghdadi’s claim that his organisation no longer recognised the authority of Zawahiri cemented the split.⁷ Seeing which way the wind was blowing, many in Syrian opposition militias, which had received substantial training and support from Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia in 2012–13,⁸ defected to ISIS, taking their weapons and funding with them.⁹ This resulted in millions of dollars flowing to

2. Christoph Reuter, ‘The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State’, *Der Spiegel*, 18 April 2015.
3. Michael Stephens, ‘Islamic State: Where Does Jihadist Group Get its Support?’, *BBC News*, 1 September 2014.
4. Faraj Obagi, ‘IS Kills 500 Members of the Albu Nimr Tribe’, *Al-Monitor*, 5 November 2014.
5. Letter from Ayman Al-Zawahiri to mujahideen (in Arabic), 13 Rajab 1434 (23 May 2012), available at <<https://assets.documentcloud.org/documents/710586/ayman-zawahiri.pdf>>, accessed 18 September 2015.
6. Oliver Holmes, ‘Al Qaeda Breaks with Syrian Militant Group ISIL’, *Reuters*, 3 February 2014.
7. Aymenn Jaweed Al-Tamimi, ‘The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and Ash Sham’, Hudson Institute, 11 March 2014, <<http://www.hudson.org/research/10169-the-dawn-of-the-islamic-state-of-iraq-and-ash-sham>>, accessed 1 September 2015.
8. See, for example, Aaron Stein, *Turkey’s New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order*, RUSI Whitehall Paper 83 (Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, 2014), p. 67.
9. Stephens, ‘Islamic State’.

an organisation with the goal of establishing military hegemony and political dominance across the Middle East. Using its new wealth, unmatched tactics and sheer force of will,¹⁰ ISIS took control of large swathes of the country.

The Development of Operational Leadership

The brains behind the operation, however, came from Iraq and a cadre of individuals that emerged from the dying embers of AQI in 2010.¹¹ AQI flourished in the post-Saddam order that followed the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 under the leadership of Jordanian strongman Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, whose radical ideas and brutal methods proved to be the incubator for Islamic State ideology. Zarqawi notably differed from the leaders of Al-Qa'ida Central, who stressed the importance of striking at 'the far enemy' (namely, the US and its Western allies).¹² His focus was instead on Shia Muslims, regardless of their status as combatants, as the primary threat to Al-Qa'ida's continued existence. In a series of communications in mid-2005, Zawahiri, then-Al-Qa'ida deputy leader, repeatedly warned Zarqawi that his hatred of the Shia and targeting of Iraqi civilians could well make AQI unpopular, and should therefore be avoided.¹³ Indeed, it was Zarqawi's bloodlust for the Shia, and AQI's brutal methods of governance across the Sunni heartlands of Anbar province, that proved to be the group's eventual undoing.¹⁴ Zarqawi was killed in a US air strike in 2006, and AQI's leadership was decimated as the Sunni tribes of Anbar and Nineveh provinces, backed by the US, rose up against AQI in what was known as the *Sahwa* ('awakening'). It was during these hard years that the future operatives of ISIS learned their trade, fighting the US-led occupation of the country after 2003, and particularly during the period of the surge, in 2007–08, when AQI was stretched to breaking point.

Through natural attrition of weaker recruits and the inevitable search for military advantage, what remained of AQI by 2010 was a smarter, more politically aware cadre of individuals with military skills and a good knowledge of the Sunni heartlands of Iraq. Many of the group were introduced to each other during, and radicalised by, years of detention in the US-administered Camp Bucca facility (sometimes known as the 'jihadi university') in southern Iraq. They subsequently formed a close-knit unit which merged elements of disaffected members of Saddam's Ba'athist regime with hard-line jihadist elements committed to the overthrow of what they perceived as the Western and Shia domination of Iraq.¹⁵

10. For examples of the strategic use of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices and suicide car bombs see Al-Tamimi, 'The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and Ash Sham'.

11. See Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York, NY: Regan Arts, 2015).

12. See, for example, *لعل تامجہ نشل یتوص ليجست ىف وعدی ةدعاق لل میظنت میعز*, *Al-Youm Al-Saba'a*, 13 September 2015.

13. Letter from Ayman Al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi (in Arabic), 9 Jumada II 1426 (16 July 2005), available at <http://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_arabic.pdf>, accessed 18 September 2015.

14. Daveed Gartenstein Ross and Nathaniel Barr, 'Extreme Makeover: Jihadist Edition: Al-Qaeda's rebranding campaign', *War on the Rocks*, 3 September 2015.

15. Terrence McCoy, 'Camp Bucca: The US Prison that Became the Birthplace of ISIS', *Independent*, 4 November 2014. For a more detailed analysis see Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, chapters 4 and 6.

The Fusing of an Organisational Hierarchy

It was this marriage of ideologies that led to a hybrid Ba'athist-Islamist identity for Al-Qa'ida's newest incarnation.¹⁶ Old Saddam loyalists such as Izzat Al-Douri, who assumed leadership of the Ba'ath Party in 2007, had run smuggling operations in Iraq's Sunni regions for years and knew the patronage systems and tribal landscape well. Al-Douri and many Saddam-era army intelligence officers, such as Samir Abd Muhammad Al-Khlifawi (also known as Haji Bakr) and Abu Abdulrahman Al-Bilawi, made their way into the top ranks of AQI and subsequently ISIS.¹⁷ All had expressed affinity with Islamist thinking in the past, and so would not have been anathema to Baghdadi and his jihadist clique. However, more importantly for Baghdadi, these men brought with them knowledge of military tactics and organisational hierarchy that the jihadist groupings of Iraq and Syria simply did not possess. In this, the influence of Haji Bakr was particularly notable. Documentation smuggled out of Syria between April and November 2014 shows his detailed plans for a hierarchical, compartmentalised bureaucracy, in which each arm operates independently of the others. It also features parallel institutions of security and secret police to ensure that nobody outside of the ruling council holds too much power.¹⁸ The result is an organisation with an Iraqi top level of command, reminiscent of the Ba'athist hierarchy that existed under Saddam, sitting atop a fluid hierarchy that decentralises power to a number of local emirs across Iraq and Syria. It is this decentralisation that makes ISIS incredibly difficult to destroy. The level of autonomy handed to ISIS front-line commanders means that defeating the group in Kirkuk, for example, would have little impact on the battles ISIS is waging around Aleppo.

The Establishment of Control

Additionally, ISIS has hurriedly set about establishing a permanent system of governance in the areas which it controls. The organisation keeps close control of its finances and organisational expenditures. From an annual operational budget of around \$2 billion, fighters are paid \$400 per month, more than other fighters operating across Syria and Iraq at present.¹⁹ The group is meticulous in keeping an eye on its 'citizens', with Internet usage monitored and all telecommunication devices regularly checked by its religious police force, the *hisbah*.²⁰ Those found to be accessing banned information are punished publicly, following trial in the group's religious courts; those found to be in communication with the enemy are publicly executed as traitors. Such brutal methods, however, have not stopped a steady stream of recruits to the group's cause. Through slick propaganda in multiple languages, ISIS has attempted to show its

16. Kyle Orton, 'Saddam's Former Loyalists are Leading ISIS – As True Believers', *National Review*, 20 July 2015.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Some of these documents are available on the *Der Spiegel* website. See <<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/bild-1029274-836847.html>>, accessed 18 September 2015.

19. Jack Moore, 'Isis News: Caliphate Unveils First Annual Budget of \$2bn with \$250m Surplus War Chest', *International Business Times*, 5 January 2015.

20. Caroline Mortimer, 'ISIS "Bans Private Wi-Fi Access" in Raqqa to Monitor Dissent', *Independent*, 21 July 2015.

friendlier face, featuring well-equipped healthcare systems,²¹ abundant supplies of food, and clerics handing out toys and sweets to happy children. By early February 2015, an estimated 20,000 foreigners had joined its ranks, and more continue to join.²² Despite the best efforts of the international coalition, which has killed over 10,000 fighters,²³ the fighters killed have all been replaced by new recruits, according to officials of the Kurdistan Regional Government.²⁴

An Entrenched Sociopolitical and Military Force?

A product of chronic regional instability, and the nurturing of jihadist ideology by its parent organisation Al-Qa'ida, ISIS is arguably the most complex and powerful jihadist group that has ever existed. Stretching across a territory the size of Great Britain, ISIS has embedded itself within the very fabric of the region. Continually drawing in new recruits, the group has seen its influence expand into Libya, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Egypt and Turkey, and it has inspired terror attacks in Canada, Australia and France. For more than a year now, the coalition against ISIS has attempted to defeat it, with only muted success. Now firmly established, and the pre-eminent military force in the region, ISIS may take years to defeat, if at all.

There is currently no indigenous military power within Syria or Iraq that can defeat the group without significant support from either the West or Iran. Given that ISIS enjoys widespread support for its opposition to both the Shia and the West, it would be self-defeating to assume that outside military intervention will be the key to defeating both the group and the ideology that drives it. Military containment might at least prevent ISIS from being able to expand further – possibly into Jordan, Lebanon and the Gulf States. However, any solution to this crisis must avoid conferring political legitimacy on ISIS, which would be unacceptable to both regional and Western powers.

Moreover, ISIS is unlikely to find a place in the mainstream political discourse of either Syria or Iraq, unlike Hizbullah in Lebanon. Instead, the basic premise of the 'caliphate' is the end of the established order of states, and the creation of its own in its place. As such, there appears to be no room for compromise – or even direct negotiations – with the group at the present time. Indeed, the end of ISIS will only come if, like its predecessor AQI, its rule crumbles from the inside as its 'citizens' turn against it.

21. *BBC News*, 'Islamic State NHS-Style Hospital Video Posted', 24 April 2015.

22. Federica Cocco, 'How Many Foreign Fighters Have Joined the Islamic State', *The Week*, 24 June 2015.

23. *Reuters*, 'More than 10,000 ISIS Fighters Killed Since the Start of Coalition Assault, US Claims', 3 June 2015.

24. Speech by Minister Falah Mustafa Bakir, head of the Department of Foreign Relations, Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG Headquarters, London, 16 April 2015.

III. Iraq

Gareth Stansfield

Well before it took Mosul in June 2014, ISIS – or at least the groups that would coalesce around its banner – was very much known to the Iraqi government and military. Whether in Baghdad, in Mosul (in the office of the governor of Nineveh) or in Erbil, it had become worryingly clear for at least a year that forces were re-emerging in the country's Sunni Arab-dominant areas that were becoming increasingly aggressive, popular and successful.

The response in these three power centres was, however, not unified. Indeed, the inherent contestation between the three sets of elites – in Baghdad, Mosul and Erbil – worked against any co-ordinated response to either nip the ISIS threat in the bud militarily, or improve the political and economic situation of the communities in these largely Sunni Arab areas so that the attraction of ISIS would not be so strong. Indeed, driving the resurgent threat posed by ISIS were the deeply divisive actions of the Shia prime minister, Nouri Al-Maliki.

The Return of Sectarianism and Ethnicism

Although he failed to secure electoral victory for his State of Law bloc in 2010 – with the Sunni-dominated Al-Iraqiya bloc marginally winning – Maliki still managed to retain his position by promising to share power with his Sunni and Kurdish opponents. Yet this sharing never happened. Rather, Maliki turned against both groups from 2012, following the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. He accused the Kurdish leadership of working against Iraq's interests by pursuing an independent oil-export strategy,¹ and senior Sunni figures of being involved in terrorist activities.²

For the Kurds, the effect was to distance them further from Baghdad. The response of the Arab Sunnis of the provinces of Anbar, Nineveh, Salahuddin, Kirkuk and Diyala was more militant, with demonstrations taking place from the end of 2012 in Fallujah and violent clashes breaking out in Hawijah in April 2013 and the rest of Iraq in May. In Mosul, the governor of Nineveh province, along with his new Kurdish allies, was openly warning of the increased popularity of ISIS, which, by 2013, was operating with impunity in the province, building its black-market links and already taking protection money from local businesses – with the governor and state institutions unable to stop it. This combination of the Iraqi government's actions, the governor of Nineveh's weakness, and the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) antipathy provided the social and political underpinnings for not only the return of ISIS to Iraq, but its sinking of roots and the consolidation of its power in a very short period of time.

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1. Ian Black, 'Golden Oil of Iraqi Kurdistan Raises Tensions with Baghdad', *Guardian*, 10 June 2013; Gareth Stansfield, 'To Acknowledge or Ignore the Unraveling of Iraq', Brookings Institute Middle East Memo No. 33, 31 July 2014.
 2. Duraid Adnan and Tim Arango, 'Arrest of a Sunni Minister's Bodyguards Prompts Protests in Iraq', *New York Times*, 21 December 2012.

Even then, the capture of Mosul on 10 June 2014 took everyone – Iraqis included – by surprise. But perhaps it should not have: Fallujah and Ramadi had fallen in January and Mosul had been under threat for at least a week before. However, even with such a run-up, no-one could have predicted that ISIS would be capable of taking Mosul with a force of 1,500 fighters outnumbered 15:1. However, the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) stationed in the city and province were largely Shia and had senior officers who had largely been political appointments made by the prime minister's office. Their flight removed any semblance of ISF command and control, with the well-disciplined ISIS force moving quickly throughout Nineveh and then into Kirkuk province.

With the ISF fleeing from its bases in the north, it was not just ISIS that found itself in a position to expand into new territories. The Kurds, too, suddenly saw what they had defined as the 'disputed territories' in Kirkuk, Diyala and Nineveh become available for new ownership. Contested with the government of Iraq since 2003 (and with Saddam Hussein before that), the Kurds' demand to bring what they viewed as traditional homelands into their region had proved to be a dangerous flashpoint between Erbil and Baghdad, and one that the country's newly established constitution, foreign interlocutors and the UN had failed to resolve. Now, the Kurds simply entered these territories, taking some 90 per cent of the lands that they had claimed, and bringing them under the control of the KRG, including the prized city of Kirkuk and the oil infrastructure that ran to the west of the city. What the Kurds did not fully realise was that their territorial expansion also brought them into direct contact with ISIS along a border that ran for over 1,000 km. Or perhaps they did, but they did not fully understand the threat posed by ISIS fighters. If this were the case, then they came in for a dangerous shock in August 2014 when ISIS turned its attention to the Kurds, nearly defeating the vaunted Peshmerga and only being held back by what was the rapid organisation of air strikes. This was achieved not by the US or the Europeans in the first instance, but by Nouri Al-Maliki appealing directly to Tehran and Moscow for attack aircraft.³ Tehran responded immediately, with Moscow sending Sukhoi SU-25 ground-attack aircraft some days afterwards – long before the Western response materialised – and thus setting a pattern that would see Baghdad become more reliant upon countries other than the US, and especially on Iran, than anyone could have predicted.

By the summer of 2015, the situation had of course moved on, but ISIS remains a potent force that continues to hold large swathes of Sunni Arab Iraq, having taken Ramadi and continued to consolidate its position in Anbar, Nineveh and Salahuddin provinces. There have been ISIS setbacks, such as in Tikrit as well as in Syria – in Kobane in particular and Tel Abyad more recently. Yet the overall picture is one of a powerful and expansionist movement, with strong support coming from Arab Sunnis, that continues to surprise and outmanoeuvre its adversaries. Even when defeated, ISIS fighters exact a devastating toll on those who fight against them; Shia forces retaking Tikrit suffered very high losses against a small defending force in March 2015.

Given the danger inherent to fighting ISIS in territories that are largely Sunni Arab-dominated, it is reasonable to ask who shall actually undertake the war against it. With the ISF discredited and in a state of disorganisation following its 2014 savaging, the burden of fighting, in terms of

3. Mehdi Hasan, 'Haider Al-Abadi: Bomb Isis or We'll Ask Iran to Do It, Top Iraqi Politician Warns United States', *Huffington Post*, 30 June 2014.

forces deployed by the government of Iraq, has been largely taken on by a range of Shia militias that operate under the name of Al-Hashd Al-Shaabi (the Popular Mobilization Forces). Formed in 2014, following Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani's fatwa to mobilise Iraqis (not just Shia) in a 'righteous jihad' against ISIS, the Hashd brings together a range of old and new units, including several that had fought against US forces a decade earlier – namely the Peace Brigades of Muqtada Al-Sadr, Kata'ib Hizbullah, Asa'ib Ahl Al-Haq and the Badr Organization. Not only are these the same Shia forces that fought the US, they are also very much influenced, if not controlled, by the Al-Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of Iran.⁴ This illustrates one very significant aspect of the conflict that suggests the outcome will not involve reconciliation among communities in Iraq: not only do ISIS members fight as Sunnis, but the Hashd is equally sectarian, fighting ISIS as Shia rather than Iraqis. If ISIS is to be defeated and the Sunni Arab community of Iraq is to be reintegrated into a normalised political process, then it is unlikely to be achieved by Shia militias entering Sunni territory. Indeed, this can only make the situation worse. Rather, to defeat ISIS, a Sunni Arab force is needed – but there is no such force available.

However, this has still not stopped outside powers from trying to find such forces, and the Kurds are being increasingly discussed in Western circles as the possible praetorians of a military operation aimed at removing ISIS from Iraq. Following their near-death experience in August 2014, the Kurdish Peshmerga have managed to defend their lines in Iraq, albeit with air cover provided by a range of countries and the strategic placing of non-Iraqi Kurdish forces – from the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey, People's Protection Units in Syria and Party for Free Life in Kurdistan in Iran – at key points along the line. They have also had some victories against ISIS – particularly in Syria, rather than in Iraq. As a result, the Kurds are seen as at least being able to stand up to ISIS, and seem to have a better reputation when entering Sunni Arab territories. Yet they still have the same problem as the Hashd of not being Sunni Arabs, and they have an even bigger problem that they are not militarily as strong as their Shia counterparts or their ISIS foe.

For those viewing the Kurds as possible praetorians, they have three very significant failings. The first is that their willingness to fight beyond the borders of Kurdistan wanes significantly the further they are from their homeland – not least because the enmity they would face in places such as Mosul, Hawijah and Raqqa would be immense. The second is that their equipment is old and their supplies are limited. This is made all the worse because of the third problem: internal rivalries, the age-old weakness of the Kurds. Even when faced with an enemy as dangerous as ISIS, the Kurds cannot claim that there is one Peshmerga force, with one unified chain of command and one mechanism to distribute the weapons that are now arriving. Instead, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) organise their own forces separately, with prominent political leaders from each party taking command of particular points. While some parts of their military forces are effective, including the KDP's special forces and the PUK's Counter-Terrorism Group, they are not great enough in number or ordered in such a way as to defend a border of some 1,100 km against an opponent that is as well co-ordinated, equipped and determined as ISIS.

4. Kirk H Sowell, 'The Rise of Iraq's Militia State', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 23 April 2015.

The Kurds can defend Kurdistan, with outside help, and maybe enter Sunni areas to defeat ISIS, but little more than that; the Hashd can enter Sunni areas with very significant outside help from Iran and maybe from the US, if Washington were inclined to assist former enemies. However, the end result of using these non-Sunni Arab forces to defeat ISIS could give rise to a 'son of ISIS' that would be an even worse manifestation of Sunni Arab resentment than its parent – just as ISIS was to the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, which had previously brought the government of Iraq to its knees and which was only contained by a very significant 'surge' of US forces in 2007.

So what is to be done? The position of US and Western powers appears to be clear: they will not deploy ground forces to defeat ISIS and occupy territory as the first steps towards the normalisation and reintegration of Iraq. Why this is the case is clear: the military intervention of 2003 still haunts Western capitals, and the scale of the problem in Iraq and Syria is such that to suggest Western intervention would be seen as a deeply unpopular move by Western electorates. Yet just as there are consequences to intervention, there are also consequences to not intervening, and three in particular spring to mind:

1. Without substantial numbers of Western troops to lead in the defeat of ISIS in Iraq, and possibly in Syria, Iraq is left exposed to the very great risk that the sectarian conflict – which has already started – will escalate. If this happens, then it is unlikely that Iraq can survive as a country and the post-First World War map of the region will be irrevocably altered
2. There is a strong likelihood that Iran will continue to expand its role. Indeed, it is already remarkable that the defence of Baghdad, the recapture of Tikrit, and the plans for the taking of Ramadi are all being managed not by the successors of US Generals David Petraeus and Raymond Odierno, who had dominated Iraq until 2010, but by General Qassem Soleimani of the Al-Quds Force of the IRGC. The Western powers invested their blood and treasure in Iraq between 2003 and 2010, and it is the Iranians who are now benefiting from their investment, and are set to continue to do so. Again, this has to have a negative impact upon Iraq's continued unified existence
3. The Kurds of Iraq will be drawn into furthering their own independent military mission against ISIS, which is as much about securing their own boundaries containing their own independent homeland as it is saving Iraq. For Western powers, to have a well-placed, reasonably loyal and sort-of-democratising entity such as an independent Republic of Kurdistan emerge in the north of Iraq may not actually be a bad development, but it is not a straightforward one to realise. The managed end of Iraq's integrity by the international community may be a better, stable and more honest way forward, rather than simply watching the emergence of a new, weak entity that would struggle to manage its relationship not only with regional powers (Turkey and Iran), but also with those Kurds resident in neighbouring countries, and, indeed, among themselves in Iraq.

And so, viewing current situation of from different vantage points within Iraq, the picture is horribly complex. It is perversely made all the more so by removing from the mix the possibility of wide-scale Western intervention against ISIS in the interests of preserving Iraq's integrity.

The question is perhaps, also, not if Western powers should intervene, but when. ISIS, by its nature, is not a movement that will simply 'go away', be easily defeated or seek to normalise its relations with its neighbours. It is an aggressive, expansionist and absolutist movement that has a very clear vision of what it wants – the caliphate – and also seems to have a clear strategy for how to achieve it, irrespective of the setbacks it may suffer.

It is also a vision that does not, even cannot, ignore Western countries. Compare this with Western policy, which has no clearly articulated vision of what is desirable either in the Middle East in general or with regard to ISIS and the Kurds in particular, and seems to cling desperately to the fiction of what is seen as the unity of Iraq. Even if this unity and the preservation of the Middle Eastern state system are accepted as the aim, there is little to suggest that there are any meaningful plans or strategies in place to achieve it. Western countries seem to be very much reacting to events, especially in comparison with regional actors – whether the Iranian-Shia confluence in Tehran and Baghdad that seemingly controls Iraqi actions, Caliph Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi and the ISIS leadership in Raqqa and Mosul, or the Kurdish leadership in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. It should not be forgotten, however, that such events are continually creating new facts and realities on the ground that may well not be favourable to Western interests.

IV. The Gulf States

Michael Stephens

The fall of Mosul to ISIS in June 2014 was a difficult moment for the Gulf States, which watched in perplexed discomfort, not quite knowing what eventualities in Iraq best suited their interests.

The overwhelmingly Sunni Gulf rued the day Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki and his State of Law coalition strengthened their grip on power in the 2010 elections in Iraq, allowing for a creeping Shia domination of the country. The late King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia's hatred for Maliki and his behaviour has been well documented;¹ the Qataris and Emiratis had no affection for the man either.² The uprising of Iraq's Sunnis, which shook the Iraqi state to its core, was initially met with a degree of sympathy, and the messaging emerging from the Gulf after ISIS swept across Iraq reflected a sense that there was real disenfranchisement and anger among Iraq's Sunnis that needed to be addressed.³

What was not welcome, however, was the way in which ISIS united a fractious coalition of tribes, ex-Ba'athists and disgruntled Sunnis into a nihilistic killing machine intent on exterminating anybody who opposed it or did not align with its narrow vision of Islam or politics. Shia Muslims, religious minorities such as the Yazidis and Sunni tribes who opposed ISIS all have met similarly gruesome fates.⁴

Additionally, the ISIS leadership rapidly expanded its ambitions to the entirety of the Middle East, renaming itself simply Islamic State, clearly indicating that the Gulf States could be its next target. In November 2014, the self-appointed caliph of ISIS, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, declared: 'O sons of al-Haramayn ... the serpent's head and the stronghold of the disease are there ... draw your swords and divorce life, because there should be no security for the Saloul'.⁵ Baghdadi's choice of words was designed to provoke; his sneering use of the word Saloul to describe the Al-Saud (the ruling house of Saudi Arabia) was deliberately insulting. His reference to Saudi

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1. See Stratfor, 'Re: [OS] PAKISTAN/KSA – Saudi King Called Zardari Greatest Obstacle to Pak Progress: Report', accessed via WikiLeaks, 'Global Intelligence Files', 2013, <https://wikileaks.org/gifiles/docs/10/1027118_re-os-pakistan-ksa-saudi-king-called-zardari-greatest.html>, accessed 4 September 2015.
 2. Jay Solomon and Carol E Lee, 'US Signals Iraq's Maliki Should Go', *Wall Street Journal*, 19 June 2014.
 3. Peter Kovessy, 'Qatar Slams Iraqi PM as Militants Make Gains', *Doha News*, 17 June 2014; Najmeh Bozorgmehr and Simeon Kerr, 'Iran-Saudi Proxy War Heats Up as ISIS Entrenches in Iraq', *Financial Times*, 25 June 2014.
 4. See Louisa Loveluck, 'ISIL Releases New Video of 2014 Speicher Massacre of Shia Army Recruits', *Daily Telegraph*, 12 July 2015. For analysis of the atrocities committed against the Yazidi community, see Mohammed A Salih, 'Yazidis Tell Horror Stories about ISIL Captivity', *Al Jazeera*, 20 January 2015. For analysis of the extermination of the Sunni Al-Bunimr tribe, see Hamza Mustafa, 'ISIS Seeking to Eradicate Anbar's Al-Bunimr Tribe: Iraqi MP', *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 5 November 2014.
 5. Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi quoted in *Reuters*, 'Islamic State Leader Urges Attacks in Saudi Arabia: Speech', 13 November 2014.

Arabia as the Haramayn (two holy Mosques) also indicated a complete disregard for the king's status as 'Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques', implying the Al-Saud has no legitimacy to rule. ISIS had become a direct enemy of all Gulf regimes – and it needed to be destroyed.

Limited Options

Lacking any meaningful way into the politics of Baghdad, there is little Saudi Arabia, or indeed any Gulf State, can do to have a serious impact on Iraq's political and security decisions. Furthermore, the remarkable ability of ISIS to dominate tribal politics of Sunni areas in Iraq has all but removed the Saudis' influence over Iraq's Sunni population.⁶ The Saudis' support for their tribal cousins and allies has historically been piecemeal at best, with promises of funding and support waxing and waning with seemingly little reason.⁷ Moreover, the ties that bound Iraq's Sunnis to Saudi Arabia have easily been undermined by ISIS, which has invested time and energy into cajoling and coercing Sunnis into offering it support.⁸ The result is that in matters to do with Iraq, the Gulf Arabs, and most importantly Saudi Arabia – the region's leading Sunni power – have largely been reduced to the role of observers.

Rumbles of 'it was better under Saddam' pervade polite conversation in the Gulf, underlining just how worrying the realities of post-2003 Iraq have become for all the Gulf States; and this despite their deep historical antipathy toward Iraq's old strongman. Since the removal of Saddam in 2003 the consensus in the Gulf has been to support a united Iraq, although the individual states have pursued differing emphases in this regard.⁹ However, this is a problematic policy, primarily because offering Iraq's current government support means tacitly accepting Shia dominance in the country and, by extension, Iranian influence. This is especially so given Iran's ever-growing role in providing security on behalf of the Iraqi state as a consequence of ISIS's avowedly anti-Shia and anti-Iranian stance.

The Iran Factor

It is difficult to quantify the extent to which ongoing operations by the Iraqi Security Forces, Shia militia groups, and the US-led coalition in Tikrit and Ramadi to remove ISIS in the spring and summer of 2015 solidified in Riyadh's mind the suspicion that Iran was taking over security

6. See, for example, the Haji Abu Bakr documents outlining ISIS's long-term plan of subversion and espionage in Sunni tribal areas of Iraq and Syria in Christoph Reuter, 'The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State', *Der Spiegel*, 18 April 2015.

7. Frederic Wehrey and Ala' Alrababa'h, 'An Elusive Courtship: The Struggle for Iraq's Sunni Arab Tribes', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 7 November 2014, <<http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=57168>>, accessed 4 September 2015.

8. See *Reuters*, 'Islamic State Leader Urges Attacks in Saudi Arabia'.

9. For analysis of the policies prior to the emergence of ISIS, see F Gregory Gause III, 'Iraq in the Middle: Iraq's Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council', interview, Brookings Institute, 23 May 2012, <<http://www.brookings.edu/research/interviews/2012/05/23-iraq-gause>>, accessed 4 September 2015. For analysis of Gulf State policies since the rise of ISIS, see US Government and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), 'U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement', White House, DC, 14 May 2015.

operations in Iraq. The reaction in Gulf newspapers and by a number of key thinkers in the region has been overwhelmingly negative.¹⁰ The tussle that took place between Iraq's army and Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi on one side and the Popular Mobilization Forces and their Iranian backers on the other concerning the timing and leadership of the Tikrit operation was seen in the Gulf as evidence of two things. First, despite whatever good intentions Abadi may have had, he was not in charge of security provision and had all but accepted the hold of the Shia militias and Iran on command and control. Second, the US was unwilling and unable to challenge this Iranian control, thereby all but confirming in already-worried minds that Iran was using anti-ISIS operations as an opportunity to increase its stranglehold over Iraq.

The Popular Mobilization Forces have so far been reluctant to allow local residents back into Tikrit.¹¹ This may indeed be proof that Iran and its militia allies had sought to socially engineer areas of Salahuddin and Diyala provinces in favour of Shia Iraqis by preventing the return of certain Sunni tribes and residents to those areas.¹² Whether this is true of course matters little, because the perception among policy-makers in Riyadh, and indeed the majority of the Sunni Arab world, is that this is exactly what happened – the Tikrit operation has served as yet another example of Iran's exploitation of instability across Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen to further deepen its influence.¹³ Although Tikrit was not the straw that broke the camel's back, the way in which the operation was conducted reinforced the deeply held belief among the Al-Saud that Iran's encroaching influence across the region was deeply sectarian and counter to Saudi interests, and it had to be stopped.¹⁴ Indeed, it is without question that this attitude – cemented by Iran's determined support for President Bashar Al-Assad in Syria, the Houthis in Yemen and Shia opposition protestors in Bahrain – drove Riyadh to intervene in Yemen in April 2015 with overwhelming force to stop the Houthi insurgency as it took over what remained of the Yemeni state.

Accordingly, there is now a deep ambivalence in the Gulf towards the efforts of the Iraqi state and its allies to defeat ISIS. Should ISIS remain in Iraq and Syria, it would pose a persistent threat to the stability of the entire region and afford Iran the excuse to bolster its influence in Arab affairs. Should it be defeated, Iran would still succeed in dominating the Levantine sphere as there is no adequate resistance to the proxies it controls. This does not mean that the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) wish to see ISIS benefit at the expense of Iraq. On the contrary, the GCC, as a bloc, has consistently reiterated its desire to see ISIS destroyed,¹⁵ but in a way that does not result in heavily sectarian militias taking hold of the capabilities of the Iraqi and Syrian states, facilitating long-term Iranian-dominated security on their behalf.

10. See Abdulrahman Al-Rashed, 'Tikrit Igniting Sectarian War in Iraq', *Al-Arabiya*, 6 March 2015.

11. Sofia Barbarani, 'Looting Shia Militias Transform Tikrit into City of Ghosts', *Times*, 12 June 2015.

12. Samuel Morris, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back', blog post, Middle East Research Institute, 28 April 2015, <<http://www.meri-k.org/one-step-forward-two-steps-back/>>, accessed 4 September 2015.

13. Malak Ghobrial and Saif Eldin Hamdan, 'Iraqi Foreign Minister Dismisses Saudi Worries about Iranian Control', *Reuters*, 11 March 2015.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Taimur Khan, 'GCC Ministers Denounce ISIL at Jeddah Meeting', *National*, 30 August 2014.

Action against ISIS Derailed in Yemen

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), possessing by far the largest and best-equipped air forces in the region, participated actively in launching strikes in the earliest days of Operation *Inherent Resolve*, while the Bahrainis, Qataris and Kuwaitis largely limited their role to logistical and basing support. Results were initially positive, most notably during the ISIS siege of Kobane in the autumn and winter of 2014, in which both Saudi and UAE planes struck frequently, providing the Syrian Kurds on the ground with much-needed air support. However, the level of Gulf State activity against ISIS has dropped drastically since the opening two months of *Inherent Resolve*. According to senior US officials, the Royal Saudi Air Force and the Emirati air force are conducting only minimal numbers of strikes against ISIS at the time of writing.¹⁶ This contrasts with the significant ramping-up of air power in Operation *Decisive Storm* in Yemen, in which the Saudis and Emiratis have conducted tens of sorties a day, with the peak of daily strikes as high as 126.¹⁷

The reasons for this *volte-face* are as much political as they are strategic. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have the capacity to operate out of bases in northern Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and have sufficient air-to-ground munitions. The burning alive of Jordanian pilot Moaz Al-Kasasbeh in early 2015 unnerved Gulf military planners, to the extent that the UAE temporarily withdrew from the coalition.¹⁸ However, this setback does not fully explain why both countries have largely withdrawn from kinetic operations against ISIS. The more likely explanation is that although ISIS posed a real and present danger to the countries of the GCC, particularly ideologically, it did not present a direct military threat in the way that the Iran-supported Houthis in Yemen did.

Indeed, the Saudis looked on in alarm as the Houthi rebels took over Sana'a in September 2014 before driving the GCC-backed government of President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi into exile in the southern city of Aden in February 2015. To make matters worse, a swift push south by Houthi forces forced Hadi to flee to Riyadh, affording Iran's allies all but total control over the country.¹⁹ In the face of this development, Riyadh, long considering Yemen its backyard, reassessed its threat perception. The defeat of the Houthis (and by extension their supporter, Iran) became the immediate priority for military action, a 'must-win' for the new King Salman and his recently promoted son Prince Mohammed, and the war would show the Iranians their days of meddling in the region were at an end.²⁰

As a result of this recalculation of threat priorities, the defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria was afforded far less attention. Accordingly, the bulk of Gulf operational power was moved to Saudi Arabia's southern borders. As with *Inherent Resolve*, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have been most heavily involved, by and large, in military efforts to push back the Houthis. The two countries

16. Author interview with US official involved with Operation *Inherent Resolve*, 19 June 2015.

17. Ahmed Asiri, military briefing given in Riyadh, 16 April 2015.

18. *Reuters*, 'UAE Stops Airstrikes in Anti-Islamic State Coalition: U.S. Officials', 4 February 2015.

19. Michael Stephens, 'Yemen is a Defining Moment for King Salman', *Al Jazeera*, 27 March 2015.

20. Martin Reardon, 'Saudi Arabia Draws the Line in Yemen', *Al Jazeera*, 26 March 2015; Michael Stephens, 'Yemen Campaign Key Test for Saudi Arabia', *BBC News*, 27 March 2015.

have provided not only air power but also training to Yemeni forces, as well as troops and armoured vehicles in an attempt to turn the tide against the rebels.²¹ Only as the war escalated did Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait become increasingly involved, deploying substantial numbers of troops in recent months.²² Importantly, however, Oman has not committed to military action in Yemen and stands outside of consensus among the other GCC members on the matter. Long valuing its relationship with Tehran, Muscat refused to be drawn into a conflict that had the potential to bring its GCC partners and the Iranians into a possible confrontation. This is in contrast to its position within the anti-ISIS coalition, in which its interests more closely align with those of both other Arab states and its Persian neighbour.

The Growing ISIS Threat at Home

Regardless of this disparity of force projection between theatres, the most pernicious threat ISIS poses to the Gulf States cannot be solved by military deployment. In recent months it has become clear that the immediate threat of ISIS to Saudi Arabia is actually domestic, as has been proven by the organisation's sponsoring of two separate attacks on Shia mosques in the Eastern Province in May, followed in June by a suicide attack on a Kuwaiti Shia mosque by Saudi ISIS sympathisers.²³ On 6 August, a ISIS suicide bomber struck a mosque in the southern town of Abha, in a deliberate targeting of Ministry of Interior personnel.²⁴ Indeed, within Saudi Arabia's counter-ISIS strategy great emphasis has been placed on internal security measures designed to target and detain groups of disaffected radicals before they are able to commit acts of terrorism inside the country.²⁵ In July, the Saudis rounded up 431 of their own nationals in a series of anti-terror sweeps.²⁶ Yet, as shown by the attack on 6 August, ISIS appears to have maintained an ability to inspire young men from within the kingdom to commit acts of terrorism, and it is not unreasonable to assume that further attacks on the Saudi homeland will come in future months.

To what extent ISIS operations inside Saudi Arabia, and potentially across the entire Gulf, are being controlled by the group's leadership in Iraq and Syria is unknown. However, the continued existence of ISIS in both countries provides an inspirational core that is beyond Riyadh's control, and will serve as an ideological centre of anti-monarchy radicalisation. To this end, it is in the interests of all the Gulf States – not just Riyadh – to seek ISIS's demise. Yet in the absence of comprehensive military strategies that ensure victory, it may well prove that the domestic fight

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21. Michael Knights and Alexandre Mello, 'The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden', Policy Watch 2464, Washington Institute, 2015.
 22. *BBC News*, 'Yemen Crisis: Qatar "Deploys 1,000 Troops"', 7 September 2015; Reuters, 'UAE, Bahrain Say 50 Soldiers Killed in Yemen Attack', 4 September 2015; author interview with Kuwaiti military source, London, September 2015.
 23. *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, 'Kuwaiti Mosque Attack Suspect Admits to Being in Daesh', 4 August 2015.
 24. Caroline Mortimer, 'Saudi Arabia Mosque Attack: 13 Confirmed Dead as Suicide Bomber Targets Abha Security Base', *Independent*, 6 August 2015.
 25. Elizabeth Dickinson, 'Saudi Arabia is Trying to Stop its Citizens from Joining the Islamic State', *Global Post*, 15 June 2015.
 26. *AFP*, 'Saudi Arabia Announces Arrest of Over 400 Islamic State Supporters', 18 July 2015.

against ISIS proves more of a drain on Saudi state resources, and more costly to its citizenry, than any military adventures in Iraq and Syria.

Conclusion

More than a year on from the ISIS blitzkrieg there remains no possible outcome for Iraq that is good for the members of the GCC. Should the state prevail, heavily supported by Iran-backed militias, it would all but solidify Tehran's grip on the country's state apparatus. Should ISIS become a permanent fixture of the landscape, Iraqi territory would provide a home for an organisation committed to the Gulf States' destruction. And should the Iraqi state break up along ethnic and sectarian lines, it might well set a precedent for the unravelling of the entire region, bringing into question the legitimacy of a number of other fragile states, particularly Lebanon, Yemen and Syria – which would run counter to all notions of the GCC's emphasis on regional stability. However, the extent to which these desires for stability can be translated into a serious policy is questionable.

External military action in Yemen, Syria and Iraq does not guarantee that any one of these countries will overcome their respective political challenges. Indeed, military intervention may only exacerbate existing problems. Moreover, the ability of outside powers in the Gulf to influence the drift of Iraq's politics is, at best, limited. It is telling that, in conversations with the author, military officials from three Gulf States have admitted that should the Kurdistan Regional Government choose to separate from the rest of Iraq, there is very little they could do about it, even if their governments' policies are to oppose the move.²⁷

In the meantime, Gulf eyes are fixed on the US, which is being forced into gradually deepening its footprint in Iraq along with a number of other Western countries, most notably the UK and France. While the critics of the current US administration focus on a supposed 'lack of a strategy' to defeat ISIS,²⁸ the reality is that the regional states, including those in the Gulf, are also lost for quick answers, particularly in Iraq. Other than hoping that the US will show sufficient leadership to take on a full military mission against the group, and hoping that Assad will eventually be forced to step down in Syria, it is difficult to see what could be done at present. Saudi Arabia has recently bolstered its engagement with Russia, one of Assad's prime backers, in an attempt to find common ground on a political solution.²⁹ However, while this may well prove to be the beginning of a political consensus in Syria, it does not translate into any type of solution in Iraq. ISIS's entrenched position in Anbar and Nineveh governorates will be unaffected by a potential Syrian grand rapprochement, and it will require a huge effort from the Iraqi state, backed by the US-led coalition, to drive ISIS from its midst. Neither the US nor any Western country is likely to place active service personnel other than trainers and special forces on the ground. This

27. Author interview with Saudi official, London, March 2015; author interview with UAE official, Abu Dhabi, September 2014; author interview with Qatari official, London, June 2015.

28. Tom McCarthy, 'ISIS in Iraq: "We Don't Yet Have a Complete Strategy", Obama Says', *Guardian*, 8 June 2015.

29. Justin Vela, 'Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister to Visit Russia for Talks on Syria Conflict', *National*, 8 August 2015.

leaves no option for Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States other than to wait it out, hoping for a result in which ISIS does not dominate and the Iranians are not left in control of what remains of the Iraqi state.

V. Iran

Ali M Ansari

There can be little doubt that the rise of ISIS poses a major challenge to Iranian foreign policy, which until recently was recognised by friend and foe alike as a triumph of regional aspiration and ambition. Iranian politicians boasted of their domination of four Arab capitals (Sana'a, Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad); the survival and imminent victory of their protégé Bashar Al-Assad in what remains of the Syrian state; the imminent defeat of the emergent Islamic State; and the withdrawal of its 'American sponsor' from the Middle East, leaving Iran and its Islamic Revolution the ultimate victor in a contest that has spanned some thirty years.

While none of these statements bears critical scrutiny, it is the last of them which perhaps warrants it most, and indeed reveals the most about the ideological worldview that shapes Iranian foreign policy. These views have been largely lost in the whirl of rhetoric that has surrounded the nuclear negotiations in which the pragmatic President Hassan Rouhani and his fluent Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif outlined a promise of a more constructive and collaborative relationship with the West. Yet in its regional foreign policy, the old narratives persist, in large part because since the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, regional foreign policy has been outsourced to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), for whom the ideology of the Islamic Revolution remains not only sacrosanct, but its *raison d'être*. As a result, it spares no effort in reinforcing this narrative as a means of ensuring its own continued centrality to the political life of the Islamic Republic. It is a salutary reminder of the limitations of pragmatism in the conduct of foreign policy.

Indeed, despite reaching an agreement with the P5+1 on Iran's nuclear programme, the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, made clear that Iran's regional policy – and policy towards the US in particular – would remain unchanged. The key question is whether President Rouhani will be able to translate this particular diplomatic achievement into a broader change in approach reclaiming at least the administration, if not the overall direction, of regional foreign policy from the IRGC. This would allow him to actively pursue a collaborative strategy with the West against ISIS.

The Growing Regional Role of the Revolutionary Guards

The IRGC began to determine regional policy with the rise of President Ahmadinejad in 2005, although it had begun to lay the foundations for this role under President Mohammad Khatami in the months following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Iranian strategists had been wrong footed by the speed of the Iraqi collapse in 2003 but moved quickly to fill the vacuum that had been created by the invasion through the establishment of Iranian religious charities and other NGOs to work in Iraq. In the absence of a functioning Iraqi government these provided essential services that were in fact tacitly welcomed by a coalition whose light footprint meant

it was fully stretched in trying to establish stability and security.¹ However, it became apparent by the end of 2003 that stability was elusive and that the political fabric of the country was fragmenting. As a result, Iran took measures to insure itself by encouraging and sponsoring Shia militias there. With the 'neocon' turn in Iran after 2005, this policy of sponsorship became the preserve of the IRGC, which not only executed policy but increasingly determined it. Responding to the bellicose comments of US neocons, the IRGC argued with some popular credibility that it was important to contain the US in Iraq, and effectively defeat them there, lest they turn their attention to Iran. Much as Lebanon had been in the 1990s, Iraq became the 'front line' in a broader struggle with Washington that also now took in Afghanistan. The deterioration of US morale, its enthusiasm for withdrawal (especially after the election of President Obama in 2008) and the apparent dominance of Iran within Iraq, lent further credibility to the IRGC position: its worldview had not only been correct, but its strategy had worked. Ahmadinejad's bombast gave further credence to the view that US defeat was Iran's triumph.

This strategy was given a new twist with the onset of the Arab upheavals in 2011, which the Iranian state enthusiastically redefined as an 'Islamic Awakening' that had not only taken its lead from the Islamic Revolution but from the inspirational leadership of Ayatollah Khamenei in particular. Iran's frontline had shifted dramatically. Just how resilient this ideological worldview was to be was shown by the uprising in Syria against President Bashar Al-Assad. There, the IRGC was determined to support Assad, swiftly perceiving the uprising as US-inspired and part of the larger global struggle.² Senior Iranian figures, including Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, echoed these views by suggesting that the US encouraged the development of ISIS to sow discord between Sunni and Shia groups.³ It was not a narrative that was accepted without criticism at home and many in the Iranian foreign ministry had reservations about becoming involved in a conflict in which the 'Islamic Revolution' sided with the ruthless autocrat. Indeed, as the uprising turned to bloody civil war the sense of unease in Tehran became palpable, not least because the IRGC strategy appeared to be faltering. In the aftermath of Rouhani's election in 2013, pragmatists in the regime vented their concerns – most audibly, former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, who derided Iran's support for Assad as contrary to the principles of the revolution.⁴ But this proved short-lived. The pragmatists were diverted to the far more serious business of negotiating a settlement to the nuclear dispute along with the lifting of sanctions, while the IRGC was left very much in control of regional policy. The incoherence of Western policy (the fact that it was, in effect, fighting with Iran in Iraq and against Iran in Syria) and its unwillingness to engage in these increasingly thorny issues encouraged more direct involvement by the Saudis and the

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1. For background on Iran's role in Iraq after 2003, see Michael Eisenstadt, 'Iran and Iraq', United States Institute of Peace, <<http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-iraq>>.
 2. For example, see Roy Gutman, 'Iran's Perspective on Syria: U.S. Allies to Blame for Rise of Islamic State', *Miami Herald*, 17 August 2015; Jonathan Saul and Parisa Hafezi, 'Iran Boosts Military Support in Syria to Bolster Assad', *Reuters*, 21 February 2014.
 3. For example, see *Fars News*, 'Barkhi khialand ke ba tavafoogh iran behesht-e anvarsarasht mishavad [Some Believe that with the Agreement Iran Will Become an Extraordinary Heaven]', 18 August 2015.
 4. Gareth Smyth, 'Iran: Rafsanjani Signals Wavering in Long-Standing Support for Syria', *Guardian*, 6 September 2013.

Turks, who – eager to curtail Iranian ambitions – supported a range of Sunni groups in Syria,⁵ some of which radicalised. This, in turn, served only to fuel Iranian narratives of Western perfidy.

The Pitfalls of Iranian Strategy

Indeed, the absence of a clear Western strategy towards developments in the region allowed the Iranians to rationalise these developments in conformity with their broader ideology of Western complicity. This meant that when ISIS emerged as a strong force in Iraq in June 2015 – behind what was, in effect, Iran's new frontline – the obvious embarrassment to IRGC strategy, rooted in an assumption that it was in 'control' of Iraq, on the basis of its influence with the Shia and the Kurds, was disguised under the repeated rhetoric of a hidden Western agenda. All this while Iran's nuclear negotiators were ostensibly holding up the promise of better relations and co-operation against ISIS. Indeed, for all practical purposes Iran and the US were co-operating in Iraq, with Tehran even moving swiftly to remove its protégé, Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki, for having mishandled the political situation and aggravated sectarian strife, while US air strikes were frequently co-ordinated to coincide with ground assaults directed by Iranian officers. Arguably one aspect of this new-found coincidence of interests was the collective praise heaped on the once-shadowy but now pictorially ubiquitous commander of the IRGC Quds Brigade, Qasem Soleimani, who was credited with almost single-handedly turning the situation around, and by his own reckoning at least, to have led Iran to an imminent victory against ISIS by late 2014.⁶

However, much as in Syria, from 2015 the horizon of victory appeared to be receding, and one suspects that the effusive praise and grandiose statements had more to do with raising morale than the reality of progress on the ground. Indeed, behind the bombast, the Iranians are increasingly concerned about the proximity of ISIS forces to Iranian borders.⁷ Similarly, they are growing wary of their reliance on local Shia militias over which they have much more direct control (replicating in many ways their success with Hizbullah) than they do the Iraqi Army, which is regarded much more as a creature of the US. The parlous performance of the Iraqi Army of course reinforces the view that the US, either by accident or design, has facilitated the rise of ISIS, whereas Iran's Shia militias, to say nothing of the Kurds in the north, are doing the hard fighting. There is also evidence that many of the fighters in these militias are drawn from non-Iraqi Shias, including, in one reported case from Syria, of Afghan volunteers.

Reconciling Narratives of Confrontation and Engagement

In the immediate aftermath of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iranian strategy towards Iraq was focused on securing a pliant, demilitarised state, from which no military threat could

5. See, for example, Aaron Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order*, Whitehall Paper No. 83 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).
6. See for example Dan Lamothe, 'Qassem Soleimani, Iran's Spy Commander, Introduced to a New Generation', *Washington Post*, 5 March 2015; Najmeh Bozorgmehr, 'Iranian General is New Hero in Battle Against Isis', *Financial Times*, 7 November 2014.
7. *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 'Daesh Don't Dare to Get Close to Iranian Borders: Firouzabadi', 2 June 2015; *Entekhab*, 'Daesh be 40km har yek az marza Iran beresad, naoodesh mikineem [If ISIS Comes within 40 km of Any of Iran's Borders, We Will Destroy Them]', 2 June 2015.

emerge. Since 2004–05, with hard-line control over Iran's institutions and the outsourcing of regional policy to the IRGC, this strategy began to shift and, after 2011, quickly accelerated. The IRGC has effectively established a military network through increasingly dependent Shia militias that serve as its clients. The model for this is clear.

Today, as in Iraq in the aftermath of the invasion of 2003, greater Iranian success against ISIS and, by extension, in Syria can only enhance its immediate influence in the fertile crescent. Similarly, the means of this influence and the sectarian tensions that are likely to result from the growth of militia power will, as in 2003, mean that this extension of Iranian power is unlikely – in the absence of a broader regional peace – to lead to enhanced stability.

The fight against ISIS is read on three different levels: as a fight against radicalism and terrorism; as part of a broader regional struggle against Saudi Arabia; and last, but by no means least, as an aspect of the global struggle against the US. It is at this last level that the recent Vienna Agreement poses ideological problems and where the Iranian Foreign Ministry and the IRGC remain divided, since the IRGC's strategy is founded on a narrative of confrontation with the US that is clearly at odds with that being pursued by Iran's current foreign-ministry establishment. This dynamic reflects a profound tension within the Iranian political system that is becoming increasingly explicit.⁸ Indeed, the return of Mohsen Rezai (the wartime commander of the IRGC) to the ranks of the IRGC and his warnings to regional powers (most obviously Saudi Arabia) that their 'machinations' along Iran's borders – both eastern and western – will receive a vigorous response suggest a military establishment preparing for a broader confrontation with its regional rivals.⁹

Quite how much of this is real, rather than driven by ideology and institutional interest, remains unclear, though some have voiced anxieties about the determination of some hardliners to engender a war mentality.¹⁰ However, there is a clear logic behind the approach of these elements of the Iranian revolutionary establishment to the region. Zarif himself has warned (albeit in relation to US–Iran relations) that the 'cycle' of conflict at the interstate level needs to be broken – and, certainly, the real danger is that a regional dynamic beyond the control of Iran's pragmatists will strengthen the hardliner arguments.

8. *Press TV*, 'US, Saudi Arabia Pursue Mideast Division: Iran Official', 3 May 2015.

9. *Middle East Monitor*, 'Iran to Saudi: Iranians' Patience Has Limits', 27 May 2015, <<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com>>, accessed 17 August 2015.

10. See, for example, *Iranian Labour News Agency*, 'Barayam payamk ferestadeand, chera mardom ra baraye jang amade nemikoneed [They Sent Me a Message Asking Why I Was Not Preparing the People for War]', 2 July 2015.

VI. Russia

Igor Sutyagin

Russia's position on, and contribution to, efforts to counter ISIS in Syria and Iraq are both complex and controversial. The gains Moscow could reap go beyond the simple matter of security, extending to the pursuit of its political aims on three continents. Nevertheless, the security implications for the Russian Federation are enormous, with the country being perhaps the most vulnerable of the developed industrial states to the spill-over of ISIS's actions into its territory, not least because it is among the largest sources of foreign fighters travelling to the Middle East. However, perhaps surprisingly, the Russian security services, according to some sources, have occasionally provided a degree of assistance to those joining the group in Syria and Iraq, indicating a degree of short-term thinking and highlighting the inconsistency of the Kremlin's policy.

Countering ISIS: Killing Many Birds with One Stone

One prevailing view within the Kremlin is that ISIS is another monster (like the mujahedeen in Afghanistan three decades ago) created by the US to achieve its goals that has subsequently broken free of its creator's control.¹ In this respect, the Kremlin is happy to let the US become ever-more embroiled in its self-made troubles.

However, a realistic threat assessment, in combination with tactical political calculations, has forced Moscow to take a more proactive stance in dealing with ISIS. The scale of the group's success in Syria now threatens the survival of President Bashar Al-Assad's regime – and Moscow must now move urgently to save its last remaining strategic ally in the Middle East as well as its own position as an influential arbiter between the Arab world and Israel. Moreover, for Russia, Syria is a natural 'third force' in the complex regional equation – an anti-Israel player whose stance is nevertheless different from those of its Arab neighbours – and a reasonably obedient follower of the Kremlin's political line.

Close ties to the Syrian regime are also instrumental in the Kremlin's pursuit of political influence in European politico-military affairs. One element of this is a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean, at the crossroads of international politics. The rudimentary naval base in the Syrian city of Tartus is vitally important in allowing a Russian navy squadron to maintain a permanent regional presence,² underpinned by the operational flexibility afforded by onshore storage and maintenance facilities. Without a Mediterranean base, the squadron would be dependent on the smooth flow of supplies from Russia via the Turkish Straits and Gibraltar,

1. See, for example, N Patrushev, 'Kto upravlyaet khaosom [Who Steers Chaos]', *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, 10 February 2015, <<http://www.rg.ru/2015/02/11/patrushev.html>>, accessed 28 May 2015.

2. The recent Russo-Cypriot agreement allowing the Russian navy to use Cypriot ports falls short of a permanent basing arrangement as it lacks provisions for storage and maintenance facilities and the long-term presence of Russian specialists. Negotiations with Egypt about a prospective Russian naval base in the mouth of the Suez Canal have not yet borne fruit.

both controlled by NATO and therefore hostage to Russo–NATO relations. The unlimited visiting rights enjoyed by Russian naval and air assets in Cyprus, as well as a prospective naval base in Egypt, cannot substitute for Russia's existing base in Syria.

In combination, Russia's politico-military standing *vis-à-vis* both the Middle East and Mediterranean allows Moscow to punch above its weight in the international arena – an advantage that would be greatly diminished, if not lost entirely, should ISIS, with its overtly anti-Russian stance, succeed in Assad's overthrow.

Saving Assad

Moscow therefore finds itself compelled to counter the groups fighting against Assad, including ISIS (despite its substantial reservations over the potential consequences of challenging it), in order to protect the Syrian president and, by extension, Russia's own regional and global position. In an August 2015 meeting in Doha between the US, Saudi Arabia and Russia, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov proposed the establishment of a 'coalition of the willing' that would send ground forces to fight ISIS – with Assad's Syrian troops and Iraqi armed forces as their backbone.³ This proposal – the third put forward by Russia since September 2014,⁴ and one that was unlikely to be warmly received – was clearly intended to legitimise and secure Assad's regime, on the basis that the West and its regional Arab allies would not undermine a key component of the anti-ISIS coalition.

It was just one in a long series of attempts to secure Assad's future – like that of February 2012 recently revealed by diplomat and mediator Martti Ahtisaari.⁵ The plan put forward by Russia's ambassador to the UN proposed, first, that Syrian opposition should not be armed by external actors (thus ensuring a serious threat to Assad would not materialise); second, that the UN should immediately initiate a dialogue between the opposition forces and Assad (thereby securing the president's legitimacy at the highest international level); and finally, that Assad would 'step aside', although the timeframe remained undefined and guarantees that this would happen in time were not forthcoming.⁶

3. *Federal News Agency (FAN)*, "'Dvoynoy udar' Putina po IGIL obedinit v borbe s terrorom – Lavrov [Putin's "Double Strike" against ISIS Will Unify the Fight against Terror – Lavrov]", 9 August 2015, <<http://riafan.ru/367067-dvoynoy-udar-putina-po-igil-obedinit-v-borbe-s-terrorom-lavrov/>>, accessed 12 August 2015.

4. For the proposal made in September 2014, see *TASS*, 'Glava MID Sirii zaveril Lavrova v gotovnosti Damaska sotrudnicat' v bor'be s IGIL [Head of Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Assures Lavrov of Damascus's Willingness in the Fight against ISIS], 17 September 2014, <<http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1471763>>, accessed 26 August 2015; for the proposal made in March 2015, see *Pravdoryb*, 'Lavrov: Otkaz SSHA rabotat' s pravitel'stvom Sirii v bor'be s IGIL kontrproduktiven [Refusal of US to Work with Representative of Syria in the Fight against ISIS is Counterproductive]', <<http://pravdoryb.info/lavrov-otkaz-ssha-rabotat-s-pravitel'stvom-sirii-v-borbe-s-igil-kontrproduktiven.html>>, accessed 26 August 2015.

5. Julian Borger and Bastien Inzaurrealde, 'West "Ignored Russian Offer in 2012 to Have Syria's Assad Step Aside"', *Guardian*, 15 September 2015.

6. *Ibid.*

Rehabilitating Russia within the International Community

Joining the ranks of anti-ISIS forces would also provide Moscow with an opportunity to address some of its own self-made problems within the international arena. Among these is the need to repair Russia's reputation among the Arab countries of the Gulf, damaged as a result of its unwavering support for Assad.⁷ This might be achieved by demonstrating that it shares the interests and concerns of the Arab world regarding ISIS, and by actively supporting their efforts to counter the group.

Moreover, it is becoming clear that the stand-off with the West over Ukraine, and Moscow's attendant attempt to change the existing world order, is unlikely to lead to a lasting Russian victory.⁸ Given the economic disparity between the two sides – with, for example, Russian GDP in terms of purchasing power parity comparing unfavourably with that of the 'extended West',⁹ at a ratio of 1:16¹⁰ – and the deep dependence of the Russian economy upon co-operation with the West, a prolonged confrontation would be perilous for the Kremlin's long-term interests.¹¹ An additional factor has been China's failure to join this 'sacred fight', further isolating Moscow on the international stage.

Moscow has, for some time, sought a limited rapprochement with the West, supporting, for instance, UN Security Council Resolution 2235 of 7 August 2015 to find and punish those responsible for the 2013 chemical attacks in Syria.¹² Contributing to the common goal of defeating ISIS represents a further opportunity to erode the West's current anti-Kremlin stance. The possible benefit of this approach is shown by the fact that US authorities were willing to allow Alexander Bortnikov, director of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), to attend the countering violent extremism (CVE) summit in Washington in late February 2015, despite the travel ban imposed on him by the EU.¹³ The Kremlin's eagerness to exploit this opportunity

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7. Novaya Siriya, 'Zachem Rossiya uporno pytaetsya spastic ciriyskiy rezhim vo glave s Basharom Asadom? [For What Purpose Does Russia Work Hard to Save Bashar Assad's Syrian Regime?]', 31 March 2012, <<http://new-syria.ru/видео/1857/зачем-россия-упорно-пытается-спасти-с/>>, accessed 18 May 2015.
 8. See, for example, Fyodor Lukyanov, 'Putin Wants Peaceful Coexistence with the West', *Moscow Times*, 19 April 2015.
 9. This term refers to the states which imposed sanctions against Russia for its actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine: EU member states; several non-EU European countries; the US; Canada; Australia; and Japan.
 10. Quandl, 'GDP as Share of World GDP at PPP by Country', <<https://www.quandl.com/collections/economics/gdp-as-share-of-world-gdp-at-ppp-by-country>>, accessed 10 August 2015.
 11. See, for instance, Konstantin Gaaze, 'Putin as usual ili Tri prichiny potepleniya [Putin as Usual or Three Causes of the Thaw]', *Forbes*, 14 May 2015, <<http://www.forbes.ru/mneniya-column/vertikal/288497-putin-usual-ili-tri-prichiny-potepleniya>>, accessed 28 May 2015.
 12. TASS, 'SB OON edinoglasno prinyal resolyutsiyu o vyavlenii vinovnykh v khimicheskikh atakakh v Sirii [The UN Security Council Anonymously Voted for Identification of Those Responsible for the Chemical Attacks in Syria]', 8 August 2015, <<http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/2173147>>, accessed 25 August 2015.
 13. Contact, 'Taynaya amerikanskaya missiya direktora FSB [FSB Director's Secret American Mission]', <http://www.contact.az/docs/2015/Worldwide/022000107351ru.htm#.VWb1stJ_NHw>, accessed 28 May 2015.

for incremental rehabilitation was further manifested in President Vladimir Putin's telephone call to David Cameron in May 2015 to discuss ways to oppose ISIS and to congratulate the British prime minister on winning the general election – eighteen days after the results had been announced.¹⁴

The Iranian and Iraqi Dimensions

In the Kremlin's eyes, Iran's involvement in countering ISIS makes it plausible that the ayatollahs might reward Russia's participation – and its attendant contribution to Tehran's goals – with favourable treatment. This might include, for instance, preferential access to the Iranian market following the lifting of sanctions (especially with regards to contracts for constructing nuclear power stations, concessions to exploit Iranian oil and gas reserves, and so on¹⁵) or the strengthening of Russia's 'influence' over Iran, potentially creating another ally for the Kremlin in its game against the US, should the Russo–Western stand-off continue.

Such calculations may well have prompted Russia to make some obvious moves in support of Iran in relation to ISIS. It has already delivered, for example, ten Su-25 Frogfoot ground-attack aircraft to Iraq in July 2014, just days after Iran sent Su-25s to its neighbour (along with Iranian pilots, according to some sources¹⁶) to fight advancing ISIS forces.¹⁷

Russia also has other reasons for providing support to Iraq, which has included: the deployment of Russian specialists to make the aforementioned Su-25s operational;¹⁸ around 400 heavy mine-clearing vehicles, to be delivered later this year under the terms of a large contract signed by President Putin and Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi in May;¹⁹ and further weapons and ammunition promised by Foreign Minister Lavrov in the same month.²⁰ Moscow's efforts are far from altruistic, with Abadi publicly promising after meeting Putin in May to establish an industrial regime favourable to Russian companies.²¹

14. Steven Swinford, 'David Cameron and Vladimir Putin Agree to Work Together to Stop Islamic State', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 May 2015.

15. See, for instance, *Vzglyad*, 'Snyatie sanktsiy sulit Rossii rezkiy vsplek trgovli s Iranom [The Lifting of Sanctions Promises Russia a Surge in Trade with Iran]', 14 July 2015, <<http://vz.ru/economy/2015/7/14/756173.html>>, accessed 25 August 2015.

16. Yurefeev, 'Irak priobrel shturmoviki Su-25 iz strategicheskikh rezervov Minoborony RF [Iraq Has Bought Su-25 Assault Aircraft from the Russian Ministry of Defence's Strategic Reserve]'; *RIA Novosti*, 'Iran napravil v Irak tri rossiyskikh shturmovika Su-25 dlya borby s IGIL [Iran Has Sent Three Su-25 Russian Attack Aircraft to Fight ISIS]'.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Kurdistan.ru, 'Rossiya predostavit Iraku bronetransportery dlya razminirovaniya [Russia Will Provide Iraq Armoured Personnel Carriers to Clear Mines]', 12 July 2015, <http://kurdistan.ru/2015/07/12/news-24484_Rossiya_predostavit_Iraku_bronetransportery_dlya_razminirovaniya_avtomobiley.html>, accessed 12 August 2015.

20. *Ibid.*

21. MSN, 'Rossiaya dast Iraku oruzhie dlya borby s IGIL [Russia Will Provide Iraq Weapons to Fight ISIS]', 21 May 2015, <<http://www.msn.com/ru-ru/video/trending/россия-даст-ираку-оружие-для-борьбы-с-игил/vi-BBk5pEH?refvid=AAaYlzb>>, accessed 12 August 2015.

Russia: A Potential Reservoir of ISIS Recruits

It should not be forgotten that ISIS holds serious domestic implications for Russia too; as Alexander Bortnikov, the FSB director, announced at February's CVE summit, there were 1,700 Russian citizens fighting with ISIS in 2014, a twofold increase in a year.²² The total number of Russian citizens among ISIS's ranks may now be as high as 5,000,²³ more than 20 per cent of all foreigners currently thought to be fighting with the group.²⁴ Estimates also suggest that between 400 and 1,700 of these 'Russian' fighters came from Chechnya alone.²⁵ In addition, up to 1,000 fighters from Dagestan, also in the North Caucasus, had joined ISIS by spring 2015.²⁶ Russia's current circumstances are such that the FSB and the Kremlin take very seriously the danger posed by the potential return of these fighters from Syria and Iraq.

ISIS's Objectives in Russia

The Kremlin's approach is greatly complicated by the threats made by leading ISIS figures to invade Russia. For instance, Abu Omar Al-Shishani (originally known as Tarkhan Batirashvili²⁷) – the native Chechen and tactical mastermind behind ISIS's swift military gains in Iraq's Anbar province²⁸ –

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22. *Russia Today*, 'Direktor FSB: Okolo 1,7 tysyachi rossiyan voyuyut v ryadakh boevikov [FSB Director: Around 1.7 Thousand Russian Citizens Fight in the Adventurists Lines]', 20 February 2015, <<http://russian.rt.com/article/75312>>, accessed 28 May 2015. The original statement made by the FSB First Deputy Director Sergey Smirnov suggested that 'up to 1,700 Russian citizens might fight with Islamic State'.
 23. See, for example, *Kavkazpress*, 'Kommentariy IGIL: u nas voyuet bole 5000 bratjev s Kavkaza [ISIS Comment: 5,000 of Our Brothers from the Caucasus Fight Alongside Us]', 14 April 2015, <<http://kavkazpress.ru/archives/76349>>, accessed 10 August 2015.
 24. A UN report published in March 2015 stated that around 22,000 foreigners were fighting in Syria and Iraq alongside ISIS and Al-Qa'ida. See *Business*, 'OON: na storone islamistov voyuet 25 tysyach inostrantsev [UN: 25 Thousand Foreigners Fight Alongside Islamists]', 2 April 2015, <http://ru.business-tv.com.ua/news/oon_na_storone_islamistov_voyuyut_25_tysyach_inostrantsev-114.html>, accessed 10 August 2015.
 25. Fehim Taştekin, 'İŞİD Kafkasya'ya da bela oluyor [ISIS Comes to the Caucasus]', *Radikal*, 23 June 2015, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/yazarlar/fehim_tastekin/isid_kafkasyaya_da_bela_oluyor-1383829>, accessed 10 August 2015; Kavkazskiy Uzel, 'Vykhodtsy s Kavkaza v ryadakh IG (IGIL) [People of Caucasian Origin in IS (ISIS)]', 23 June 2015, <<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251513/>>, accessed 10 August 2015.
 26. Geopolitika, 'Spetssluzhby ozhidayut vspleska terroristicheskoy aktivnosti na Severnom Kavkaze [Secret Services Expect Jump in Terrorist Activity in the North Caucasus]', 19 March 2015, <<http://geo-politica.info/spetssluzhby-ozhidayut-vspleska-terroristicheskoy-aktivnosti-na-severnom-kavkaze.html>>, accessed 10 August 2015. This source does not specify when the number of Dagestanis fighting with ISIS reached 1,000.
 27. *Pravda*, 'Rossiya – glavniy vrag novogo Khalifata [Russia is the Main Enemy of the New Caliphate]', 3 July 2014, <<http://www.pravda.ru/world/asia/middleeast/03-07-2014/1214653-halifat-0/>>, accessed 25 August 2015.
 28. Michael Winfrey, 'How Islamic State Grooms Chechen Fighters against Putin', *Bloomberg*, 9 October 2014, <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-10-08/how-islamic-state-grooms-chechen-fighters-against-putin?hootPostID=66a06a62b40801eaca96fbefb8395933>>, accessed 25 August 2015.

promised invasion as revenge for the 2008 Russo–Georgian War.²⁹ Some, if not all, of his fighters fully support the pledge.³⁰ Another reason ISIS might seek revenge is Russia’s status, according to some sources, as the only country to have successfully countered Islamic radicals on its own territory, having defeated the so-called ‘Imarat Caucasus’ in the North Caucasus.³¹ Baghdadi’s identification in July 2014 of Russia, along with the US, as a leader of the anti-Islamic coalition clearly indicates the danger ISIS poses to Russia’s security.³²

Fertile Socioeconomic Ground

The conditions in Russia only accentuate this danger. Russia’s economic difficulties – the result, in part, of the Kremlin’s policy in Ukraine – make the country, and especially the Caucasus, prone to instability. Unemployment rates ranging between 8.9 and 30.8 per cent in the seven North Caucasus regions – in comparison to a country-wide average of 5.4 per cent³³ – provide fuel for protest, while five of these regional governments have debt exceeding 60 per cent of their respective annual incomes. In fact, regional government debt exceeds 100 per cent of income in North Ossetia and Karachay-Cherkessia, leaving them desperately short of resources with which to improve the local socioeconomic situation and thus heavily reliant on federal government subsidies.

However, the federal government’s ability to support the regions is diminishing as the national economy shrinks sharply.³⁴ Meanwhile, Russian analysts increasingly point to the conclusion that the country’s declining economic situation cannot be improved without radical political reforms – an unlikely path for the Russian government. In this climate, ISIS’s offer of generous rewards for fighting in support of the group is likely to find an increasingly receptive audience weary of economic turmoil and social decline at home.

Suppression and Potential Radicalisation

These circumstances are compounded for the Russian government by the psychological climate prevailing within the predominantly Islamic population of these regions, following Moscow’s ruthless suppression of the Chechen rebellion between 1994 and 2002³⁵ and the disappearance

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. Argumenty i Fakty, ‘Evgeniy Satanovskiy o boevikakh IGIL: “Im vazhno otomstit Rossii” [Evgeniy Satanovskiy on ISIL Fighters: “It is Important for Them to Take Revenge on Russia”]’, 10 October 2014, <<http://www.aif.ru/politics/world/1357947>>, accessed 25 August 2015.

32. *Pravda*, ‘Rossiya – glavniy vrag novogo Khalifata [Russia is the Main Enemy of the New Caliphate]’.

33. Natalia Zubarevich, ‘Dannye Rosstat’a po Severnomu Kavkazu – eto virtualnaya realnost [Rosstat’s Data on the North Caucasus is the Virtual Reality]’, *Kavkazskaya politika*, 4 August 2015, <<http://kavpolit.ru/articles/bezrab-18841/>>, accessed 10 August 2015.

34. BezFormata.ru, ‘Eksperty: rossiyskaya ekonomika okazalas v glubokoy retsessii [The Russian Economy is in Deep Recession]’, 21 July 2015, <<http://kurgan.bezformata.ru/listnews/ekonomika-okazalas-v-glubokoj-retsessii/35601573/>>, accessed 10 August 2015.

35. Yuri Vasilchenko, ‘Skolko rossiyan pogiblo za 20 let grazhdanskogo konflikta v Riossii [How Many Russian Citizens Died During 20 Years of the Civil Conflict in Russia]’, *Delovaya stolitsa*, 24 May

of dozens, perhaps even hundreds, of Chechens each year since.³⁶ More than 150 years of intermittent conflict have created a deep well of hostility within the region towards the Russian authorities.³⁷ Furthermore, Moscow's efforts to pacify Chechnya have prompted many rebels to leave for other regions in the North Caucasus, broadening the geographical basis of hostility.

The government's efforts to counter Islamic radicalisation across the country – by breaking up Islamic groups (some of them not notably extreme in their beliefs) through the arrest and extrajudicial killing of leaders and activists, and the intimidation of potential followers – have also proved highly counterproductive, providing endless reasons for blood feuds, a widespread tradition among the populations of the North Caucasus.

Together, the prevailing socioeconomic and psychological conditions serve to strengthen the flow of new recruits from troubled regions to Islamist groups involved in terrorist activity, as highlighted by Russian security-services insiders tasked with dealing with the issue.³⁸ Of greatest concern to the Kremlin will be the news that emirs of the *vilayets* (provinces) established by Islamists in Dagestan, Chechnya, Ingushetia and Kabardino-Balkaria have recently taken an oath of loyalty to Baghdadi.³⁹ Moreover, given these conditions, and the number of Russian citizens who have already travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight with ISIS, the possibility that radicalised and experienced fighters may return from the Middle East is a very serious prospect indeed. The likely consequences of this for domestic stability are certainly an extremely important factor in shaping Russian attitudes toward co-operation with the West and the Arab world with regards to ISIS.

Dealing with ISIS: Hesitant ... and Controversial?

Despite the possible opportunities open to Russia through collaboration, the potential domestic threat posed by ISIS to Russia – including, possibly, an attack on its own territory, as promised by Shishani – renders it too costly for Moscow to become directly involved militarily in international efforts to counter the group. The only possible exception is the use of special forces should ISIS advance into the areas immediately adjacent to Russian territory, given past experience in the Chechen wars that special forces are the most effective counter-terrorist and counter-insurgent tool (if only in the short term).⁴⁰ Such operations also tend to incur low casualty rates. Nevertheless, while Moscow is certainly determined to deal with the issue of ISIS, it is happy for others – whether the US, Europe or the Arab countries – to undertake the most risky and bloody tasks.

2014, <<http://www.dsnews.ua/politics/skolko-rossiyan-pogiblo-za-20-let-grazhdanskogo-konflikta-24052014110000>>, accessed 10 August 2015.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Komsomolskaya Pravda – Kazan*, 'Realnye zhertvy chechenskikh voyn [The Real Victims of the Chechen Wars]', 28 September 2010, <<http://www.kazan.kp.ru/daily/24565/738459/>>, accessed 15 September 2015.

38. Geopolitika, 'Spetssluzhby ozhidayut vspleska terroristicheskoy aktivnosti na Severnom Kavkaze [Secret Services Expect Jump in Terrorist Activity in the North Caucasus]'.

39. InoSMI, 'IGIL prikhodit na Kavkaz [ISIS is Coming to the Caucasus]', 24 June 2015, <<http://inosmi.info/igil-prikhodit-na-kavkaz.html>>, accessed 12 August 2015.

40. Boris Zayakin, 'Kratkaya istoriya spetsnaza Rossii [A Brief History of Russian Spetsnaz]', p. 8, <<http://litrus.net/book/read/166057?p=8>>, accessed 25 August 2015.

However, there are also unconfirmed reports, of questionable credibility, that the FSB has unofficially endorsed the participation of radicalised locals from the North Caucasus in the conflict in Syria, even assisting them in obtaining passports.⁴¹ On the one hand, this seems counterintuitive, given the risk posed by those eventually returning to Russia and the Kremlin's desire to appear willing to fight against the common enemy of ISIS in Syria, albeit alongside Assad. On the other hand, such short-termism is typical of the current Russian authorities in general,⁴² and so it may well be that the FSB is attempting to reduce the level of domestic terrorism by facilitating Russian extremists in leaving the country. If this is the FSB's plan, then it may well have been effective in the short term, given a twofold decrease in terrorist activity in the North Caucasus since the eruption of the Syrian civil war in 2011.⁴³ Furthermore, given FSB estimates that only 300–400 of the more-than 5,000 fighting in Syria will come back,⁴⁴ the potential tenfold reduction in the number of violent extremists within Russia could be the most radical achievement of the country's counter-extremist policy ever.

The deployment in September 2015 of Russian troops to Tartus and Latakia (namely, one battalion of the Russian Black Sea Fleet 810th Marines Brigade and, probably, one company of the 27th Guards Motor Rifle Brigade, along with one battalion of military engineers) does not change the overall picture.⁴⁵ Instead, it only underlines the contradictions of the Kremlin's policy, given that these troops have been deployed to (and are fighting in, according to numerous but unverified reports⁴⁶) areas of Syria where ISIS is not present. In this way, Russian troops are backing Assad in the fight against groups such as Jabhat Al-Nusra and Ahrar Al-Sham, which are themselves opposed to ISIS. If Russia troops do eventually join combat, therefore, they would also – technically – be assisting ISIS.

41. Tatiana Lokshina, 'Boeviki edut v Sيريю s vedoma FSB [Fighters Are Travelling to Syria with the Knowledge of the FSB]', Radio Liberty, 29 July 2015, <<http://ej.ru/?a=note&id=28269>>, accessed 10 August 2015.

42. See Radio Liberty, 'Donetskie Fermopily i putinskaya Rossiya [Donetsk Thermopylae and Putin's Russia]', 22 January 2015, <<http://www.svoboda.mobi/a/usa-today-riots-in-baltimor/26807411.html>>, accessed 25 August 2015; Boris Akunin, 'Putin ne strateg, on taktik, to est slovo "poslezavtra" dlya nego ne suschestvuet [Putin is a Tactician, not Strategist, i.e. The Words "The Day After Tomorrow" Do not Exist for Him]', Blognews, 3 March 2014, <<http://blognews.am/rus/news/136666/putin--ne-strateg-on-taktik-to-est-slovo-poslezavtra-dlya-nego-ne-sushchestvuet.html>>, accessed 25 August 2015; Nikolay Svanidze 'Putin – taktik, no ne strateg – mnenie [Putin is a Tactician, Not Strategist – Opinion]', ППОLife, 22 November 2014, <<http://newsprolife.com.ua/putin-taktik-no-ne-strateg-mnenie>>, accessed 25 August 2015; Chetverta Vlada, 'Stanislav Belkovskiy: Putin – ne strateg, a taktik po tipu myshleniya [Stanislav Belkovskiy: Putin is Not a Strategist, but a Tactician by His Mentality]', 11 August 2014, <<http://4vlada.net/v-mire/stanislav-belkovskii-putin-ne-strateg-taktik-po-tipu-myshleniya>>, accessed 25 August 2015.

43. *Ibid.* This twofold drop of terrorist activity might not be directly due to the Syrian civil war, although it certainly correlates.

44. Kavkazskiy Uzel, 'Vykhodtsy s Kavkaza v ryadakh IG (IGIL) [People of Caucasian Origin in IS (ISIS)]'.

45. Aleksandr Golts et al., 'Spaset li Kreml diktaturu Asada? [Would the Kremlin Save Assad's Dictatorship?]', Radio Liberty, 12 September 2015, <<http://www.svoboda.org/content/transcript/27241369.html>>, accessed 15 September 2015.

46. Gabriela Baczynska et al., 'Exclusive: Russian Troops Join Combat in Syria – Sources', *Reuters*, 9 September 2015.

Although controversial and evidently contradictory, the deployment – which has come at the same time as a partial Russian withdrawal from eastern Ukraine – also fits the Kremlin’s political line in many ways, given its urgent need to curry favour with the West, which remains unwilling to send its own troops in large numbers to the region. Indeed, the Kremlin may well be hoping that the West will show its appreciation by lifting the sanctions imposed in response to the situation in Ukraine. Moreover, by securing the base at Tartus and creating an air base at Latakia, the Kremlin has shored up its own position as an important player in the current Syrian crisis – as well as in the Middle East of the future. Should this happen, simultaneously, to deal with the problem of ISIS, this would be another very welcome outcome for the same reasons.⁴⁷ The most desirable result would be for all of these goals to be achieved without having to confront ISIS directly, thereby avoiding the risk of the organisation launching an attack on Russian soil in retaliation.

In sum, the Kremlin’s recent direct involvement in the Syrian crisis – on a bilateral, and so far limited, basis – should not be taken as a sign that Russia has at last changed its mind and decided to *combat ISIS* directly. Nor should it overshadow the fundamental differences between Russian and Western attitudes regarding ISIS and the best way to deal with it. Indeed, Russian policy regarding ISIS remains hesitant and at times controversial, despite both the potential gains of more comprehensive involvement and the threat posed by the group to the country’s domestic stability.

47. Igor Sutyagin, ‘Tsinizm i blagodarnost [Cynicism and Gratitude]’, Radio Liberty, 12 September 2015, <<http://www.svoboda.org/content/article/27240783.html>>, accessed 15 September 2015.

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