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OUT OF THE DESERT

ISIS'S STRATEGY FOR A LONG WAR

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SUMMARY

The collapse of ISIS's caliphate and its subsequent flight from much of its former territory has been a triumph for the anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq and Syria. However, for ISIS, expulsion from former urban strongholds is the end of one chapter and the beginning of another: the group has since rolled out a well-developed strategy to assure its future resurgence. This paper examines ISIS's actions, publications, and communications to determine its insurgency strategies and long-term organizational outlook, emphasizing sources that have been largely overlooked by forces fighting the group.

By analyzing the strategies ISIS uses and has used in its previous incarnations, this paper argues that insurgent groups like ISIS will continue to operate within the ungoverned space along the Syria-Iraq border, and that if left unchecked, the group is likely to re-emerge.



KEY POINTS

- * The contiguous terrain linking Iraq and Syria provides an ideal space for jihadis to endure, entrench, and emerge again.
- * ISIS's post-caliphate strategy is to target Sunnis that collaborate with government forces or other insurgent groups using hit-and-run tactics and targeted assassinations, using as its base desert areas.
- * Rural insurgency is not an afterthought for ISIS and other jihadis who are currently on the defensive. Rather, it is a strategy that they have long thought about and planned for.
- * Signs of ISIS recovery already appear to be emerging in areas from which the group was expelled in late 2014 and early 2015.
- * The group will continue to model its post-caliphate strategy on what it is convinced worked the last time it was driven underground in 2008-09.

INTRODUCTION

In both Syria and Iraq, the insurgency landscape has undergone a notable transformation. Various militant groups have largely been forced to turn from holding and defending population centers to retreating into rural areas or ungoverned spaces, or even temporarily melting away. ISIS has lost almost all of the territory it seized in 2014. Similarly, Syrian factions opposed to the regime of Bashar al-Assad have struggled to hold on to the many populated strongholds that they held in 2012 and 2013, including sizeable garrisons in Deir Ezzor, Raqqa, al-Hasakah, and Homs in 2014; eastern Aleppo in 2016; and various areas in Homs, Hama, Idlib, and southern Syria since.

The collapse of ISIS's caliphate could open the door for other groups to operate in the terrain it once controlled uncontested. Rival groups and individuals are already preparing to return to eastern Syria and Iraq as ISIS loses ground.¹ The space where various forces could compete in the future stretches contiguously from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in central and northwestern Iraq to northwestern and southwestern Syria. In this complex terrain, it is unlikely that existing power vacuums will be filled quickly. As a result, insurgent groups will continue to operate there while forces loyal to central governments will likely maintain a tenuous grip, at least for the foreseeable future.

In this scenario, an expansive theater of operations will emerge, in which militants could feasibly carve out safe havens, regroup, and stage attacks locally, regionally, or internationally. Contrary to common perceptions, jihadis placed high importance on rural areas early on in 2011, while simultaneously focusing on major population centers.² One al-Qaeda ideologue envisioned the possible state of jihadis in Syria as “mercurial in nature,”³ where rural insurgency would challenge the local governments and their foreign allies that largely remain unprepared to face insurgency effectively. Forces fighting the Syrian and Iraqi governments have already articulated strategies for operating in such an environment.

The contiguous terrain linking Iraq and Syria is comparable both in value and threat to the militant hub existing along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. The area acquired the moniker “AfPak” and began being perceived and treated as a single theater that required an integrated or holistic approach.⁴ Concurrently, the “Syrac” space extends deep into Syria and Iraq with favorable sociopolitical conditions for jihadis to endure, entrench, and emerge again.

This region is the soft underbelly of both Iraq and Syria, a fact unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. In this region, no socially viable or sustainable local forces have been utilized by the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS to capture and hold towns previously controlled by ISIS. Instead, these Sunni-majority areas are now dominated

by Shi'i and Kurdish forces. Adding to the future challenge, much of the region ISIS once controlled now lies in ruins.

This paper seeks to situate the next phase of ISIS in this context. For ISIS, rural insurgency is no less important than urban warfare as a means to degrade enemies, recruit members, and lay the groundwork for their long-term survival or next return if defeated. A key objective of this paper is to demonstrate that rural insurgency is not an afterthought for ISIS and other jihadis who are currently on the defensive. Rather, rural insurgency is a strategy that they have long thought about and planned for, even before the U.S. launched Operation Inherent Resolve in the summer of 2014. ISIS has prioritized the borderlands where both the Iraqi and Syrian governments have more limited reach, and it is here where the jihadi project will either die or flourish.

ISIS'S FORMULA FOR SURVIVAL

ISIS has a strategy to resume its insurgency after the collapse of its government, namely from rural areas. The plan is often expressed in three terms used in its Arabic-language publications—"sahraa," or desert; "sahwat," or Sunni opponents; and "sawlat," or hit-and-run operations. These terms deal with the where, who, how, and why of the next phase of insurgency.

SAHRAA, OR DESERT

Since the summer of 2016, even before the battles in Mosul and Raqqa began, ISIS began to talk about the desert as a viable place to launch its post-caliphate insurgency. Since then, ISIS propaganda has frequently featured desert combat to show that it could still inflict damage on government forces in remote areas and on vital highways linking Syria and Jordan to Iraq. Invoking the desert also draws parallels to the last time the organization was deemed defeated in Iraq after 2008.

SAHWAT, OR SUNNI OPPONENTS

Sahwat was originally restricted to the tribal Awakening Councils established in western Iraq to fight ISIS's predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), during the 2007 U.S. troop surge.⁵ The term has since been broadened to include any and all opponents and collaborators coming from Sunni communities.

SAWLAT, OR HIT-AND-RUN OPERATIONS

Headquartered in the desert or hidden in populated areas, ISIS aims to run a far-reaching and ceaseless insurgency in rural areas and urban centers to deter and stretch thin its opponents and to abrade any fledgling state-run governance or security structures in areas it previously controlled.

ISIS began to publicly articulate its post-caliphate strategy in earnest in May 2016, when its former spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani gave his last speech before being killed in Syria in late August 2016.⁶ In his speech, Adnani prepared ISIS's followers for the fall of "all cities" under the group's control. Throughout the speech, he depicted the rise and fall of the group as the latest stage in a historical flow, continuing as a preconceived and preordained process from the early days of the Iraq war in 2003-04 until the current day. Territorial demise, to him, was merely a change of mode in which the process of depleting the enemy would continue apace, if in different forms. If and when an opportunity for another rise presented itself, the process of enemy degradation would have laid the groundwork for an even deeper influence than the previous round. In his May 2016 speech, Adnani proclaimed: "Do you think, O America, that victory is achieved by the killing of one commander or more? It is then a false victory."⁷ He added:

Victory is when the enemy is defeated. Do you think, O America, that defeat is the loss of a city or a land? Were we defeated when we lost cities in Iraq and were left in the desert without a city or a territory? Will we be defeated and you will be victorious if you took Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa or all the cities, and we returned where we were in the first stage? No, defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight.

Since Adnani's speech, ISIS has repeatedly released videos and articles featuring similar themes. An editorial published by its weekly *Al-Naba* newspaper in August 2016—a publication that tends to be relatively in sync with daily life under the caliphate—echoed its former spokesman's statements about how the group understood its 13-year history. In the editorial, the authors summed up the group's strategy after its expulsion from former strongholds in Iraq in the wake of the troop surge with the support of Sunni tribesman:

In the years that followed the rise of *sahwat* in Iraq, the mujahideen retreated into the desert after leaving behind tens of concealed mujahideen from among the security squads [i.e. sleeper cells], which killed, inflicted pain, drained, and tormented them, and confused their ranks, and exhausted their army, police, and their security apparatus, until God willed that the Knights of the Desert return to storm the apostates inside their fortresses after they had worn them out through *kawatim* [gun silencers], *lawasiq* [sticky bombs], and martyrdom operations.⁸

ISIS has also focused on the role of Sunni collaborators in its demise in 2008-09 and vowed to keep up the pressure against any newly emerging ones. "America was defeated and its army fell in ruins, and began to collapse had it not been salvaged by the *sahwat* of treason and shame," roared Adnani in his May 2016 speech. The August 2016



Fighters from Hashd al-Shaabi, also known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), pose in front of a mural depicting the emblem of ISIS after retaking the city from ISIS fighters. AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP/Getty Images

editorial also warned the Syrian *sahwat* of the same fate as the Iraqi insurgents, claiming that the group's "mafariz amniyah," or secret security units, have since become even more skillful in "the methods of deceiving the enemy and thwarting its security plans."

Together, these three elements shape ISIS's formula of survival after the caliphate. Even though the group suggested it would withdraw to the desert, future attacks will still focus on urban centers, with rural areas acting as pathways between the two terrains. As the group retreats from its last strongholds, ISIS operations will target new governing structures and Sunni collaborators in order to prevent the establishment of alternatives to ISIS rule that might appeal to local communities in predominantly tribal and rural areas. Hit-and-run attacks would demonstrate that nothing is out of ISIS's reach, even if its ability to control territory has plummeted.

ISIS'S INSURGENCY STRATEGY

ISIS's recent discussions of a post-caliphate insurgency are consistent with a strategy that the group's previous incarnation, ISI, expressed in a 2009 document entitled the "Strategic Plan to Improve the Political Standing of the Islamic State of Iraq," a defining study of the factors that led to ISI's near-defeat and how it planned to recover.⁹ The analysis and prescriptions in

the document shaped the group's strategy, and its success has subsequently come to define how ISIS perceives its chances of recovery today. The group believes that what worked before will work again. For this reason, a closer examination of the document, along with the group's narrative around the caliphate's recent crumbling, could provide the best available insights into what ISIS intends to do next.

The document makes it clear that the popular uprising launched against ISI in Sunni areas with American help was overwhelming and devastating for the group. It discusses how tribesmen driven by tribal solidarity turned against ISI, and does not shy away from acknowledging that the uprising was inclusive of all tribes.

Around the time the document was being drafted, ISI had begun to see the momentum against it decline, due again to tribal dynamics. Quickly, ISI saw signs of new opportunities begin to emerge. Young people who had joined the U.S.-backed Awakening Councils were becoming disillusioned with their leaders. Tribal elders were restless about the rise of rival overlords coming up from within their own tribes. The Councils gradually began to crumble, and ISI slowly regained renewed, if quiet, relevance. "That does not mean the calamity and adversity will stop, it will undoubtedly continue," the document underlined. "But, as historical precedents show, it will not be as encompassing and large. They [the Awakening Councils] are decreasing substantially."¹⁰



An Iraqi security forces member takes combat position as he carries a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) in the rural town of Husaybah. AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP/Getty Images

The view within ISI suggested that the group had weathered the storm of the Awakening Councils. This is how the document described the supposed process of bringing the councils down:

With the spread of the Awakening Councils, it became clear that ISI focused on this pathological phenomenon and on trying to target the heads of their founders. This would resemble a large tree whose roots are cut off so that its branches die out on their own. This intensive military policy culminated in the near-collapse of the Awakening Councils, a great and significant accomplishment, which proves that ISIS has become a political and military power capable of dealing with internal problems effectively.

The purpose of ISI's 55-page treatise was to offer a diagnosis of the tribal uprising that upended its primacy and to suggest how best to prepare for the U.S.'s departure from Iraq. The group's war minister at the time, Abu Hamza al-Muhajir, said of the preparations of ISI's competitors in Iraq that "The timing of the withdrawal of the occupier is the worst timing, as the experience in Afghanistan has shown, and we have become certain of that. There are parties storing weapons and preparing [secret security units]¹¹ for the day when the occupier leaves. They shoot one rocket and store ten others."

Having contained the U.S.-led tribal uprising, the next phase was to prepare for U.S. withdrawal:

After our emancipation from the circumstances around the *sahwat* and with the end of that phase, in which the *sahwat* presented a real danger to the *dawlah* [ISI]... this period emerges as a period of planning and preparation for what comes after the American withdrawal... the real victor of this battle will be the one who knows how to plan and prepare for the post-withdrawal period.

This preparation phase, as outlined in the document, involved the use of various tactics that would enable the group to consolidate itself within Iraq and abrade the capabilities of its rivals. The focus would be to prevent the emergence of local structures capable of filling the vacuums left behind after U.S. withdrawal. Such tactics included targeting police and army units to maximize the cost of joining their ranks. To achieve its goals, ISI suggested three courses of action for the group's clandestine campaign.

The first focused on targeting Iraqis—particularly Sunnis—seeking to enroll in the military and police forces. ISI proposed "nine bullets for the apostates and one bullet for the crusaders" and a range of soft propaganda portraying enrollment in state agencies as both socially shameful and religiously sinful. The reason for the 9:1 bullet ratio was twofold. The Americans had already

made a choice to leave Iraq, so it was pointless to focus on them. Instead, the document's authors believed that the U.S. planned to use local Iraqis as proxies for a continued occupation. Therefore, placing a focus on eroding functioning state institutions would push the U.S. further from its commitment to building a new Iraq that served its interests. By disrupting the creation of effective security institutions, ISI's logic went, the U.S. would give up and leave Iraq to its own devices, and thus open up new opportunities to the *mujahideen*, or fighters:

"When will a building be completed when what one builds is being destroyed by another," the document said, citing Arabic poetry. "This great wisdom is one of the most important policies that should be applied in the jihadi work, especially in this critical period."

Furthermore, the document explained that the U.S. had pinned its hopes on the ability of Iraq's army and police forces to fully control the security situation without the need for direct American support. This, the authors added, would enable the U.S. to withdraw from Iraq. Incessant attacks against the police and army would render the U.S. "torn between getting themselves out of the conundrum as soon as possible and staying in it while unable to complete the building that they began working on."

ISI's second proposed tactic was to purge areas in which the group operated from any sustainable rival military presence. This process would involve targeting security bases and gatherings in order to deplete the government forces and divert their attention. Such attacks would increase the group's influence and

mobility in as many areas as possible, and thus enhance its ability to conduct operations in a wider area.

The goal here, according to the document, was manifold. It would supplement ISI's effort to prevent the construction of functioning army and police institutions; it would also further deplete government forces, forcing them to constantly worry about rebuilding bases or finding new areas to construct facilities, which would drain the security forces' ability to fully control population areas. In this context, the authors cited Sun Tzu's maxim: "reduce the hostile chiefs by inflicting damage on them; and make trouble for them, and keep them constantly engaged."

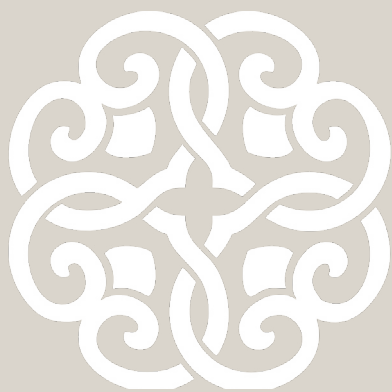
ISI's third proposed course of action was to focus assassination attacks on key nodes within the security forces. Such figures included operationally effective officers, engineers, and trainers, since these skilled cadres were critical to the expanding objectives of Iraq's security forces and would be difficult to replace. The document also cited unspecified reports that most of Iraq's forces were unable to conduct operations without close American support, and therefore proposed that targeting those elite forces capable of operating independently be a top priority. "Although such targeting requires a great deal of time and effort, it is worth the focus," the document stated. "Even a small number of this type of concentrated targeting is better than a large number of other targets."

In this context, other specified targets included political leaders. By attacking effective and influential political figures, the document



People's Protection Units (YPG) fighters in Syria's Kurdish-controlled northwest. *Andia/UIG via Getty Images*

said, ISI would create power vacuums and sow confusion among other leaders. Since such targets were difficult to reach, the document suggested that ISI work patiently to infiltrate political circles and recruit moles and bodyguards to conduct attacks on its behalf. Successful targeting would erode the public's trust in the government's ability to defend ordinary citizens.



RETREATING TO RURAL AREAS

Throughout the U.S.-led campaign against ISIS that began in the summer of 2014, the U.S. pursued a disjointed strategy in Iraq and Syria. The campaign initially had an Iraq-first approach in which professional, tribal, and Kurdish forces were trained and equipped to fight ISIS.¹² In Syria, the effort to train an anti-ISIS force from within mainstream opposition factions was halfhearted and swiftly crumbled. Therefore, the U.S. continued to rely heavily on an effective yet insufficient Kurdish militia, the People's Protection Units (YPG). In October 2015, the Syrian Kurds announced the establishment of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which included a growing number of Arab fighters.¹³



Members of the Free Syrian Army defuse mines planted by ISIS near the ISIS-controlled Bab district of Aleppo province during "Operation Euphrates Shield." *Hüseyin Nasir/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

After ISIS was driven out of most of central and northern Iraq and northern Syria in mid-2017, the war's center of gravity shifted toward the two countries' hinterlands.¹⁴ Local forces in those areas were relatively less-equipped to fight ISIS, and more battle-hardened Kurdish-dominated forces had to travel to towns where they tended to be viewed with even more distrust than elsewhere. Deir Ezzor, for example, has almost no Kurdish population, which would otherwise have provided the legitimacy or justification for the YPG's local involvement.

Meanwhile, the weakening northern and southern Syrian opposition were coming under enormous strain, as former al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) exploited their weakening to further entrench itself.¹⁵ In late January 2017, HTS launched a consolidation campaign in the northwestern province of

Idlib. HTS claimed that opposition forces—with foreign backing—planned to turn against the group after peace talks were organized by Russia in Astana, Kazakhstan, enhancing its control of territory. By the time the campaign ended in February, several groups had either joined HTS or had been forced to join Ahrar al-Sham to shield themselves from it. HTS tightened its grip in Idlib and the mobilization against it by some sections of the opposition failed. The group then went on to assert itself as the leader of the rebellion, first through a number of suicide attacks against regime targets in the heart of Homs and Damascus, and later through offensives it led in Hama and southern Syria.

To make matters worse for the non-jihadis, the opposition's backers were shifting their priorities in the conflict. In late August 2016, for example, Turkey began to work closely with

Russia after the former launched its operation to expel ISIS from west of the Euphrates River and to block any further expansion of the YPG in northern Syria. The operation, dubbed Euphrates Shield,¹⁶ was a game-changer in the Syrian conflict, marking a critical shift in Turkish priorities away from the removal of Assad. Countries such as Qatar have since had little room to bankroll groups they previously backed, especially after both Turkey and Jordan moved closer to Moscow, and since the regime recaptured eastern Aleppo in December 2016.

With backers either changing priorities, exiting the conflict, or being locked out of it,¹⁷ the resulting loss of territorial strongholds placed non-jihadi insurgents under increased pressure, either from HTS or ISIS. In Syria, the loss of urban bases was more damaging to mainstream opposition fighters. These fighters are less prepared than jihadis to conduct long-term rural warfare operationally and ideologically, given jihadis' experience in other battlefields in the decades before the ongoing Syrian conflict, especially in Syria and Afghanistan in the 1970s-80s, in Algeria in the 1990s, and in Iraq since 2003. Politically, withdrawal from populated urban centers also dealt a further blow to the opposition's attempts to win international recognition and support as a viable alternative to the Assad regime.

This situation as it stands has favored jihadis and positions them well to inherit what remains of anti-government sentiment.¹⁸ For ISIS and HTS alike, the erosion in support for the anti-Assad rebellion empowers their respective strategies, principally the objective of presenting themselves as the only available

alternative to the populations they seek to control. Interestingly, ISIS's desire to present itself as the true defender of Syria's anti-regime insurgency became even more pronounced in the spring of 2018, as mainstream opposition forces agreed to a series of surrender agreements near Damascus.

Starting in October 2017, there were signs that ISIS had begun to shift its strategy in areas traditionally known to be its key strongholds, namely the Euphrates River Valley, extending from Deir Ezzor in eastern Syria to Anbar in western Iraq.

With the fall of Mosul in mid-2017, the writing appeared to be on the wall for ISIS's caliphate. Notwithstanding ISIS's emerging weakness, the speed of its subsequent retreats from places like Tal Afar, Hawija, and even Raqqa, were a surprise to many. Even more unexpected was ISIS's retreat from areas long perceived to represent its strategic base—the Iraq-Syria borderlands and the Euphrates River Valley, where it had a decade or more of experience fighting or operating and from where it re-emerged in 2014.

ISIS's continued presence in that region, combined with assertions by local sources and U.S. officials about the volatility of the border areas,¹⁹ underscored the significance of these borderlands as hideouts and a potential launching pad for future operations. These areas became the center of ISIS's remaining concentration of forces, comprising die-hard foreign and local fighters and key commanders preserved from previous battles.²⁰ By late summer of 2017, they were also host to at least 550 ISIS fighters who had been given

safe passage to travel from Lebanon and Raqqa in deals with Hezbollah²¹ and the SDF,²² respectively.

But despite their apparent strategic significance, some of these areas fell abruptly from ISIS hands with little fighting in October 2017. For example, after ISIS's defeat in al-Mayadin, local sources speaking to Deir Ezzor 24, a grassroots organization specializing in documenting violations by both the regime and jihadis, denied the city had been retaken by forces loyal to Assad.²³ The local skepticism underlined the extent to which ISIS's sudden withdrawal had surprised locals,²⁴ who along with U.S. officials had seen the city as a critical ISIS base amid the ongoing assault on Raqqa to the north.

ISIS fighters also appear to have melted away in al-Bukamal and al-Qa'im, border towns that face each other in Syria and Iraq, respectively. After earlier shaping operations, the Iraqi push into al-Qa'im was relatively swift and lasted less than two weeks.²⁵ Similarly, the Syrian regime and Iran-backed militias announced they had recaptured al-Bukamal in November 2017, shortly after a campaign to fight the group was launched there in September. It was after the defeat in al-Bukamal—which ISIS denied at the time—that the regime and its allies declared the jihadi group to have been destroyed, on Nov. 9, 2017.²⁶

One possible explanation could be found in ISIS's own publications. Al-Naba hinted at a major change of strategy in a series of articles published between September and October 2017 on dealing with the U.S. air campaign. In two reports published in September 2017, Al-Naba explained that having suffered heavy

losses—particularly in Kobane—ISIS militants were internally debating how to evade the “precision” of U.S. airstrikes while pursuing ground assaults on multiple fronts.²⁷ Ideas included disguising weaponry and engaging in military deception, such as waging fake attacks to distract enemies. The article concluded that it would be a mistake for ISIS to continue engaging forces that enjoyed air support from the U.S. or Russia because the function of these forces was not to serve as conventional fighting forces, but mainly to provoke the militants and expose their whereabouts and capabilities in order for sophisticated drones and aircraft to strike them.

In order to avoid the depletion of its forces by overwhelming air power, the article pushed for ISIS to adopt a counter-strategy in which it would begin to refrain from engaging in sustained clashes in urban centers, a notable departure from established strategy. Given that ISIS quickly retreated from urban areas in places like Tal Afar and Hawija in the weeks following the liberation of Mosul, it appears likely the article reflected an actual change in strategy by ISIS's leadership after the loss of Iraq's second largest city in July 2017.

This change of tactics was also reflected in the early stages of the battle of Raqqa, where, as Al-Naba revealed, ISIS divided the city into small, self-sustained, and autonomous localities in order to enable militants to defend their areas with minimal movement and without the need for resupply from other districts.²⁸ ISIS allowed these small groups of fighters to make autonomous decisions, dictated by their own circumstances and needs. According to the Al-Naba article, another precaution taken in Raqqa and then more generally was



An Iraqi man reads an article picturing a man authorities claimed to be Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, leader of ISI. Ali Al-Saadi/AFP/Getty Images

to avoid gathering in large numbers at entry points to a battlefield, as such positions had typically been struck from the air, weakening any attempt by ground forces to advance into an urban environment. "In modern wars, with precision weapons, everyone tries to avoid direct engagement with his enemy to minimize losses," the article declared.²⁹

In another Al-Naba report issued on Oct. 12, 2017, ISIS suggested that it had again been forced to switch to insurgency tactics as it had back in the spring of 2008, then under the leadership of Abu Omar al-Baghdadi and his war minister Abu Hamza al-Muhajir.³⁰ The article related how the group's predecessor, ISI, had been forced to dismantle its fighting units in March 2008 and pursue a different strategy aimed at preserving what was left of its manpower. Providing details never before disclosed, it described how the ISI had become

exhausted and depleted after two years of fierce fighting against U.S. and Iraqi troops, so much so that it was no longer able to stand and fight for long. "In early 2008, it became clear it was impossible to continue to engage in conventional fighting. That was when Abu Omar al-Baghdadi said: 'We now have no place where we could stand for a quarter of an hour.'"³¹ The article argued the situation in late 2017 was comparable to 2008 and that this justified a switch of approach.

ISIS's apparent decision to conserve forces for a durable insurgency in the region stretching from Deir Ezzor in eastern Syria to Anbar province in western Iraq makes strategic sense, given that it has frequently highlighted the area as being key to its survival and best suited for a guerrilla war. For ISIS, rural and desert-based insurgency are as important as urban warfare in any sustained effort to deplete

an enemy, to recruit new members, and to lay the groundwork for a future comeback. The geographic and human terrain of the Deir Ezzor-Anbar region would provide ISIS with an area in which it could regroup, coordinate sleeper cells, regain financial autonomy through extortion, and plot attacks.

Tactical changes within key sanctuaries also comport with patterns that predated the group's military weakness. Nibras Kazimi, an Iraqi security expert, has noted that ISIS used particular tactics in these areas. He has explained that, in areas like al-Rutbah, Palmyra, eastern Qalamoun, and west Samarra, ISIS's fighting was restricted to deflection, probing, and attrition even before their territorial collapse. ISIS's "well-developed and functioning" bases of operations in the desert, according to Kazimi, remained intact because the group refrained from engaging

in costly battles, as had happened elsewhere in Iraq and Syria, near desert areas throughout the campaign against it since 2014.

However, this tactical evolution could be unrelated to an ISIS loss of territory. Kazimi explained that the group's operation in the desert could also be the result of an earlier strategy developed to facilitate attacks further afield, in neighboring countries like Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Even at the height of its power in 2014 and 2015, the desert remained a core component of the group's fighting strategy, and thus was not only left in place but also reinforced with new fuel and water depots, transportation routes, and alliances with desert nomads and smugglers. "The desert fighting force was developed with generous financial allocations, increased training, innovative camouflage techniques, surveillance equipment, and its own iconography and symbolism within the ISIS narrative of jihadi glory," Kazimi added.



An explosion rocks the Syrian city of Kobani during a reported suicide car bomb attack by ISIS on a YPG position in the city's center. *Gokhan Sahin/Getty Images*

RECOVERY SIGNS

In fact, during the early months of 2016, well before it lost Mosul, ISIS had increasingly transitioned to insurgency tactics. General Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, told reporters in May 2016 that ISIS “may be reverting in some regards back to their terrorist roots.”³² Indeed, in early 2016 the group had stepped up hit-and-run attacks in towns it had lost, without any indication that the limited number of militants involved in these operations sought to regain control of the towns.³³ The tactic was a notable divergence from the group’s traditional tendency—particularly at the height of its expansion in 2014—to engage in conventional attacks, including armed convoys and artillery barrages. These new tactics tended to involve small units attacking from behind enemy lines or through hasty raids.³⁴ In early 2016, as it began to combine insurgency tactics with conventional army tactics while holding territory, ISIS could be described as pursuing a hybrid strategy of territorial control and insurgency tactics.

The group also began to mount attacks in areas it had previously failed to enter as a more conventional armed force, such as in Abu Ghraib, west of Baghdad, and in the coastal region of western Syria.³⁵ By reverting back to the old insurgency and terror tactics, ISIS found itself more capable of penetrating otherwise well-secured areas. Previous attempts to attack such areas through conventional fighting units had failed even while the group was at the height of its power.

By the spring of 2016, the emergence of these new tactics, combined with ISIS’s continued control of territory, raised questions among U.S. officials about the versatility and adaptability of allied Iraqi and Syrian forces and the kind of training they received relative to that of ISIS.³⁶ As one senior U.S. official conceded to this author in May 2017, it was not yet possible for the U.S.-led coalition to focus on countering asymmetric or insurgent tactics while ISIS still controlled significant territorial sanctuaries.³⁷

ISIS’s reversion and reliance on insurgency tactics increased further as it lost more territory. Hit-and-run attacks and high-profile assassinations returned to newly liberated areas, such as in Salah ad-Din, Diyala, Anbar, and Raqqa,³⁸ although such attacks were rarely accounted for in official and public statements by the U.S.-led coalition related to progress against the group.

In Iraq, the return of ISIS operations to areas newly liberated from its control was a reality long before the group lost its hold of Mosul. In October 2016, as Iraqi troops prepared for the battle in Mosul, Iraqi officials told Al Sumaria TV that ISIS had already begun to recruit new members among displaced civilians in areas secured since late 2014 in the city of Samarra, in Salah ad-Din province.³⁹ Officials’ fears were triggered by new findings by local intelligence and a series of suicide attacks in areas between the Balad district and Samarra,⁴⁰ which officials attributed to the inability of security forces to hold and secure the liberated areas, especially near the Tigris River.

One Iraqi military intelligence official, Hayder Abdulsattar, told Al Sumaria at the time that ISIS’s numbers and activities were growing

again and, along with sleeper cells, the group had begun facilitating the movement of its operatives across the Euphrates River. "We use ambushes [to catch ISIS operatives crossing the river], but it is not enough because that requires the support of a whole brigade," Muhammad Abbas, the commander of the Sixth Brigade of Hashd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), told the channel.

Signs of ISIS recovery already appear to be emerging in areas from which the group was expelled early on in late 2014 and early 2015. This could be attributed to the time the group has spent regrouping since, or as these areas calm and become less of a focus of U.S. or coalition airstrikes. As noted last year by Michael Knights, ISIS was already involved in intense insurgent operations in several parts of the country a year after it declared a caliphate, and especially in Diyala province, with the level of violence in June 2017 remaining at around the same level as in 2013. In fact, in Diyala, which was never overrun by ISIS, an insurgency against Shi'i militia forces had been gathering pace since 2015, and steady attacks ranging from ambushes to assassinations have been regularly reported in and near the province.⁴¹

Knights' research pointed to a full-fledged insurgency in Diyala province being led from an adjacent ungoverned space north of the Diyala River. "The insurgency has attained a steady, consistent operational tempo of roadside IED attacks, mortar strikes and raids on PMF outposts, and attacks on electrical and pipeline infrastructure," Knights wrote. He added, "In Diyala, the Islamic State is already engaged in the kind of intimate violence that

was seen across northern Iraq in 2013: granular, high-quality targeting of Sunni leaders and tribes working alongside the PMF."⁴²

There have been similar patterns of insurgent operations over the past two years in the borderlands straddling Iraq and Syria, in which ISIS benefits from geographic and social terrain that more challenging for counterinsurgents. Since 2017, ISIS fighters have carried out several hit-and-run attacks on military bases in the area, some of which have killed high-ranking Iranian and Russian officers.^{43, 44}

For ISIS, the return to these activities was also designed to demonstrate that its existing, new generation of leaders was capable of following in the footsteps of their previous generation. Wilayat Salah ad-Din, for instance, released a video in May 2016 entitled "Craft of War," seeking to replicate its previous comeback. The video addressed how much the group's new leadership had absorbed skills obtained from founding leaders like Abu Abdulrahman al-Bilawi, who planned the takeover of Mosul before he was killed in June 2014.⁴⁵ The 30-minute video showed operations targeting "the enemy's rear lines" in the province, on the Baiji-Haditha road, between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, as well as inside the city of Tikrit.

As in other combat videos posted by ISIS in recent months, the video details various armed attacks, the forceful dispersal of the enemy, and the seizure of arms and vehicles from the bases of enemy forces. The video featured the killing of Tikrit's counterterrorism chief along with 31 people, including 14 policeman, after seven ISIS fighters entered the city's central Zuhur district in a police car wearing suicide vests and police uniforms before storming the counterterrorism chief's residence. The

video's commentator then claimed the attacks demonstrated the current leadership's ability to plan and execute effective attacks, just as the old guard had done previously when they brought the group back to life after it was thought dead:

These operations brought to mind the planning of the ISIS's early leaders. The qualitative operations in Tikrit, Baiji, al-Siniyyah, Samarra, and others...are an extension of the methodology of the commanders and leaders who had previously led the war of attrition and kept the enemy occupied, and who laid the groundwork for a long war. Men of honesty carried the banner after them to destroy their enemy, and the first sign of glad tidings appeared at their hands (showing) that Salah ad-Din was and remains a deterring place for the apostates.

ISIS has an extensive plan to exploit this region. It is also conscious of the advantages presented to it today in being able to focus its energies on guerrilla or insurgent-type operations, rather than on seeking to maintain control over approximately one-third of Iraq and half of Syria. ISIS has spoken occasionally, for example, of the enhanced abilities of its clandestine network to resume a

post-caliphate insurgency to exhaust and erode its enemy. This network is led by the worst of the worst within ISIS, namely the "amniyat,"⁴⁶ or security units.

Even at the height of its strength in 2014, ISIS's *amniyat* continued to operate underground. Such units were typically tasked with clandestine work within local communities, behind enemy lines, and even within the organization itself. Thus, they are the most likely to melt back into the population by virtue of their anonymity, expertise, and mobility. While locals who lived under ISIS had varying access to those within the organization's military, police, clerical, and services sectors, "amni," or security operatives were largely unknown to the local population.



A member of Syrian pro-government forces carries an ISIS flag as he stands on a street in the ancient city of Palmyra after pro-government troops recaptured the city from ISIS. STR/AFP/Getty Images

WRONG LESSONS LEARNED?

The overall goal of the strategy proposed in 2009, and echoed in recent years, was to deplete the enemy and preempt any effort by central or local authorities to create security or social structures capable of entrenching rival government political orders and challenging the presence of jihadis. The campaign of incessant attacks to debilitate the enemy, which ISI fighters launched inside Iraq following the U.S. withdrawal in 2010, is a process jihadis refer to as “*nikayah*,” or a war of attrition.

These tactics distinguish ISIS even from its ideological sibling, al-Qaeda. While the concept of *nikayah* was first popularized within al-Qaeda circles, mainly by the Jordanian jihadi theorists Abu Qatadah al-Filistini and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, such tactics have emerged as the organizing principle of ISIS's insurgent campaign. Al-Qaeda operatives conduct similar attacks against specific targets for similar reasons, but these attacks are significantly less comprehensive and wide-ranging than those of ISIS. The latter does not shy away from publicly targeting individuals who collaborate with governments. It also has no qualms in apostatizing and killing clerics or community leaders who work against them. Conversely, in its attempt to win hearts and minds, al-Qaeda tries to avoid the alienation of local communities. Instead, it focuses on de-emphasizing its ideology and embedding into the social or insurgent fabric of a given country, depending on the circumstances, as it has attempted to do in Yemen, Syria, and Libya in recent years.

The tactics that ISIS followed after it was dislodged from Sunni towns in Iraq before 2008 are arguably unique across the Islamic jihadi landscape. Its extreme, unequivocal, and comprehensive targeting of all potential opponents or rivals enabled it to achieve results that al-Qaeda in Syria, for example, struggled to achieve. In another example, the absence of viable Sunni insurgent groups that could rival it in Iraq is in large part due to its pre-emptive campaign against them over the years, along with other factors, notably the withdrawal of American support from the Awakening Councils and the targeting of those councils by the former prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki. Al-Qaeda in Syria, on the other hand, has been repeatedly checked or challenged by local resistance precisely because it has sought to accommodate dissent and avoid being compared to ISIS, tactics that limited its ability to react forcefully and adequately to competing factions and voices in the same way that ISIS did.

One major gap in the connection between ISI's post-2008 campaign and ISIS's dramatic rise in 2014 is that the group was affiliated with al-Qaeda from August 2011 to April 2013, a crucial period fueling its rise the following year. During that period, Jabhat al-Nusra's operations in Syria began, driven by members of ISI. Jabhat al-Nusra was bankrolled by the group until April 2013, when the latter unilaterally announced the merger of the two branches and the resulting creation of ISIS, which Jabhat al-Nusra swiftly rejected. Instead, Jabhat al-Nusra pledged its allegiance directly to al-Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Those were formative months for ISIS's expansion into Syria.

In the first two years of its operations in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra built some of its most successful strongholds in rural Deir Ezzor.⁴⁷ The effort to entrench its presence in rural areas in particular was neither arbitrary nor was it limited to eastern Syria. Despite the fact that it operated effectively in urban centers, al-Qaeda's affiliated presence in Syria was largely based in rural areas for the better part of its existence in the country.

In February 2014, Jordanian Sami al-Aridi, who had earlier replaced Iraqi Abu Mariyah al-Qahtani as Jabhat al-Nusra's top clerical authority, wrote a series of tweets about his group's strategy in Syria.⁴⁸ Aridi, who Nusra leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani had described to Al Jazeera in 2013 as being the authoritative voice on the group's ideology,⁴⁹ listed 19 strategic recommendations originally developed by prominent Syrian jihadi theorist, Mustafa Abdul Qadir Setmariam (Abu Musab al-Suri). Among those recommendations was to pay special attention to rural areas and build networks in remote areas.

What if, then, ISIS drew the wrong conclusions about its rise in 2014, a development that owed a great deal to the networks and geographic reach that its former Syrian branch had established? While most of Jabhat al-Nusra's network chose not to defect during the infighting with ISIS in 2013, ISIS benefited from an influx of a sizeable number of the group's commanders, members, and resources. In other words, much of the infrastructure and some of the manpower that laid the groundwork for ISIS's expansion had been built by another group operating under different guiding principles.

Another potentially misconstrued lesson that ISIS may have internalized is a related one. In the strategy document detailed earlier, the group

spoke unfavorably toward the idea of winning hearts and minds, which jihadis call "hadhina sha'biyah,"⁵⁰ meaning communal or popular incubation. This could be attributed to the sweeping popular uprising against it circa 2008, as the authors describe how initial attempts to win hearts and minds delayed any pre-emptive moves against their fellow insurgents' counter-uprising. The lesson, the document stated, should be to nip such internal challenges in the bud without paying any undue attention to alienating people as a result.

The group followed this lesson after it broke away from Jabhat al-Nusra, immediately declaring war against the *sahwat* in Syria, by which it meant opposition fighters opposed to the regime in Damascus. Its war against the opposition caused many inside and outside Syria to see it as collaborating with the regime. That is when the group became known as "Daesh," a pejorative term based on the Arabic acronym for ISIS. It was also during that time when the group was labelled widely in the region as "khawarij,"⁵¹ or outliers, a reference to a similarly extreme group that emerged in early Islamic history.

Whether ISIS has learned the right lessons from its history will determine the prospects of it rising again. But that does not in any way make its next choice of tactics any less deadly. The group will continue to model its post-caliphate strategy on what it is convinced worked the last time. Significantly, the area poised to be the testing ground for the group's strategy in the coming years includes previous strongholds where al-Qaeda paved the way for ISIS's rise: areas near the Syrian and Anbar deserts and the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in eastern Syria and northern and western Iraq.

CONCLUSION

As the group has made clear since the Adnani speech in May 2016, ISIS intends to replicate the experiences envisaged in its 2009 document. Adnani's comparison of ISIS's recent military defeats to the last time the group (in the form of ISI) was pronounced defeated in 2009 reflects how the group perceives these current defeats. The 2009 strategy was summed up in Adnani's definition of defeat as "the loss of willpower and desire to fight." The group's incessant, ceaseless, and targeted attacks serve a carefully calculated function. The pursuit of this strategy, the group believes, led specifically to the sweeping gains made in 2014. Mosul collapsed swiftly not because the militants were powerful; it fell because its defenders were weak, a weakness the group seems to attribute to its insurgency campaign between 2008 and 2014.

ISIS's focus is unlikely to diverge from what was described in the 2009 document. It will focus on targeting burgeoning government structures, military bases, individuals who cooperate with the government, as well as government or foreign business interests. Another obvious target will be Shi'i and Kurdish militias, now spread out throughout Iraq's central and northern Sunni communities, the diffuseness of which make them soft targets.

In Iraq, none of the Sunni insurgents that once competed with ISIS's predecessors for territory and influence exist today in a meaningful way. In Syria, meanwhile, ISIS will likely conduct a campaign focused mostly on Kurdish and regime forces that have inherited control of its former caliphate in eastern Syria.⁵² Elsewhere, especially in southern, central, and northwestern Syria, much of ISIS's efforts will likely focus on infiltrating and fighting rebel forces. The flow of arms and existing



YPG military police members demonstrate with their flags in the Kurdish town of al-Muabbadah in the northeastern Hassakah province.
Delil Souleiman/AFP/Getty Images

sanctuaries could position northern and northwestern Syria as lucrative financial areas for jihadi groups like ISIS. For this reason, a priority there could be to lay low. A senior jihadi based inside Syria also told this author that some jihadi operatives had moved to zones currently overseen by Turkey in the hope of benefiting from expected reconstruction plans there.⁵³ Several rebel sources have also spoken of suspected ISIS sleeper cells in Idlib.

However, the main battle will likely be concentrated in Iraq and Syria, extending from central Iraq to northern Syria. In such geographic spaces, jihadis could focus their attacks on their enemies while their opponents find it harder to sustain a counterinsurgency. The terrain also offers jihadis rear bases in which they could regroup, run sleeper cells, extort, and plot attacks on highways and in urban centers.

Remote, rural areas are also populated and jihadis could still use them to sustain themselves and to conduct urban guerrilla warfare, acting as “land pirates” sailing through an archipelago of desert areas, river valleys, rural towns, and small urban centers. Even at the height of the U.S. troop surge in Iraq, when Syria was a stable and occasionally cooperative country, the U.S. struggled to effectively target jihadi networks along the border, according to a former senior official involved in the surge.⁵⁴

The situation on the both sides of the border is worse today than a decade ago, with both the Syrian regime and U.S.-backed forces unable to fully secure the borders or blunt jihadi mobility. Moreover, state control of those areas has receded as jihadis have worked studiously to fill the vacuum and eradicate

rivalries and any state infiltration and influence there. This means the Syrian and Iraqi governments’ abilities to police these areas and to gather intelligence on local networks is seriously strained. This erosion of state reach necessitates the rebuilding of local leadership and governance to stabilize their areas and effectively challenge jihadi networks.

In addition, competing agendas complicate the ability of governments and other affiliated forces to work together on border security. These include the seemingly irreconcilable Kurdish-Turkish tensions and other ethnic and sectarian rivalries in Iraq and Syria. As such, this paper recommends an integrated American role in both countries to manage tensions and competing agendas and to ensure a coherent strategy to defeat jihadis and prevent their resurrection, while respecting the existing national borders. The U.S. is better placed than other countries to play this oversight role in the “Syraq” region, considering its presence on both sides of the border and because of its relations with countries like Iraq and Turkey.

Whether jihadis succeed in rebuilding their influence will hinge greatly on whether the U.S. is ready to anticipate jihadi strategies and to pursue actions founded upon a long-term and clear guiding policy rather than being guided by a largely reactionary approach.

ENDNOTES

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Cover photo: A former jihadi who fought alongside ISIS but defected to join Iraqi government forces takes position in Amriyat al-Fallujah in Iraq's Anbar province. *Haidar Hamdani/AFP/Getty Images*

Photo 2: Iraqi Shi'i fighters from the Popular Mobilization Units take an ISIS flag off of an electricity pole during an operation in the desert of Samarra aimed at retaking areas from ISIS jihadis. *Ahmad Al-Rubaye/AFP/Getty Images*

Photo 3: Iraq army and peshmerga forces launch a U.S.-led operation against ISIS in Sadiye, a town in Iraq's Diyala province. *Ali Casim/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

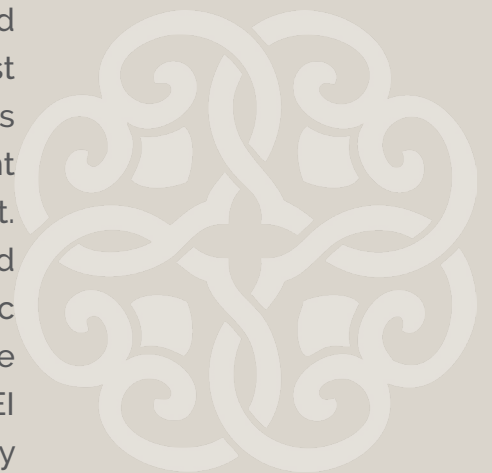


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