

Thinking the Unthinkable: Coming to Grips with the Survival of the Islamic State

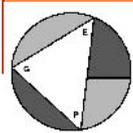
James M. Dorsey

Abstract Well over a year after a US-led coalition launched air strikes and increased support of Iraqi and Kurdish military forces in a bid to degrade and destroy the Islamic State (IS), the jihadist group that has built a pariah state in a swath of Syria and Iraq has demonstrated resilience despite a mix of significant victories and defeats. The limited impact of the airstrikes and Iraqi ground operations raises the spectre of a longer term existence of a disruptive entity in the heartland of the Middle East and the question of how the international community will deal with it in the absence of the political will to employ the kind of force that could potentially destroy it. It also raises questions about whether all members of the coalition are towing the same line. Thus evidence mounts that IS is as much a product of a successful Saudi-led counterrevolution in the Middle East and North Africa that was intended to roll back the gains of popular revolts that swept the region in 2011, as it was a tool in the kingdom's 36-year old war against revolutionary Iran that gathered pace as the contours of a resolution of the Iranian nuclear crisis became clear.

'The king is dead, long live the king'

Reports that self-declared caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State (IS), was seriously wounded in a coalition strike in early 2015 has done little to weaken the group as it fights multiple battles in Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State, despite news reports that Al-Baghdadi was paralyzed in the attack, has stood its ground in Syria, made advances in Iraq, and according to some Iraqi lawmakers as well as the group's captured Baghdad bomb maker, infiltrated Baghdad that is regularly rocked by bombings.¹ A photo picturing Al-Baghdadi sitting knees crossed that was published by a Kurdish news agency in mid-July suggested that reports that he had been injured were false or that he had since recovered.² CNN's Pentagon correspondent Barbara Starr at the same time quoted US officials as saying that Al-Baghdadi had been sighted in June in the Syrian city of Raqqa.³

Al-Baghdadi's resilience is emblematic of the group's ability to survive significant military pressure rather than collapse under its own weight, as it licks its wounds in an environment in which the attitudes of some of the United States' closest allies towards militant Islamist militias, including some associated with Al Qaeda, are ambivalent and in flux. A continued willingness to forge tactical alliances with groups considered by not only the West but also other major powers like China and Russia beyond the pale, coupled with IS's resilience, raises the spectre of jihadist groups becoming a more permanent fixture on the Middle East's political landscape.



The IS leader's resilience is also a reflection of the murky, shifting politics of Saudi-led Gulf support of jihadist groups, including IS, despite the obvious danger of backlash as is evident in IS's declared targeting of the kingdom as well as the Al Qaeda attacks in Saudi Arabia in the very first years of the 21st century,⁴ and more recent IS attacks on Shiite mosques in the kingdom and Kuwait and on Saudi security personnel.⁵

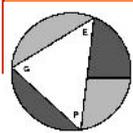
In a speech in 2014, former head of the British Secret Intelligence Service, MI6, Sir Richard Dearlove, recalled Prince Bandar bin Sultan, once the powerful Saudi ambassador in Washington DC and former head of Saudi intelligence, warning him more than a decade ago that "the time is not far off in the Middle East, Richard, when it will be literally 'God help the Shia'. More than a billion Sunnis have simply had enough of them."⁶

Dearlove left little doubt that Gulf states had contributed to the rise of IS as part of their bid to not only to counter Iran but to force the demise of Syrian president Bashar al Assad, "Such things simply do not happen spontaneously," Dearlove noted. He said, referring to the kingdom's austere interpretation of Islam, that Saudi strategic thinking was rooted in deep-seated beliefs that that there "can be no legitimate or admissible challenge to the Islamic purity of their Wahhabi credentials as guardians of Islam's holiest shrines." Dearlove argued further that Saudi leaders were convinced that they possessed a monopoly on interpretation of Islam that leads them to be "deeply attracted towards any militancy which can effectively challenge Shiadom."⁷

Scholar Madawi al-Rasheed took Dearlove's comments a step further, noting that attacks on Shiite mosques in 2015 in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia had been perpetrated by Saudi nationals.

"Such terrorism is not an export from the Levant to Saudi Arabia and its neighbours, but rather the return to its historical home of an indigenous trend of political violence. The justification for such sectarian terror was established in Saudi Arabia, where it has its ideological roots and has since seized the imagination of a new generation. It is thus unsurprising that the perpetrators were Saudis. ISIS is not simply a problem unfolding in the Levant but is in part an outcome of religious indoctrination and political conditions in Saudi Arabia... There is no doubt that hate preachers are an entrenched reality in Saudi Arabia. This is not a new phenomenon that was initiated by ISIS but is an important cornerstone of the Saudi-Wahhabi religious tradition. It flourished in the eighteenth century and continues to inflame the imagination of a wide circle of clerics and their followers today," Al-Rasheed argued.⁸

Dearlove and Al-Rasheed's comments on Saudi and Gulf ambivalence in the fight against IS by implication pointed to other equally fundamental factors that shape attitudes in the Saudi kingdom and other regional sheikhdoms. Leaving aside the merits of foreign intervention, the refusal of Saudi Arabia and other regional players with the exception of Iran to commit ground forces to the fight against IS highlights how the kingdom is blinded by a sectarian approach to a legitimate struggle for power.



Committing ground troops would mean Saudi troops fighting alongside the Iraqi military and Shiite militias that both answer to a Shiite government in Baghdad—a heresy in a Saudi world view that despite the arrest of hundreds of alleged IS operators in the kingdom sees Iran rather than IS as the greater threat to Saudi national security. In fact, if national security is defined as survival of the Saudi regime, both IS and Iran pose a mortal threat. Both challenge the Saudi claim as the Custodian of the Holy Cities, Mecca and Medina, to have developed the one and only legitimate form of Islamic rule.

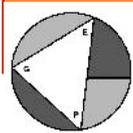
The Islamic Republic of Iran's challenge is multi-fold: a republic rather than a monarchy established as the result of a truly popular revolt and legitimized by an institutionalized, albeit flawed, electoral process, that propagates a revolutionary instead of a status quo approach to geopolitics. For its part, IS's declaration of a caliphate by implication dismisses the Islamic credentials of Saudi rulers and propagates political activism and jihadism rather than the kingdom's adherence to quietist Sunni precepts of obedience to the ruler.

Moreover, Gulf engagement with jihadist groups was further part of what international relations scholars Bulent Aras and Richard Falk described as authoritarian leaders' "learning process" in their desperate need "to develop new strategies...(and) cope successfully with recent geopolitical challenges," making use "of concrete geopolitical reasoning to shape a problem-solving agenda designed to facilitate authoritarian survival." Aras and Falk argued that the popular revolts had rewritten the political geography of the Middle East and North Africa with "the erosion of regional structures, alienation of non-Arab elements, empowerment of non-state actors and reproduction of old problems in a new context."⁹

IS in particular, by challenging the notion that political conflict occurred exclusively within the boundaries of or between sovereign nation states, has called into question the regional order in the Middle East and North Africa. "New territorial entities are surfacing on the periphery of regional geopolitics...(that are)...directly challenging the stability of central powers acting within this regional system," Aras and Falk said.¹⁰

In effect, IS, with its roots in the Islamic State of Iraq founded more than a decade ago by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, is not simply a product of the United States' ill-conceived invasion of Iraq but more importantly a manifestation of a fundamental crisis of Sunni Arab politics.

IS is "a true and genuine product of the current reality and is objectively indicative of the extent to which political, moral, cultural, and social conditions (in the Middle East and North Africa) have deteriorated... It as an 'entity' alien to the outcomes and consequences of corrupt authoritarian regimes, on the one hand, and deteriorating social contexts, on the other hand. These malaises are further exacerbated by the stagnation and defects of the intellectual and jurisprudential systems in the region as a whole... (It) is an expected product of the current Arab social and political reality, particularly in Iraq and Syria. IS has re-emerged and found a fertile chaotic climate, where sectarian and ethnic conflicts are raging, and the nature of the struggle has transformed into an identity-driven one, turning political processes into societal conflicts, rather than purely political or partisan competition," concluded scholars Hasan Abu Hanieh and Mohammed Abu Rumman in a study of IS.¹¹



Playing jihadists

The most recent IS attacks and Al-Baghdadi's declaration of the caliphate, a direct challenge to the fundamental precepts of the Saudi kingdom, have recently swung the Saudi pendulum back to jihadist groups opposed to the Islamic State with Jabhat al Nusra, an Al Qaeda affiliate, in the forefront. Nusra and its allied have made significant advances in Syria and put the Assad regime on the defensive. Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states and Turkey appear willing to grant support despite the failure of Qatari efforts to persuade Nusra to break its ties to Al Qaeda.¹²

A flurry of meetings of various rebel groups; the recent dissolution of the Levant Front, the largest rebel alliance in Aleppo;¹³ the unexpected presence of the leader of the Saudi-backed Islam Army that operates out of Damascus, Zahran Alloush, at a recent gathering of Syrian clerics and rebel groups in Istanbul;¹⁴ and talk of Saudi efforts to bring rebel groups together in Riyadh to discuss the creation of some kind of representative political entity, suggests stepped-up Saudi, Turkish and Qatari efforts to turn the tide in Syria's four year-old civil war.

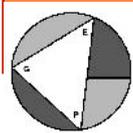
15

Jamal Khashoggi, a well-connected Saudi journalist quipped in a recent tweet that Alloush's visit "to Turkey removes the last obstacle for Saudi-Turkish-Qatar cooperation in Syria."¹⁶ Alloush's cousin, a leader of the Revolutionary Command Council, an insurgent alliance that includes the Islam Army, added that Turkey was seeking to unite rebel groups across Syria.¹⁷

The Saudi-led efforts to defeat Assad involve playing jihadist groups against one another, a risky strategy that irrespective of the outcome of internecine jihadist struggle would ensure that jihadism remains deeply entrenched within the legal boundaries of Syria. It also means that IS, widely viewed as the world's richest jihadist group despite reduced revenue streams (as a result of curtailing by the US-led coalition) of income from the sale of oil from captured Syrian and Iraqi oil facilities and diminished ransom returns from kidnappings, is likely to be a major player.

IS is aided by the fact that confrontation of the jihadist group does not constitute the top priority of any of the forces arrayed against it. "None of its enemies considers defeating ISIL to be its paramount priority. All...have at least one other enemy or goal that it firmly believes is more important. Hence a band of terrorist maniacs—who seem almost as suicidal as they are homicidal—is surviving armed conflict with everyone else simultaneously. The prioritising of something or someone else constantly holds these parties back from fully attacking ISIL or provides it with some kind of backdoor out of calamity," argued Gulf scholar Hussein Ibish.¹⁸

Lebanon's Shiite militia Hezbollah needs to take its position at home into account and keep an eye on Israel with pundits predicting that another war with the Jewish state is inevitable; Iraq needs to get its own house in order before being able to focus all its energies on IS; Jordan is struggling economically as a result of the influx of Syrian and Iraqi refugees and is



dealing with fallout of the Palestinian issue; Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are fighting a troublesome war in Yemen; Syrian president Bashar al-Assad is happy to see the US-led coalition do its dirty work while he concentrates on confronting other Syrian rebels; and Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish rebels are seeking to strengthen enclaves of their own as Turkey targets primarily the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) rather than IS.

Recent IS attacks in Gulf states like the mosque bombings in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia should make confronting the group a higher priority for the conservative sheikhdoms. Successfully challenging IS would however have to entail a fundamental change of policy that alongside counterterrorism would allow Gulf autocrats primarily in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain to launch a sincere dialogues with citizens of different religious beliefs and adopt inclusive policies that no longer marginalize Shiite communities. No Gulf state appears willing to embrace the kind of reforms that would be needed to confront IS on levels more effective than the military battlefield.

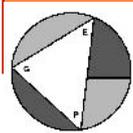
In that void, IS has the space to entrench itself and carry out well-prepared plans for the creation of a revolutionary state. A cache of documents belonging to one of the architects of IS that were obtained by German magazine *Der Spiegel* illustrates how a former Iraqi Baathist military officer designed in neat diagrams the structure of a future Islamic state divided into provincial councils that are dominated by intelligence and security services.¹⁹

The plan involved the provision of financial service and the operation of schools, day care centres, media and public transportation. It envisioned a state and institutions that has the making of sociologist Ervin Goffman's concept of a 'total institution' in which

"all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority..., each phase of the member's daily activity will be carried out in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together... all phases of the day's activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole circle of activities being imposed from above through a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials... (and) the contents of the various enforced activities are brought together as parts of a single overall rational plan purportedly designed to fulfil the official aims of the institution."²⁰

Der Spiegel's analysis of the cache of documents concluded that "it is true that jihadist experiments in ruling a specific geographical area have failed in the past. Mostly, though, that was because of their lack of knowledge regarding how to administer a region, or even a state. That is exactly the weakness that IS strategists have long been aware of—and eliminated. Within the 'Caliphate,' those in power have constructed a regime that is more stable and more flexible than it appears from the outside... Within IS, there are state structures, bureaucracy and authorities."²¹

An *Al Jazeera Center for Studies* analysis of IS's state structure mapped its government as being made up of councils, including the advisory *Shura* Council that in theory has the power to depose the caliph, but in practice makes recommendations for senior



appointments and offers non-binding advice on issues of war and peace and day-to-day issues that are not explicitly covered by the *Quran* or the Sunnah, teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed. *Ahl al-Hal wal Aqd* (Those Who Loosen and Bind), the equivalent of a parliament that is rooted in Islamic jurisprudence and includes members of the *Shura* Council as well as local leaders, was the institution that appointed Al-Baghdadi as caliph. Other councils provide Islamic guidance, operate the judiciary, oversee media policy, manage finance and budgets, supervise the military, oversee security and intelligence, and administer IS's provinces.²²

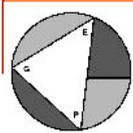
Some Iraqi officials believe nonetheless that the Baathist contingent in IS's power structure could also prove to be the group's Achilles Heel. The officials argue that the jihadists had dashed Baathist hopes that they would be the dominant force and instead have exploited the skills of the former officers and officials of the regime of Saddam Hussein for their own purposes. "The plan of the former Baathists was to use ISIS as a Trojan horse to derail the political process and to take over. But in the end, it is ISIS that used them instead," Maj. Gen. Tariq al-Asal, a senior Iraqi Interior Ministry officer and the former police chief for the overwhelmingly Sunni Anbar province, told *The Wall Street Journal*.²³

The officials point to signs of divergence between the Baathists and the jihadists, including a number of statements by one, major group of Baathist insurgents, *Jaish Rijāl at-Ṭarīqa an-Naqshabandiya* (The Army of the Men of the Naqshbandi Order) founded by Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, who was reportedly killed by Iraqi troops in April 2015.²⁴ As Saddam's right hand, Al-Douri had been responsible under the former Iraqi leader for forging ties with militant Islamist groups.

Nonetheless, by linking the name of his group of insurgents to a Sufi order, Al-Douri was putting on public display the differences between the Baathists and the jihadists with their austere interpretation of Islam. The group condemned in February 2015 the burning alive by IS of a captured Jordanian pilot and has taken issue with the group's destruction of religion and heritage sites and persecution of minorities. It also paid condolences for the death of Saudi King Abdullah and congratulated King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, a sworn enemy of IS, on his ascension.²⁵

Talking the talk, walking the walk

Visits to Lebanon by Syrian residents of IS-controlled territory highlight problems in how the international community copes with an entity that holds out the prospect of longevity despite being a pariah and under continuous military, economic, and political attack. The visitors, often in Lebanon to visit family, are frequently stopped by security forces on suspicion of being jihadist operatives because they carry identity cards issued to every resident by IS. The visitors are caught in a bind, being unable to travel in or out of the Islamic



State without those identity cards.²⁶ Similarly, IS's neighbours have turned a blind eye to smuggling that contributes significantly to its income stream.²⁷

"IS has done what others talked of. It has an army comprising highly equipped regular forces as well as guerrilla forces, it controls a large territory, it has an oil industry, it has a tax system, it has a system of local government and a system of justice. It fights like a state, it sees like a state and it punishes like a state. It carries conviction and meets with belief. It doesn't care that it horrifies us; it knows that millions of Muslims have been horrified by what our governments have been doing to them," said Middle East historian Hugh Roberts.²⁸

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that IS had introduced the licensing of Internet cafes and ordered them to ensure that their wireless was only available in the confines of their premise rather than also to their neighbours in an effort to control access to information.²⁹

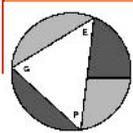
IS has proven capable of institutionalizing taxation and levies and administering Sharia'a justice. Absentee landlords who receive rents from property owned in IS-controlled territory report that they receive payments with officially documented taxes deducted by the group's administration.³⁰

IS has further fixed power lines, dug sewage systems and painted sidewalks in northern Syria. It enforces food security controls, searching markets for expired food and sick animals. It runs a regular bus service across what was once the border between Syria and Iraq and recently reopened a luxury hotel in Mosul. Newlyweds were offered a free three-night stay, meals and all. It has advised wounded residents that they no longer need to travel to Turkey to acquire prosthetic limbs because they are now produced domestically in the Islamic State.

In doing so, IS offers a semblance of order, albeit a harsh one, in a region that has succumbed to mayhem and bitter sectarian warfare.³¹ "It is not our life, all the violence and fighting and death. But they got rid of the tyranny of the Arab rulers," said a worker and IS resident.³²

Perhaps, more fundamentally, IS has focused on shaping its next generation through education in a model that is not dissimilar to the system implemented in the 1970s by the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia that saw children as less corrupted by bourgeois values and more able of adopting its system of values. To that affect, teachers in IS-controlled territory are forced to sign statements of repentance, retrained and indoctrinated; foreign fighters are recruited as instructors; and curriculums have been rewritten. Music, art, science, biology, history, philosophy and sports have been replaced with Islamic studies, mathematics, Arabic and physical and military training. Boys and girls, who are obliged to wear a hijab from the age of six, are segregated.³³

IS's jihadist ideology and military training is at the core of the Islamic State's education system. The product is frequently on display in IS video clips that show children cheering IS



forces, attending executions, training to fight, and learning how to use automatic weapons in ambushes and plant an improvised explosive device (IED).

“They are giving them lessons in jihad. It was brainwashing. They were teaching the children to rebel and inform against their parents, telling them to put Islam first and encouraging them to disobey their parents as blasphemers... This generation has no culture, no education, no future,” said Wissam, a Syrian who fled to Turkey from Raqqa.³⁴

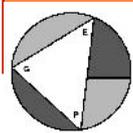
Wissam was echoing conclusions of a United Nations report that noted that “ISIS prioritises children as a vehicle for ensuring long-term loyalty, adherence to their ideology and a cadre of devoted fighters that will see violence as a way of life.” The report said some schools had been turned into training camps. “In Raqqa city, children are gathered for screenings of videos depicting mass executions of Government soldiers, desensitizing them to extreme violence. By using, conscripting and enlisting children for active combat roles, the group is perpetrating abuses and war crimes on a massive scale in a systematic and organised manner,” the report said.³⁵

In focusing on education, IS is following in the footsteps of newly independent states that after throwing off the shackles of colonialism needed a new national narrative that countered the allegedly civilizing mission of the former colonial power, introduced an element of heroism as part of the development of a national identity and vision, and allowed the new rulers to consolidate power.

IS’s narrative is articulated, according to scholar Laurie A. Brand,³⁶ in its educational curriculum directive that replaces Syria’s official designation as the Syrian Arab Republic with the Islamic State and bans the Syrian national anthem. Concepts of patriotism and Arab nationalism make way for adherence to Islam, the community of the faithful, strict monotheism and Muslim land on which God’s path governs. Homeland is God’s rather than that of its inhabitants.

With institutionalization, IS has put in place the building blocks it needed to obtain at least the consent, if not the support, of significant segments of the population it controls, including the ability to establish order in areas where anarchy disrupted livelihoods, police a territory effectively and identify and punish distractors and reward supporters, and govern and supply the local population with public goods and governance.³⁷

“ISIS has the capacity to deploy an organization staffed by motivated cadres, and this goes a long way toward explaining its success and its ability to prevail over its more fragmented rivals... Like other revolutionary groups in the past, ISIS (IS’s past designation that was changed in June 2014 with the declaration of the caliphate) has profited handsomely from the infusion of foreign fighters in its ranks, a feature of rebel groups that have had the capacity to rely on a diffuse transnational social movement. However, the strength of ISIS cannot be reduced to the contribution of foreign fighters, who remain primarily in the organization’s lower ranks, but instead is derived in part from its ability to link up with the population, once it becomes its de facto ruler,” noted political scientist Stathis N. Kalyvas.³⁸



Kalyas' assertion appeared to be borne out by a resident of Raqqa, the IS capital, who referring to IS's ability to provide security and albeit unevenly ban corruption, told *The New York Times* that "you can travel from Raqqa to Mosul and no one will dare to stop you even if you carry \$1 million. No one would dare to take even one dollar." Added an antiques dealer who fled Raqqa: "Honestly, both are dirty, the (Syrian) regime and Daesh," But IS "is more acceptable here in Raqqa." Much like the harsh order imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s, the dealer argued that IS was "implementing God's regulations. The killer is killed. The adulterer is stoned. The thief's hands are cut."³⁹

Institutionalization in territories controlled by IS, coupled with the group's battlefield resilience and the fact that the state's neighbours are forced to deal with the reality of its existence as evidenced by the problems posed by travellers, suggests the irredentist entity is a fixture that is not about to be vanquished.

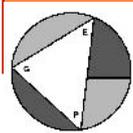
The entity's continued existence calls into question the goal of the US-led alliance announced with the launch in 2014 of airstrikes of degrading and destroying the Islamic State. It also punctures the notion that Iraq and Syria can be restored as nation states in their status ante quo. The US effort to definitively defeat IS are further undermined by the fact that allies like Iraq and Saudi Arabia represent models of governance that have failed to deliver and have fuelled the proliferation of Sunni jihadist sympathies.

"It's time to ponder a troubling possibility: What should we do if the Islamic State wins?... An Islamic State victory would mean that the group retained power in the areas it now controls and successfully defied outside efforts to 'degrade and destroy' it... (Political scientist Barry R.) Posen says that the United States (as well as others) should deal with the Islamic State the same way it has dealt with other revolutionary state-building movements: with a policy of containment. I agree," said international relations scholar Stephen M. Walt.⁴⁰

Ineffective wars

Underlying the debate between realists like Posen and Walt who root their argument in the alliance's unwillingness to commit ground troops to the fight, the inherent weakness of the Iraqi armed forces and past experience of revolutionary states like the Soviet Union, China, and most recently Iran—all states that were initially ostracized but ultimately integrated into the international community—and proponents of a military-focused approach is a straight forward question: What constitutes the greatest threat to regional and international stability, IS's disruptive expansionary goals or its ideology? Is the confrontation with IS primarily a war in the traditional sense of the word or a war of ideas?

Lawrence Rubin argues in a book published in 2014 that transnational ideologies present a greater and more immediate national security threat than shifts in the military balance of power.⁴¹ "An internationally recognized Islamic State would create an ideational security dilemma with its neighbours in which ideological power, not military power, would be the primary trigger of threat perception and policy. Even if IS did want to become a legitimate



state, the internal threat it poses through the potential recruitment and mobilization of the citizens of Sunni Arab states would make its socialization within the Middle Eastern order extremely difficult and unlikely,” Rubin wrote.⁴²

The problem with the debate is that it focusses on the nature of the threat and ways to neutralize it, rather than on what has sparked not only an immediate threat but one that has been emerging and mushrooming over a period of decades. The debate ignores the fact that radicalization is being fuelled by misguided foreign policies and diplomacy as well as repressive, exclusionary domestic strategies that produced social marginalization, huge gaps in income distribution and dislocation of resources in corrupt autocracies with youth bulges that populate a swath of land stretching from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the Indian Ocean. It also ignores the fact that IS is equally a product of an epic power struggle in the Middle East and North Africa being waged by some of the closest allies of the US in its campaign to defeat the group.

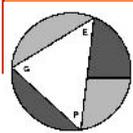
At the bottom line, neither military action nor intellectual engagement is likely to defeat IS without a questioning of the notion that autocracies, irrespective of their ability to provide goods and services and ensure that citizens regardless of ethnicity or faith have a stake in society, either guarantee stability in the Middle East and North Africa or are the better of two evils. Policy and academic debate has seemingly chucked aside the realization in 2011 that governments, analysts and pundits were caught off guard by a wave of mass anti-government protests and popular revolts because of a false belief that the region was characterized by popular apathy in the face of strong regimes.

Retrograde forces lead transition

If anything, IS, despite its unprecedented brutality and intolerant ideology, suggests a radicalization of what initially were peaceful attempts at regime change as a result of counterrevolutionary policies by autocrats who are equally brutal in their repression of dissent and no less willing to risk the region being engulfed in sectarian strife in their bid to retain absolute power. The brutal suppression with the help of Saudi troops of an initially non-confessional popular revolt in Bahrain in 2011 and the Assad regime’s violent forcing of the transition of peaceful anti-government protest into bloody civil war are prime examples.

Developments in the region suggest that rather than approaching the Middle East and North Africa in terms of an Arab Spring that has transformed into an Arab Winter, there is a need to recognize that the region remains in transition, albeit one that is messy, ugly and bloody as much because of retrograde forces like IS that have taken the lead in response to counterrevolutionary forces determined to avert change at whatever cost.

As a result, a defeat of IS with or without a bringing in from the cold of *Jabhat al Nusra* would do little to halt radicalization or prevent the emergence of a yet more extreme group in much the same way that IS eclipsed *Al Qaeda*. Containing IS rather than seeking to defeat it may be



riskier in the short-term and involve a far greater effort to achieve real change but is likelier to produce greater and more sustainable stability in the middle and long-term.

In many ways, containment would build on key lessons learnt from confrontation with politically violent groups, particularly religiously motivated ones, such as Lebanon's Hezbollah, Palestine's Hamas, Pakistan's *Lashkar e-Taibe* and Afghanistan's Taliban. By creating a state, IS has taken the success formula of militant politicized religious groups—the provision of social services, education, health, and enforcement of law and order—to new heights.

Proponents of containment note that some two decades of military efforts to defeat jihadism has failed to dampen the ideology's appeal and has probably enhanced the ability of militant Islamist groups to recruit. "Case studies from Algeria and lessons learned from the Cold War suggest that if the strategic goal truly is the complete defeat of IS, success will likely come more from IS internal failings rather than external military force," said Middle East scholar Clint Watts.⁴³

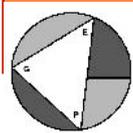
Containment's success depends however on significant segments of IS's population not only becoming disillusioned with the group's ideology and practices but also being offered credible alternatives. That again would have to involve fundamental change in countries across the Middle East that have joined forces against IS. Essentially arguing in that vein, scholar Marc Lynch warned that defeated insurgencies and movements "often rise from the ashes even stronger and better adapted than before." Lynch pointed to the resurgence of *Al Qaeda* after its 2001 defeat in Afghanistan and IS itself after having suffered significant setbacks in Iraq in the years between 2007 and 2010.⁴⁴

Shared strategies

In a 2009 study, Eli Berman, a former member of the Israeli military's elite Golani brigade-turned-University of California economist, argued that it was not religion that turned the likes of Hezbollah and Hamas into some of the world's most lethal and seemingly sustainable militant groups, but their creation of a mutual aid environment that limits the ability of those under their control to seek economic and social opportunities elsewhere.⁴⁵

IS fits Berman's definition of such militant groups as economic clubs that cater to the spiritual and material needs of their dependent members. It is a lesson that has seeped into the doctrine of counter terrorism and counter insurgency hearts-and-minds strategy but appears to have been lost in the debate between realists and those that put the emphasis on the war of ideas.

As a result, in a twist of irony, IS and the US military have adopted similar approaches, which involve a "clear, hold, build" strategy that is dependent on the buy-in of a local population. IS focuses on resource-rich areas and urban centres where it can impose taxation and introduce a governance structure that excludes its Islamist competitors. "The provision of



services is a key tool through which IS initially appeals to people in its area of command, and it has sometimes dismantled existing institutions and sought to implement its own state structure by establishing courts, police and schools and imposing sharia law... IS sometimes appropriates schools and other institutions, giving those working within them the 'option' of keeping their positions, but under its control," noted Middle East analyst Lina Khatib.⁴⁶

In doing so, IS relies on the fact that security and safety in war-battered Syria is a more important concern than democracy and liberal freedom. Its continued sway is enforced by intimidating brutality in an environment where resistance is barely an option.⁴⁷

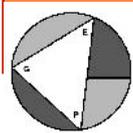
Exclusively military-focused efforts like initiatives to confront IS on the battlefield of ideas fail to take IS strategy into account to weaken the ability of the group's opponents to exploit its weaknesses. This failure increase the likelihood of IS's state becoming a more permanent fixture. These efforts neither address the fact that popular support for IS is less ideological and more because its residents either do not have alternatives or see it as the best of a set of bad options. Still, there is growing discontent with public brutality and a governance system that remains in flux and contradictory as it develops; differences within the administrative and military ranks of IS as a result of ideological fluidity; resentment against the undermining of tribal authority; and complaints about favouritism accorded foreign fighters in terms of income, housing and access to goods and services.⁴⁸

In perhaps the first indication that IS is sensitive to public opinion, Al-Baghdadi in July 2015 banned further publication of videos showing beheadings in an effort "to be considerate of Muslims and children's feelings who may find these scenes grotesque," according to Arab media reports.⁴⁹

"People hate them, but they've despaired, and they don't see anyone supporting them if they rise up. People feel that nobody is with them," a 28-year-old Syrian with family in IS-controlled Mosul who asked to be identified only by the nickname he uses in political activism, Adnan, told Associated Press. Adnan was one of 20 Syrians and Iraqis interviewed by the news service about life under IS that they backed up with leaflets, application forms, and other paperwork documenting restrictive rules and regulations that were brutally enforced by the Hisba, the state's religious police.⁵⁰

The international community's piecemeal approach rooted in concern about overreach in confronting IS in select geographies like Iraq rather than globally as an expansionary phenomenon alongside the military and ideological focus effectively gives the group and its state space to dig in.

A recent Institute of War study based on war simulations concluded that "ISIS (IS's former designation) likely will expand regionally and project force globally in the medium term... Avoiding or delaying action against ISIS will not necessarily preserve strategic options in the future. Instead, US strategic options may narrow as adversaries grow in strength and potential allies suffer losses and turn to other partners... Military planners in the simulation perceived that the United States does not have enough armed forces to undertake a multi-



theatre campaign to degrade and defeat ISIS on its own. The U.S. therefore must choose between increasing its armed forces, relying on coalition partners to achieve the defined mission, or changing the defined mission against ISIS.”⁵¹

The United States, in an effort that critics say is hindered by a history of broken promises in Iraq, has more recently sought to forge alliances with potential opponents of IS in Syria. Modelled on the US-sponsored Sunni Awakening that in 2006 drove IS's predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq, out of predominantly Sunni Anbar province, US officials have begun to map the social and economic landscape of northern and eastern Syria with a focus on the region's intricate Sunni tribal and clan relationships, including family ties to IS.⁵² US officials hope the mapping exercise will enable them to forge a force capable of confronting IS on the battlefield.

Initial US success in marshalling Sunni tribal forces benefitted from the presence of US troops in the country, frequent on the ground meetings that created an environment of trust, US financial and military support, and a US pledge to ensure that Sunni Muslims would have a stake in the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, which would include the integration of their militias into the Iraqi armed forces.

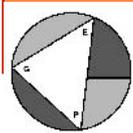
More than four years into the Syrian civil war, the US lacks the assets it was able to leverage in Iraq. Sunni tribal leaders moreover recall that US failed in making good on its promise to ensure their inclusion in the post-Saddam power structure. They also remember that President George H. W. Bush effectively called on Iraqis in the wake of the 1991 liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation to revolt against Saddam only to then allow the Iraqi leader to brutally repress a predominantly Shiite revolt.

Those memories are reinforced by the US refusal in its confrontation of IS in Iraq to arm Anbar's Sunni tribes because it fears that would undermine the authority of the Iraqi government. In talks with US and Arab officials, Syrian tribesmen contrasted the US refusal with its willingness to arm the Kurds in northern Iraq.⁵³

Conclusion

The current military and ideological confrontation of IS will at best contain it and hinder its plans at global expansion. The likelihood that defeat of IS being unachievable in the foreseeable future is compounded by counterrevolutionary and sectarian policies fundamental to US allies, foremost among them Saudi Arabia, which opportunistic support of jihadist groups is a tool to box in Iran and ensure regime survival. As a result, IS more likely than not is to remain an irredentist force, not only in the immediate vicinity of its territorial entity but far beyond.

Containment rather than eradication will therefore inevitably become the goal of the US-led coalition. That could deprive IS of its revolutionary appeal that has served it well as a



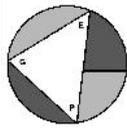
recruitment tool but at the same time threatens to give rise to an even more extremist and brutal force as difficult as that may be to envision.

James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture at the University of Würzburg, and the author of the blog The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, and a forthcoming book with the same title.

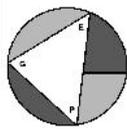
Earlier versions of this article appeared at <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.nl/2015/08/thinking-unthinkable-coming-to-grips.html>; and at The Singapore Middle East Papers, Vol./No.16, 21 August 2015 (<https://mei.nus.edu.sg/index.php/website/publications/The-Singapore-Middle-East-Papers/42/1>).

Endnotes

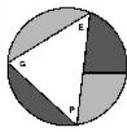
1. Martin Chulov and Kareem Shaheen, 'Isis leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi 'seriously wounded in air strike', *The Guardian*, 21 April 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/21/isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-wounded-air-strike> /. Christoph Reuter, 'I'm Not a Butcher': An Interview with Islamic State's Architect of Death', *Der Spiegel*, 16 July 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/a-conversation-with-an-isis-suicide-bomber-logistician-a-1043485.html>.
2. https://twitter.com/m_alothman/status/620315928094314496/photo/1.
3. Barbara Starr, 'Sources: Baghdadi may have been in Raqqa', *CNN*, 15 July 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/15/politics/baghdadi-raqqa-isis-terrorism/index.html>.
4. Lori Plotkin Boghardt, 'Saudi Arabia's Old al-Qaeda Terrorists Form New Threat', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 11 February 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-old-al-qaeda-terrorists-form-new-threat>.
5. Maha el Dahan and Sam Aboudi, 'Islamic State suicide bomber in women's garb kills three in Saudi Arabia', *Reuters*, 29 May 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/29/us-saudi-security-idUSKBN0OE10E20150529> /. Mark Sappenfield, 'Why Islamic State bombing in Kuwait was an attack on tolerance', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 26 June 2015, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2015/0626/Why-Islamic-State-bombing-in-Kuwait-was-an-attack-on-tolerance> /. *Al Jazeera*, 'Suicide bomber injures two in Saudi capital', 17 July 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/car-bomb-explosion-kills-saudi-capital-150716181919023.html>.
6. Richard Dearlove, 'Terrorism and National Security: Proportion or Distortion?', *Royal United Services Institute*, 7 July 2014, <https://www.rusi.org/events/past/ref:E539EC3CF6F5A4/>.
7. *Ibid.* Dearlove.
8. Madawi al-Rasheed, 'Saudi responsibility for sectarian terror in the Gulf', *Hurst Publishers*, 21 July 2015, <http://www.hurstpublishers.com/saudi-responsibility-for-sectarian-terror-in-the-gulf/>.
9. Bulent Aras and Richard Falk, 'Authoritarian 'geopolitics' of survival in the Arab Spring', *Third World Quarterly* Vol.36 No.2, pp.322-24 (all quotes).
10. *Ibid.* Aras and Falk, p.328.
11. Hasan Abu Hanieh and Dr Mohammed Abu Rumman, 'The Islamic State Organisation: The Sunni Crisis and the Struggle of Global Jihadism', *Friederich Ebert Stiftung*, 2015, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/amman/11458.pdf>.



12. David Roberts, 'Is Qatar bringing the Nusra Front in from the cold?', *BBC News*, 6 March 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-31764114>.
13. Aron Lund, 'The End of the Levant Front', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 21 April 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=59855>.
14. Zaman Al Wasl, 'Zahran Alloush in another show off in Istanbul', 21 May 2015, <https://en.zamanalwsl.net/news/10144.html>.
15. Al Araby Al Jadeed, 'Syrian rebel groups await formation of a Saudi-Turkish alliance', 21 April 2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/politics/2015/4/21/syrian-rebel-groups-await-formation-of-a-saudi-turkish-alliance>.
16. <https://twitter.com/JKhashoggi/status/590211638390751232>.
17. *Ibid.* Al Araby Al Jadeed.
18. Hussein Ibish, 'ISIL survives because all its enemies have other priorities', *The National*, 26 July 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/isil-cannot-be-beaten-without-concerted-turkish-involvement#full>.
19. Christoph Reuter, 'The Terror Strategist: Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State', *Der Spiegel*, 18 April 2015, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html>.
20. Ervin Goffman, 'Total Institutions, The Inmate World', in: Claude C. Bowman (ed), *Humanistic Sociology*, New York: Meredith, 1973, pp. 272-73.
21. *Ibid.* Reuter (see note 19).
22. Hassan Abu Haniyeh, 'Daesh's Organisational Structure', *Al Jazeera Center for Studies*, 4 December 2014, <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/dossiers/decipheringdaeshoriginsimpactandfuture/2014/12/201412395930929444.htm#.Vayzjmo68ao.twitter>.
23. Yaroslav Trofimov, 'Can Iraq's Baathists Become Allies Against Islamic State?', *The Wall Street Journal*, 6 August 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/can-iraqs-baathists-become-allies-against-islamic-state-1438854305#livefyre-comment>.
24. Jamie Dettmer, 'He Served Saddam. He Served ISIS. Now Al Douri May Be Dead.', *The Daily Beast*, 17 April 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/04/17/he-served-saddam-he-served-isis-now-al-douri-may-be-dead.html>.
25. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, 'Naqshbandi Army Statement: Condemnation of the Burning of Muadh al-Kasasbeh: Translation & Analysis', 14 February 2015, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2015/02/naqshbandi-army-statement-condemnation-of>.
26. Norman Ricklefs, 'Assessing the threat of the Islamic State', Seminar at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 28 April 2015.
27. Guler Vilmaz, 'Opposition MP says ISIS is selling oil in Turkey', *Al-Monitor*, 13 June 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/business/2014/06/turkey-syria-isis-selling-smuggled-oil.html#>.
28. Hugh Roberts, 'The Hijackers', *London Review of Books*, 16 July 2015, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n14/hugh-roberts/the-hijackers>.
29. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, '“Islamic State” storms internet cafes in the city of al- Raqqa, while closes others in “al- Furat State” and asks their owners to issue licences', 3 August 2015, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/2015/08/islamic-state-storms-internet-cafes-in-the-city-of-al-raqqa-while-closes-others-in-al-furat-state-and-asks-their-owners-to-issue-licences/>.
30. *Ibid.* Ricklefs (see note 26).
31. Ben Hubbard, 'Offering Services, ISIS Digs In Deeper in Seized Territories', *The New York Times*, 16 June 2015, www.nytimes.com/world/middleeast/offering-services-isis-ensconces-itself-in-seized-territories.html.



32. *Ibid.* Hubbard.
33. Lauren Williams, 'Syrian refugees describe ISIL-run schools as recruitment centers,' *Al Jazeera America*, 17 July 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/7/17/syrian-refugees-describe-isil-run-schools-as-shariah-institutes.html>.
34. *Ibid.* Williams.
35. United Nations, *Rule of Terror: Living under ISIS in Syria*, UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 14 November 2014, <http://www.refworld.org/pdfid/5469b2e14.pdf>.
36. Laurie A. Brand, 'The Islamic State and the politics of official narratives,' *The Washington Post*, 8 September 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/09/08/the-islamic-state-and-the-politics-of-official-narratives/>.
37. Stathis N. Kalyvas, 'Is ISIS a Revolutionary Group and if Yes, What Are the Implications?,' *Perspectives on Terrorism* Vol.9 No.4, August 2015, pp.42-47.
38. *Ibid.* Kalyvas, pp.45, 46 (quotes).
39. Tim Arango, 'ISIS Transforming Into Functioning State That Uses Terror as Tool,' *The New York Times*, 21 July 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/22/world/middleeast/isis-transforming-into-functioning-state-that-uses-terror-as-tool.html>.
40. Stephen M. Walt, 'What Should We Do if the Islamic State Wins? Live with it,' *Foreign Policy*, 10 June 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/10/what-should-we-do-if-isis-islamic-state-wins-containment/>.
41. Lawrence Rubin, *Islam in the Balance*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014.
42. Lawrence Rubin, 'Why the Islamic State won't become a normal state,' *The Washington Post*, 9 July 2015, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/07/09/why-the-islamic-state-wont-become-a-normal-state/>.
43. Clint Watts, 'Let Them Rot: The Challenges and Opportunities of Containing rather than Countering the Islamic State,' *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol.9 No.4, August 2015, p.156 (quote).
44. Marc Lynch, 'Contesting the caliphate,' *The Washington Post*, 22 July 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/07/22/contesting-the-caliphate/?postshare=2201437600013242>.
45. Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2009.
46. Lina Khatib, 'The Islamic State's Strategy, Lasting and Expanding,' *Carnegie Middle East Center*, 29 June 2015, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/06/29/islamic-state-s-strategy-lasting-and-expanding/ib5x>.
47. Zeina Karam and Vivian Salama, 'Inside ISIS' rule: creating a nation of fear,' *Associated Press / The daily Star*, 18 June 2015, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jun-18/302616-inside-isis-rule-creating-a-nation-of-fear.ashx>.
48. Alessandria Masi, 'The Islamic State's Strategy For 2015: From Militant Group To Jihadist Government,' *International Business Times*, 28 December 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/islamic-states-strategy-2015-militant-group-jihadist-government-1767722>.
49. *All4Syria*, 17 "داعش" إصدارت في إمدارات "أدعش" July 2015, <http://www.all4syria.info/Archive/233218>.
50. *Associated Press*, 'ISIS's bureaucracy of terror: Repentance cards, execution certificates, and innumerable rules,' 20 June 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/middle-east/1.662163>.
51. Harleen Ghambir, 'ISIS's Global Strategy: A Global War,' *Institute of War*, July 2015, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20Global%20Strategy%20-%20A%20Wargame%20FINAL.pdf>.



52. Jamie Dettmer, 'Wasn't ISIS Supposed to Fall Apart by Now?', *The Daily Beast*, 17 July 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/07/17/wasn-t-isis-supposed-to-fall-apart-by-now.html?via=mobile&source=twitter>.
53. Kim Sengupta, 'Isis in Syria: Influential tribal leaders hold secret talks with Western powers and Gulf states over possibility of mobilising against militants', *The Independent*, 8 July 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-in-syria-influential-tribal-leaders-hold-secret-talks-with-western-powers-and-gulf-states-over-possibility-of-mobilising-against-militants-10373445.html>.

Editorial Note

This contribution could have been, and still could be considered as, a Main Article given its length, depth and breadth. Yet Dr. James M. Dorsey prefers and prioritises speedy, timely and (thereby) frequent publications, and thus has not chosen the opportunity to let this contribution go through the peer-review process. The Editorial Board respects his wishes; it knows all too well how long and cumbersome the peer-review process can be. Nevertheless, any comments and criticisms from you, the reader, on the article are welcome and can be sent to info@ethnogeopolitics.org. These could then be published as Critical Responses in one or more next issues of the journal—in anonymized form if you wish so.

- Caspar ten Dam, Executive Editor



MAYFLOWER
BOOKSHOP

(Advertisement)

After almost nine years, the Mayflower Bookshop has left the Hogewoerd in Leiden, the Netherlands, and has settled at Breestraat 65 in the same university town (www.themayflowerbookshop.nl)

