

ISIS: Battling an “Intellectual Contagion”

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Abstract

ISIS has captivated the world for several years now with brutal violence, slick propaganda videos, and terrorism against Arab and Western targets alike. Since then, analysts have searched for a magic bullet to deal with ISIS, often focusing on military strategies. However, the author suggests that ISIS' rapid proliferation in 2014 Iraq and Syria makes the group and its ideas an "intellectual contagion" –something that spreads quickly and is destabilizing as it adapts to new situations. Using this framework, and drawing upon analyses from field scholars and experts, the author argues that while a military component is important for fighting ISIS in the short run, combatting ISIS' radical Islamist beliefs, and thus halting the spread of the contagion, is the key to defeating the group and others that may follow. The author examines ISIS' rise in post-2003 Iraq and post-2011 Syria; the development of radical Islamist ideas since 1928, and ISIS' place on this intellectual timeline; and finally strategies the United States, its European allies, and its Middle Eastern partners might employ to defeat ISIS in both the short and long runs. (186 words)

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Introduction

The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)¹ made headlines in 2014 as it swept across large swaths of territory in Syria and Iraq. With brutal violence and a masterful propaganda campaign, the group made its presence known to an astounded Western audience as the newest player in the game of fear. With continued successes on the battlefield against a crumbling Iraqi military and an overwhelmed Syrian government, thousands flocked from within and outside of these territories to stand under ISIS' black flag.

In this way, ISIS and its militant Islamist ideology represent a kind of "intellectual contagion." Journalist Dan Carlin uses this term to describe transformative ideas and movements throughout world history, such as the Protestant Reformation or the Bolshevik Revolution. With those examples in mind, one could characterize an "intellectual contagion" as an idea that spreads rapidly, disrupts a political, social, or economic status quo, and has the unsettling ability to mutate and become increasingly radical as it spreads from person to person.

Certainly, to compare ISIS to the Protestant Reformation or the 1917 Russian Revolution is to vastly exaggerate the group's power. ISIS and radical political Islam are not movements with millions of followers and they are not in themselves existential threats to the United States. However, in this thesis, I will examine ISIS through the lens of an "intellectual contagion" as a useful way to conceptualize the organization as a whole, and the ways the United States and the world ought to be thinking about jihadi militancy.

This thesis is divided into three parts. The first deals with the rise of ISIS within the geopolitical context of post-2003 Iraq and the Syrian Civil War. The second section addresses the development of political Islam in the modern era, and examines ISIS' place within this

¹ The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is known by several names, including the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and the Islamic State (IS). All may be used, but for the sake of consistency, this thesis will primarily refer to the group as ISIS or the Islamic State.

ideological discourse. Finally, the third section details possible foreign policy actions that the United States should take against ISIS. However, I ultimately argue that defeating ISIS requires more than a U.S. led military strategy. Instead, efforts should be focused on soft power approaches that seek victory on the ideological battlefield- which is an endeavor that the United States' European and Arab allies are better equipped to handle.

Part I: Putting Dirt in an Open Wound

If the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria is to be looked at as an intellectual contagion, it is important to address the conditions that let any metaphorical disease grow. In this case, one must place ISIS within its geopolitical and historical context to examine the conditions that gave birth to the group and allowed it to fester. In this respect, ISIS' development into the organization it is today is directly tied to the 2003 Iraq War, the 2011 Arab Spring, and the subsequent Syrian Civil War.

ISIS began as a branch of the terrorist organization, al-Qaeda— whose history traces back to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s. However, al-Qaeda is most infamous for its orchestration of the September 11th attacks, which helped to spark President Bush's Global War on Terror. Declared during his September 20, 2001 State of the Union address, President Bush noted, "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated" ("President Bush").

However, the Global War on Terror did not target only terrorist groups alone. Indeed, in that same address, President Bush made no distinction between terrorist groups and the nations that harbor and aid them. The Bush administration later used this framework to connect Saddam

Hussein's Iraq to the War on Terror, claiming that Iraq's secular dictator was actively supporting the religious extremists of al-Qaeda.

Although common sense would dictate that these two actors had little, if anything, in common, concerns about Saddam Hussein's alleged possession of biological and chemical weapons, and potential cooperation with terrorist groups lent the situation a sense of urgency. If these weapons were given to a terrorist group like al-Qaeda, it would represent a threat to the United States and its allies in the Middle East. Thus, the stage was set for war.

The invasion of Iraq, known as Operation Iraqi Freedom, began on March 20, 2003. Initially, the invasion went well, with a combination of air strikes and rapid troop deployments. This strategy represented Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's philosophy of using a small, lightly equipped, and mobile military. Indeed, the invasion force consisted of approximately 170,000, and later, 300,000 troops (Kamrava 204), as compared to the over 500,000 used in the 1990 Gulf War (Anderson). Although this "shock and awe" strategy would quickly result in removing Saddam Hussein from power, the small number of troops available would profoundly impact the next phase of the Iraq War: the occupation.

Although it was only a matter of weeks before Baghdad was under American control, issues in post-war governance were already beginning to arise. With Saddam Hussein's regime ousted from power and Iraqi police and security forces in disarray, Baghdad slipped into chaos. For weeks, Baghdad and other parts of the country were subjected to a spree of looting, crime, and destruction of property.

The ongoing chaos that ensued lasted as long as it did in part because the United States' military forces had no substantive orders to deal with the situation. Additionally, their small numbers meant that, even if these forces had authorization to stop the looting, it would have been difficult logistically to bring order. In effect, "US troops stood by helplessly, outnumbered and

unprepared, as much of Iraq's remaining physical, economic, and institutional infrastructure was systematically looted and sabotaged" (Strover).

In addition to the insufficient number of military personnel and lack of a mandate to interfere in the chaos, the implementation of several American policies quickly made matters worse. The first policy was implemented on May 16, 2003, and called for the de-Ba'athification of the Iraqi government and society. The Ba'ath Party was the Sunni political party ruling in Iraq under Saddam Hussein that the United States saw, "only as villains and troublemakers," responsible for any number of human rights abuses (Strover). As such, they needed to be removed from power in the same manner as their leader, Saddam Hussein.

However, the United States failed to realize how all encompassing the Ba'athist Party actually was in Iraq, and more importantly, that not every Ba'athist was the criminal that they were perceived to be. Virtually every public sector job required membership in the party, which would include everyone from school teachers to the managers of public utilities, most of whom were not violators of human rights. With this first order, the U.S. achieved its goal of removing the worst of Saddam Hussein's regime in one fell swoop; but it also, at the same time, virtually eliminated Iraq's bureaucracy and civil service. Not only did this order affect essential services, like access to electricity and water, it also affected Iraq's already crumbling, and centrally planned economy (McCrum). As such, the de-Ba'athification order was severely destabilizing for Iraq's government and people.

In effect, the de-Ba'athification order decidedly shifted Iraqi public opinion, especially among its large, minority Sunni population, against the United States. Instead of being seen as liberators, the U.S. was seen as the cause of social, economic, and political chaos. The order had the unintended effect of causing high levels of unemployment, and as a result, anger. These two factors are clearly undesirable for any occupying force, and represent the United States' first

major failure to win the support from the Iraqi people. For in any state-building endeavor, the occupying force, “must generate legitimacy and trust within the post-conflict country” (Diamond).

Recognizing its mistake, the United States tried to ease this policy after realizing that ultimately, “the Baathists’ skills and experience- and their political power- made them indispensable in the effort to rebuild post-war Iraq” (Strover). Yet, by easing this policy, the United States alienated the Shia and Kurdish populations, who had been historically repressed by Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athist Party, and wanted expulsion and justice to come to the Sunni dominated Ba’athists. The sectarian divisions in Iraq helped make the de-Ba’athification order a lose-lose situation: representing a significant obstacle in rebuilding post-war Iraq.

The second fateful order, issued about a week later on May 23, 2003, disbanded the Iraqi military. This directive was much like an extension of the de-Ba’athification order, with the same intent to flush out the worst of the regime. Unsurprisingly, it turned out similar to the first order, though with more alarming implications. By disenfranchising the Iraqi military, not only was the entire institution unemployed and angry, but it was also had the means and intent to do something about it. Thus, the insurgency that would plague the Americans in Iraq was born.

This is where al-Qaeda in Iraq, the precursor to today’s ISIS made its name. Formed by a Jordanian street thug turned jihadist named Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2004, al-Qaeda in Iraq courted the disenfranchised Sunni populations in Iraq and turned them loose against the occupying American forces (“The Secret History”). Even then, the group was developing many of the characteristics found in the Islamic State today- notably a penchant for violence of the most extreme sort. Al-Qaeda in Iraq employed suicide bombings, established a tradition of beheading, and placed a special emphasis on attacking Shia populations and targets.

Indeed, al-Qaeda in Iraq was responsible for bombing the al-Askari Mosque- one of the holiest Shia shrines in Iraq (“The Secret History”). This marked a turning point in the conflict, in which Al-Qaeda in Iraq’s actions pushed the country towards a full-scale sectarian civil war, “with pro-Saddam, Shi’ite, and al-Qaeda militia groups fighting the American forces, the weak central government, and each other” (Kamrava 206).

In this way, the insurgency would be not only directly and physically harmful to the United States, but also harmful to the reconstruction process in Iraq as a whole. Since the transition from failed state to stable democracy requires order and security, the insurgency, in effect, undermined that social and political order (Miller). Ultimately, the United States’ actions at the onset of the war provided willing and able recruits for jihadi organizations like al-Qaeda in Iraq. The insurgency that followed severely hampered the successful reconstruction of Iraq. Without the stable institutions that strong states have, it was only a matter of time before ISIS emerged to dominate the scene.

Yet, al-Qaeda in Iraq was not able to operate without restriction indefinitely. Al-Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. airstrike in 2006, which, followed by the 2007 troop surge, helped to weaken the organization (Harris). By 2009, al-Qaeda in Iraq had been soundly defeated, but its few surviving members went underground, including Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the group’s new leader in 2010. Al-Baghdadi’s leadership helped al-Qaeda in Iraq to “become increasingly well organized,” as it waited for an opportunity to rise again (Cockburn 45).

In the meantime, the United States worked to get Iraq back on its feet. By 2011, when the U.S. withdrew, it seemed as if Iraq was stable enough to carry on alone. However, that image of stability was only a façade, according to Patrick Cockburn, author of *The Rise of the Islamic State*. He argues that rampant corruption within the military and Iraqi government, was silently undermining the state. He recounts that a bewildered Iraqi minister noted that the government,

“is an institutionalized kleptocracy” (Cockburn 66). Additionally, the Shia government’s harsh subjugation of the Sunni minority has also created a brittle state that would begin to fall apart with only the slightest of instigations.

At the same time that Iraq was teetering on the edge of collapse, the Arab Spring swept across the Middle East in 2011. What started as seemingly spontaneous protests against corruption and authoritarianism in Tunisia, ended up toppling a number of dictatorships- notably in Egypt and Libya. Syria was not spared by the protests, but when the Assad regime confronted demonstrations in a violent manner, the Arab Spring in Syria devolved into the Syrian Civil War.

With Syria descending into chaos in 2011, al-Qaeda in Iraq, now the Islamic State in Iraq began to make its move. Still allied with al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in Iraq, under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, helped establish a Syrian al-Qaeda affiliate in 2012, named Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN)- known to the West as al-Nusra Front (Harris). Just as it did under similar circumstances in post-2003 Iraq, the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Nusra Front gave the conflict a sectarian flavor. With the rise of these and other jihadist groups in Syria, the conflict has become less a war against democracy protesters, and more a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and extremist Sunnis on one side, and the Iranian backed, Alawite Syrian government and Shia militia groups on the other (Cockburn 71).

Within this context of civil war and sectarian tensions, ISIS expanded the territory it held dramatically. With the declaration of a new caliphate in 2014, and name change to the Islamic State (IS), ISIS had control of a land mass in Syria and Iraq roughly equivalent to the size of Great Britain (Johnson). This campaign was documented by ISIS’ own propaganda teams that celebrated victories over its enemies in cities like Mosul and Tikrit.

However, with renewed efforts on the part of the United States, Iraq, Syria, and others, reports indicate that ISIS has ceased to make any major recent territorial gains. In fact, it has lost

some of that territory, and is now twenty-two percent smaller than it was in 2014 (Johnson). The reduction in territorial expansion is good news in stopping the physical spread of its ideas and recruitment- as Patrick Cockburn notes that once ISIS moves into a town, it is usually able to recruit, “five to ten times their original force” (145). It then remains to be seen how much longer ISIS can sustain itself without this easy source of recruits that accompanies territorial expansion.

Ultimately though, returning to the metaphor of ISIS as an intellectual contagion, its rise and development as an organization demonstrates that it thrives in an environment of political, social, and economic turmoil. Patrick Cockburn notes, “ISIS is the child of war,” and is the result of one in Iraq and another in Syria (8). However, war brings a host of other sources of discontent that can radicalize individuals into joining the fray. As such, these issues of poverty, authoritarianism, weak states, large and disenchanting populations of youth, and more that are characteristics of many Arab countries and that often accompany war must be broadly acknowledged as factors that weaken individuals’ resistance to radical ideas. The radical and militant Islamist message of ISIS is able to transform those sources of discontent into action of a violent nature.

Part II: Catching the Militant Islamist Virus

The conditions in Iraq and Syria allowed ISIS to grow, but they in themselves do not explain ISIS’ beliefs and goals. With this in mind, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria practices Salafism- an extreme and violent form of political Islam. However, political Islam in the modern era did not begin as a particularly violent doctrine. When examining the development of radical jihadi thought throughout the last ninety years, the disease metaphor is again apt. Diseases and bacteria, as living organisms, adapt and change as they travel from host to host. The same is true of this ideological development- it started in 1920s Cairo as an answer to the Arab world’s

problems and has mutated into a system of beliefs that encourages suicide bombing as a sacred act. Addressing ISIS in an intellectual timeline is important because it ultimately shows that the group's radical ideas are just as much of a problem as the political conditions that fostered its rise.

Modern political Islam, from which ISIS' beliefs can be traced, began in the streets of 1920s Cairo. Also the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna established this framework of Islamist thought that would evolve over the next ninety years. Writing in the 1920s until his assassination in 1949, al-Banna saw Arab societies falling apart due to a lack of belief in Islam. He witnessed the Ottoman Empire's sound defeat in World War I, and was distressed to see that its dissolution was being implemented by the victorious French and British for imperialist aims.

With a lack of religiosity representing the problem, al-Banna saw widespread Islamic revival as the obvious solution. A central part of this religious revival was the call for the marrying of political and religious institutions and authorities- in a way known as political Islam. In this doctrine, al-Banna inherently rejects secularism. He implicitly asks how one can separate God from the laws of men, since God rules supreme over them. While its goal may have run counter to the status quo at that time, this is not a particularly violent doctrine in itself. Al-Banna even condemns hatred and fanaticism, as their explicit condemnation are central beliefs that makes Islamic principles superior to everything that man has created thus far (Donohue 82). Nonetheless, al-Banna's foundation for political Islam in the modern era is exactly that- a foundation, which can and will be built upon in more violent terms.

However, in keeping with the intellectual contagion metaphor, the idea that started with Hassan al-Banna mutated when it was passed on to the Muslim Brotherhood's next leader,

Sayyid Qutub. Qutub, operating in the 1950s and 1960s had a more urgent tone to his message. He drew upon al-Banna's ideas, but added that preaching was not enough.

Qutub also emphasized that modern Arab regimes are representative of a state of *jahiliya* (Kepel 44). *Jahiliya* refers to the state of ignorance and paganism that characterized the Arab world prior to the introduction of Islam. Islam prides itself for defeating the evils of paganism with the virtues of a monotheistic faith, and in a sense, Islam is considered a triumph over barbarism and the uncivilized. Qutub saw these *jahili* societies as where, "the strong oppresses the weak, materialism reigns over spiritualism, and decadent behavior rules because people have rejected Sharia" (Sorenson).

Thus, to characterize modern society, under the various regimes of the Arab world, as being in a state of *Jahiliya* is a serious accusation that questions one's sincerity as a Muslim. This charge sets the discourse in a direction of pitting believers against unbelievers, or us against them. Although Qutub may not have intended for his ideas to go in this direction, they became an obsession for many of the radical thinkers who followed him.

Indeed, this questioning of another's faith is embodied in the concepts of *takfir* and *kafr*. *Takfir* refers to, "the declaration of a Muslim's removal from the Islamic community because of deviation," similar to the Catholic idea of excommunication (Sorenson). This excommunication, in turn makes one a *kafr*- an unbeliever, an infidel, or an apostate. Within the jihadi school of thought, this status means that one can and should be killed for that unbelief. As will be demonstrated later, this is a dangerous idea for the fact that anyone can accuse someone else of unbelief. It implies that any deviation from a set of beliefs, no matter how radical, is punishable by death.

With the threat of *jahiliya* and the implied presence of the unfaithful masquerading as pious Muslims, Qutub then introduces the concept of *jihad* to the equation. On its own, *jihad*

merely means a great struggle. However, Qutub draws upon the Qur'an to explain that *jihad* is necessary

to establish God's authority in the earth; to arrange human affairs according to the true guidance provided by God; to abolish all the Satanic forces and Satanic systems of life; to end the lordship of one man over others since all men are creatures of God and no one has the authority to make them his servants or to make arbitrary laws for them. (Donohue 416)

Qutub details when *jihad* is necessary, but not its nature in itself. There is often debate surrounding whether *jihad* means an internal struggle to achieve the above ends, or if it is an external struggle that involves coercing others. Anticipating this objection, Qutub notes, "one should always keep in mind that there is no compulsion in religion; that is, once the people are free from the lordship of men... no one will be forced to change his beliefs" (416). However, this is only a half-answer, as he claims that there is no compulsion *after* people are truly free. This may imply that compulsion and coercion *before* that point, in the spirit of freeing man, is just. Qutub clearly called for *jihad*, but did not make clear the way it was to be executed.

However, while Qutub never clarified what kind of *jihad* he was seeking, the intellectual disease infected another individual who innovates it again. Muhammad Abdel Salam al-Farag, another Egyptian, not only had radical beliefs, but aimed to carry them out. He was implicated in the assassination of Egyptian president, Anwar Sadat, and executed in 1982- but not before writing a pamphlet titled, "The Forgotten Duty."

In this pamphlet, al-Farag offers his own, violent, interpretation of what *jihad* meant. He argues that *jihad* in all respects is violent. After all, Islam was spread by the sword, al-Farag notes. However, not only is *jihad* a violent action, it is the duty of all Muslims to engage in such a *jihad* against infidels. Most importantly, however, it is an individual obligation, an individual

duty. Al-Farag ends his pamphlet with a call to action: “We must seriously begin to organize *jihad* activities to return Islam to this nation and to establish an Islamic State” (424).

This sounds remarkably close to the rhetoric that ISIS preaches- though it is not immediately apparent the extent of al-Farag’s ambitions. It is unclear whether al-Farag advocated for an Islamic state to replace the Egyptian government, or if this was meant to be a wider, pan-Arab Islamic state. Nevertheless, the idea of an Islamic state lost some traction after al-Farag’s death. Osama bin Laden, the next major figure in the development of the radical Islamist discourse considered it an objective, but one that he would never see in his lifetime (Wood).

Instead, Osama bin Laden, founder of al-Qaeda, wanted to focus on the evils of the “far enemy.” This contrasts with al-Farag, who argued, “to fight an enemy who is near is more important than to fight an enemy who is far” (Donohue 417). Al-Farag meant that dealing with apostate Arab regimes was a priority, rather than fighting unbelieving regimes that were abroad, like the United States, Russia, and the rest of the world essentially. However, bin Laden, profoundly influenced in fighting the “far enemy” of the Soviet Union in 1980s Afghanistan, thought otherwise.

In his 1998 fatwa, “Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders,” bin Laden outlines his twists to the intellectual contagion. Written after the 1991 Gulf War, bin Laden accused the United States of submitting, “a clear declaration of war on Allah, his messenger, and Muslims” (bin Laden). Bin Laden was distressed to see a United States military presence in Saudi Arabia, even after the war against Iraq had concluded. The continued presence of infidels in the holy lands – Saudi Arabia is home to Mecca and Medina, birthplaces of Islam – constituted a war against Muslims.

This notion that Muslims today are engaged in an explicit holy war is one of bin Laden’s greatest innovations to the ideology. As one would suspect for any nation or group at war, all

manner of tactics previously unconsidered during peacetime would now be available. As such, bin Laden echoed Muhammad Abdel Salam al-Farag's call for jihad as an individual obligation in saying that this fatwa's ruling, "to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it" (bin Laden).

This single line is important for a variety of reasons. For one, as much as bin Laden is concerned about the "far enemy," the order to kill Americans and *their allies* provides the opportunity to engage the "near enemy" as well. With this in mind, it is no wonder why Saudi Arabia, bin Laden's home country, exiled him in 1992. Perhaps more importantly, this line also highlights that civilians and military personnel are to be attacked indiscriminately. Within this framework of a holy war, bin Laden thought that there were no innocents- that civilians who control the American government or American corporations were just as guilty as the soldiers stationed in the Middle East. This belief led to the attacks on September 11th, as well as the attacks that preceded and followed them.

The point in examining this development on an ideological scale is to explain that the fundamentals are already available for ISIS to pick and choose from. In many cases, though, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, and now, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, choose the "all of the above" option. ISIS has the dual commitment to fighting those it deems unfaithful or apostates within its Muslim populations at home and abroad, or in other words, engaging both the "near" and "far" enemies. ISIS also uses the *takfiri* mentality in particular to justify the attacks on its victims – most of whom are Muslims (Buchanan). Indeed, ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani, "denounces all Muslims who do not support ISIS," which, after the establishment of the Islamic State supposedly makes Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the leader of all faithful Muslims worldwide (Sorenson).

However, what differentiates ISIS from others is not just its establishment of an actual Islamic state- a longtime goal of many other jihadi groups. Rather, ISIS' thought contains an apocalyptic vision. The basic themes are that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi represents the eighth caliph, out of an eventual twelve; the armies of Rome will fight with the Islamic State in Northern Syria before the arrival an anti-Messiah who will drive the Islamic State to make a last stand in Israel (Wood). At that point, the Prophet Jesus will return to defeat the anti-Messiah, guaranteeing the Islamic State's victory and the end of the world (Wood).

Looking forward, there is a potential for the idea to spread further. While most of these radical ideas have been dismissed entirely by mainstream theologians, there is an appeal to its black and white nature. Robyn Cresswell and Bernard Haykel argue

“jihadis are literalists, and they promise to sweep away centuries of scholasticism and put believers in touch with the actual teachings of their religion. The elements of this scenario closely resemble those of the Protestant Reformation: mass literacy, the democratization of clerical authority, and methodological literalism. Under these circumstances, anyone might nail his theses to a mosque door”
(Cresswell).

It is important to remember that there is some truth to this. Although many in the Islamic community reject the religious qualifications of people like Qutub, al-Farag, and al-Zarqawi, this kind of thinking encourages common Muslims to establish their own beliefs, rather than simply following what is handed down by the religious scholars who sit in their ivory towers. Thus, the next al-Farag could be writing his own pamphlet arguing the religious justification for a human rights violation, for example.

In sum, ISIS' radical ideas are not entirely unique. Rather, they have built upon and made innovations to an idea that, in the modern sense, began in 1928 with Hassan al-Banna. As it

spread to other thinkers, like Sayyid Qtub and Muhammad Abdel Salam al-Farag, it gained increasingly radical and violent tendencies- which ISIS is proud to display. Examining this ideological development is important because part of the solution will involve checking its spread and influence.

Part III: The Doctor's Orders?

Having seen the conditions that bred the disease, in addition to identifying the disease itself, the doctor is eager to prescribe medicine to save the ailing patient. Thus, it is time to address what foreign policy remedies the United States might employ to contain, and ultimately, defeat ISIS. Traditional conceptions include arming pro-West opposition groups and tribesmen to pursue the fight on the ground, while the United States provides air support from above. However, those proposals represent the limitation of America's power in its inability to deliver a mortal blow to ISIS on the front that really matters- the ideological and conceptual.

As the Syrian Civil War expanded, the United States was caught between its own quasi-bipolar state of mind. The United States' espoused commitment to liberal principles, such as a people's right to self-determination, necessitated support for the Syrian opposition. In contrast, its realist considerations silently suggested that it would be better for Assad to keep power, particularly after jihadi groups became a more powerful force on the ground. Faced with this impasse, the United States did not act until mid-2013 with a CIA arms program (Entous). However, at this point it was too late, and now it is no longer a feasible option to pursue for a number of reasons.

For one, ISIS and other jihadi networks are significantly more powerful than any remaining opposition group to Assad. Since 2014, ISIS has become the second most powerful armed force in Syria- so this policy "presupposes a complete transformation of the situation on

the battlefield” that has yet to be seen (Cockburn 92). Since the remaining opposition groups are so weak in comparison, another issue is then the risk that U.S. supplied weapons end up being used by the wrong side. Patrick Cockburn argues that with the current situation, weapons and supplies given to these opposition groups will likely fall into the hands of ISIS anyways (3). Adam Entous of the *Wall Street Journal* agrees, and even details a number of instances where this has happened. For example, the collapse of the headquarters of the Hazzm Movement, a U.S. supported rebel group, netted al-Nusra American military equipment (Entous). Finally, it is incredibly difficult to vet these groups to show that they even are “pro-West,” as well as make sure that they remain as such.

If arming opposition groups in Syria is ineffective, or even dangerous, using the United States’ air power is a much more preferable tool. In 2014, President Obama gave a speech outlining the ways that the United States will “degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL” (Hudson). The first part of the U.S. strategy included, “a systematic airstrike campaign” (Hudson).

Yet, while strategic air power is an important tool, it is one that cannot stand alone. In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, John Mearsheimer argues that air power is no substitute for the projection of power through armies on the ground. He suggests that, “land power is the most formidable kind of conventional military power available to states,” because it allows a physical presence to coerce enemies (Mearsheimer 110). In this respect, the situation in Iraq, as opposed to Syria, is slightly more favorable to the United States in that it can work with the more significant ground force found in the Iraqi military.

Despite its disasters several years ago at the hands of ISIS, with the increased U.S. support it has recently received as a part of the second strategy outlined in that 2014 Obama speech, the tides are shifting against the Islamic State. Indeed, the United States has been able to foster a coalition between Sunni tribes and the Iraqi military. However, using this fact to support

an Iraqi version of the proposed, “arm Syrian rebels” school of thought is mistaken. David Ignatius notes that the only reason more Sunni tribes are working with the United States and the hated Iraqi government, is because, “they think the American side is winning” (Ignatius). It should be remembered that these tribes have no inherent loyalty to the United States, and to believe otherwise, and thus over-rely on them, is a strategic miscalculation.

Nonetheless, the U.S. air campaign and advising of the Iraqi military seems to be working. Analysts, speaking of a recent speech given by ISIS’ chief spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, argue that ISIS is feeling pressured. Liz Sly, for example, highlights the defensive tone of that speech and suggests, “that the militants are contemplating the prospect that their senior leadership will be wiped out and their last important cities lost” (Sly).

Ultimately, the United States can implement policies and actions to degrade ISIS on a military front. However, good leaders recognize that planning for future battles is just as important as eliminating current ones. In this way, the crux of the issue lies in combatting ISIS’ ideas, and more broadly, the ideas of radical political Islam and violent jihad. Indeed, al-Qaeda in Iraq was soundly defeated on the battlefield in the late 2000s, but was able to re-emerge less than a decade later stronger than ever.

Certainly, defeating ISIS on a military front would deal the organization a serious blow to its credibility. Especially since declaring the reestablishment of the caliphate, to lose when one’s legitimacy is staked on divine support would be detrimental- but not fatal. Brian Jenkins and Colin Clarke, in their article “In the Event of the Islamic State’s Untimely Demise...,” argue that if ISIS is unable to withstand the current pressures it is facing against the combined might of a revitalized Iraqi military and U.S. air power, that the group has a number of options for prolonging its survival. For instance, ISIS can go underground again, but this time, “establishing a shadow network of governance,” that “could resemble what the Taliban has already created in

Afghanistan” (Jenkins). They also consider other options, such as relocating the caliphate to Libya or escalating the conflicts in a desperate attempt to shake their enemies’ resolves.

Indeed, a defeat on the battlefield offers these jihadists two ways to process their defeat. Similar to the decisive Arab defeat at the hands of the Israelis in 1967, they can believe either that their current path is truly the wrong one, and that they have lost God’s favor, or that they lost God’s favor in that they were not devout enough, nor extreme enough. It is unlikely that the veterans of ISIS will have a change in heart, pack their bags, and go home, so the United States must be prepared for the prospect of a renewed struggle in the next decade.

As such, the focus needs to shift towards fighting on an ideological scale. Herein lie the limits of the United States’ power to deal with the issue of radical Islamist militancy: fighting many of the underlying factors that fuel radicalization is more of an issue of public policy than it is foreign policy. However, while this theater of the war is ill suited to the United States’ power, other states in the Arab world and Europe, being closer to the heart of the conflict and having more significant Muslim populations than the United States, have already begun to enact policies following this train of thought.

The first major step in fighting the spread of radical Islamist militancy is providing an alternative message. Most Muslims disavow the Islamic State, but it only takes one person to infect others. In many cases, it is the radical preachers or imams of mosques that are able to convert populations that are considered “at-risk” – with all of the factors described in the first section: poverty, alienation, and more.

Silencing these radical preachers and providing alternative messages can work hand in hand, as can be seen in the cases of Morocco and France. Morocco, for example, has a unique Sufi Islamic vision that stresses non-violence above all else. In order to make sure that narrative

reigns over others, King Mohammed VI has initiated a program in which imams must be trained at a state institution, before getting approval to preach.

Additionally, Morocco has implemented many of the recommendations called for in the Rabat Plan of Action- a document outlining policy suggestions made through workshops organized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Essentially, the Rabat Plan of Action provides the legal framework, resting heavily on ideas of “hate speech” and inciting violence, to justify the separation of radical imams and their congregations (“Rabat Plan of Action”). Ultimately, this helps to reduce the influence of these preachers in Morocco.

France, like Morocco, has taken a number of steps in this direction to combat radicalization. However, France has its own issues to address, in addition to the question of European jihadists that join ISIS. Indeed, the French Senate reported that almost half of Europeans who join ISIS are French (Lynch). Yet, the issue of foreign jihadists from Europe or the West seems counterintuitive. Western European societies are not subjected to the political instability or war that facilitated the rise of jihadi groups like ISIS. To understand this phenomenon is to revisit some of the broader themes that encourage radicalization- particularly social, political, and economic alienation. These often accompany war, but can be independent of each other.

Indeed, although France has Europe’s largest Muslim population, it is a population mostly kept tucked away and out of sight- notably in suburban slums known as *banlieues*. George Packer, in his article, “The Other France,” contends that many young European Muslims face an identity crisis- which may be influenced by socio-economic conditions, but not completely. He argues, “the profiles of French jihadists don’t track closely with class; many have come from bourgeois families” (Packer). Ultimately, “the sense of exclusion in the *banlieues* is

an acute problem that the republic has neglected for decades, but more jobs and better housing won't put an end to French jihadism" (Packer).

In this sense, Packer is referring to "exclusion" on a broad level to characterize the experiences of second or third generations of immigrants in France. Clara Beyler, author of the article "The Jihadist Threat in France," supports this narrative in suggesting that these sons and daughters of migrants are left without a complete self. On one hand, they have lost the connection to their parents' home countries, and on the other hand, they have felt rejected by French prejudice. As a result, "the perceived systematic exclusion is liable to creating an inward looking propensity, a soul search in an isolated community and the tendency to construct a different identity" (Najimdeen 92). Thus, these individuals embrace Islam, especially its radical, Salafist version, as a means of seeking, "a more satisfying source of identity" (Beyler 91).

In dealing with a lack of identity, Clara Beyler agrees that ultimately, it is the radical preachers who must be stopped- as they are the key to taking advantage of this conflict of self, and then fostering extremism. The underlying sources of discontent- poverty, prejudice, social alienation, etc.- merely translate into feelings of anger. However, radical imams are able to mobilize those feelings and direct them towards harmful ends. Indeed, Beyler suggests, "the Salafi movement attracts a growing crowd of followers by playing on their feelings of exclusion" (Beyler 92).

Thus, in order to dispel radical imams and other security threats, France relies heavily on its counterterrorist apparatus. According to Beyler, France has one of the world's leading counterterrorist records, which, "can be attributed to the cooperation between its judiciary and police in making preventative arrests, its ability to gather qualitative human intelligence, its efficient international cooperation, and the increasing enforcement of its 'zero-tolerance' policy" (103). While most of those reasons are self-explanatory, France's "zero-tolerance" program

refers to its own solution to the issue of radical preachers. Essentially, imams caught preaching subversive or jihadist messages are offered one warning before being deported from France.

The deportation of imams has been a relatively successful way to address radical preaching. However, it has also opened newer issues with the rise of underground mosques, as well as the diffusion of ideas on the Internet. In the face of these new challenges, France initiated, “a program both to boost the number of French-trained imams and to instruct them on the values of the French Republic,” in 2005 (107). Similar to Morocco’s program for training imams, the idea is to create a cadre of preachers who follow state-doctrines, and subsequently pass them on to their followers. Indeed, to further demonstrate the connections between France and Morocco in this approach, France has even decided last year to send fifty young imams to Morocco for training annually (“Morocco to Train”).

However, France has invested in other ways to create its version of a “French Islam.” In another example, Yvonne Haddad suggests that creating the French Council for the Muslim Religion (CFCM) represents one way to set up a more centralized version of Islam. Centralization then affords a number of benefits, including de-radicalizing Islam by “co-opting hard-talking groups and cringing unassimilated Muslim populations under stricter government control” (Haddad). Bringing religious authority under the auspices of the state not only empowers the more plentiful moderate voices, but it also reduces the influence of the foreign states or actors, like the Saudis, who tend to export the puritanical Wahhabi Islam.

Indeed, training imams in a more moderate form of Islam would, help to check the influence of Saudi Arabia and its Islamic vision. At this point in time, Saudi Arabia runs a virtual monopoly on the exportation of imams in the Arab world, all trained in its puritanical Wahhabi strain. Patrick Cockburn notes, “the ideology of al-Qaeda-type movements in Iraq and Syria is not the same as Wahhabism. But their beliefs are similar, just carried to a greater extreme” (109).

Although Saudi Arabia is a staunch American ally, it has regularly, “fostered jihadism as a creed and movement” (58). In this way, limiting Saudi Arabia’s influence in religious matters is a step forward in fighting the ideologies of militant Islamists.

Eliminating the spread of ISIS’ radical ideas by dealing with rogue preachers must be combined with further empowerment of those who speak against ISIS. Many are quick to disassociate Islam with the Islamic State- dismissing them outright as extremists and leaving it at that. While they are extremists, Graeme Wood of *The Atlantic* thinks this is a mistake. He argues that the Islamic State is Islamic, and that the religion it preaches has at least some scholarly merit to back it up (Wood).

Of course, one can see these ideas as being outdated and medieval- and that is precisely what they are, according to Wood. However, this is why providing the modern interpretations is important, rather than simply trying to ignore ISIS’ ideas outright. Fortunately, there are some who actively challenge ISIS and providing more modern Islamic in direct contrast to ISIS. As detailed in Laurie Goodstein’s, “Muslim Leaders Wage Theological Battle, Stoking ISIS Anger,” several American, Canadian, and European imams have been targeted by ISIS for their efforts. Proud to have been put on an ISIS kill list, Mubin Shaikh says, “This is what hurts ISIS the most. It is Muslims speaking out” (Goodstein).

In addition to limiting the influence of radical preachers and providing alternative messages, efforts must also be directed to stopping radicalization in Arab and European prisons. Indeed, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq, was himself radicalized in a Jordanian prison (“The Secret History”). He went from tattooed drug dealer and street thug to one of Iraq’s most feared jihadists, all in the course of his time in a prison.

As such, Moroccan officials, for example, encourage, “reintegration over imprisonment” (Sprusansky). Having former militants counsel others is better than giving them more reasons for

anger. Plus, it serves as a way to counteract radicalization in prison- a place where many militants are first exposed to extremist ideologies. After all, “jihadi groups...tend to rely on frequent, sustained interaction,” so eliminating a venue in theory helps eliminate a potential breeding ground (Elliott).

Imprisonment in France, however, presents more challenges than in Morocco. George Packer notes that while Muslims represent approximately eight percent of France’s population, they represent more than sixty percent of its prison population (Packer). As such, Packer suggests that it is not the *banlieue* environment that encourages radicalism, but rather the prison one. Ultimately, young Muslims enter the criminal system after growing up with only anger and alienation. From there, marking the key transitioning point, jihadists offer a solution and something to blame: France (Packer). So, prisons ultimately represent another issue for France, and Europe to re-evaluate in fighting the spread of ISIS’ intellectual contagion.

Finally, at the end of the day, the final strategy is to simply be vigilant, but patient. ISIS is operating, particularly in regards to *takfiri* thought, with a highly destructive and almost unsustainable attitude as a central part of its ideology. It is joked that ISIS is too radical even for al-Qaeda, and while it is dangerous to even hint that al-Qaeda is moderate, this is true in a sense. Al-Qaeda’s chief intellectual architect, Abu Mohammed al-Maqdisi, wrote a letter to al-Zarqawi during the insurgency urging him to stop declaring *takfir* on anyone who opposed him. Al-Maqdisi reportedly said, “If a man says to his brother, ‘you are an infidel,’ the Prophet said, ‘then one of them is right.’ If the accuser is wrong, he has himself committed apostasy by making a false accusation. The punishment for apostasy is death” (Wood).

The point is that *takfiri* thought can quickly spiral out of control- and it would not be the first time for it to do so. The Algerian Civil War in the 1990s saw a similar situation as today’s Syria: multiple jihadi groups all wrestling for power, while simultaneously trying to fight the

Algerian government. However, after a decade of gratuitous violence and these various jihadi groups killing each other out of accusations of apostasy, “the various categories of Islamism had more or less petered out” (Kepel 274).

On the ground with ISIS, the same thing may be happening. A portrait of a Syrian warlord affiliated with ISIS by C. J. Chivers details Hassan Aboud, who “was turning on his own” (Chivers). Hassan Aboud was a Syrian rebel who joined ISIS for the power it gave him. Since becoming essentially an ISIS warlord, Aboud has ordered the assassination of several of his associates under this *takfiri* guise.

While it may be hard to watch, fighting ISIS militarily and ideologically will take time. There will be no results overnight. In the short run, the United States can pursue a policy of military engagement. Providing air support for a beleaguered Iraqi military should continue to aid in dealing physical blows to ISIS, and subsequently help to undermine the group’s credibility and legitimacy. However, long-term efforts at undermining recruitment and the appeal of radical Islam must be considered as well. These efforts must start in the areas closest to the conflict- the Middle East and Europe- and address the proliferation of radical imams and prison recruitment.

Conclusion

ISIS is an intellectual contagion and it is a dangerous organization. Yet, it is also not an outbreak of biblical proportions and it is not an existential threat to the United States- meaning that there is no risk of ISIS violating the United States’ territorial integrity or the sovereignty of its government. However, ISIS should be taken seriously because it does present a threat to the stability of the Middle East. Moreover, ISIS is at least partly responsible for the refugee crisis that is burdening Europe, and has inspired a number of terrorist attacks in the Middle East and abroad.

Yet, one must consider strategies carefully. The first section of this thesis demonstrated that hasty decisions led to a war in Iraq that gave birth to ISIS. The group was born in the context of war and instability, which must be acknowledged. The second section showed that ISIS follows a clear ideological narrative that developed for almost ninety years. Examining the ideological component is important because it is a major part of the problem: it mobilizes discontent from the adverse conditions of war and instability into a radical and violent end.

Ultimately, treating the ISIS disease requires a two-pronged regimen. In the short run, the United States must continue to support the Iraqi military from the air. Doing so should allow Iraq to slowly take back its lost land, which in turn will hurt ISIS' credibility as a divinely protected group.

However, military solutions are only short-term solutions, since military victories against ISIS will likely turn it more towards the insurgent model that it once followed. Insurgencies are typically tenacious and have the advantage of being able to wait conflicts out. As such, a longer-term strategy needs to involve combatting ISIS' ideas of radical Islamism and violent *jihād*. This falls largely outside of the United States' hands, and consequently requires participation in Europe and the Middle East to start by halting the spread of these radical ideas from radical imams and prison environments.

These policy suggestions represent starting points in dealing with ISIS for the American, European, and Middle Eastern governments, and it will take time before concrete results are seen. Therefore, these nations must remain vigilant in the meantime, as the medicine slowly begins to take effect.

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