The Future of ISIS

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The United States has been politically, economically, and militarily involved in the Middle East for over half a century. Despite the war-weariness of the American public and growing support for a grand strategy of restraint, direct U.S. engagement in the region will continue into the foreseeable future. Notwithstanding the difficulties of identifying (let alone pursuing and achieving) the “least bad option” in the Syrian civil war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the unwelcome tension between supporting democratization and stability, the United States has a number of core interests in the Middle East. These include preventing the rise of a regional hegemon, nuclear proliferation, and significant terrorist attacks on the homeland, as well as ensuring access to oil and the security of regional allies.

These interests provide a backdrop for the most prominent regional threat to emerge in recent years: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS. The good news is that ISIS poses little threat to the most crucial U.S. regional interests, such as preventing the rise of a regional hegemon...
and the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The bad news is that ISIS still presents a significant threat to a number of other U.S. interests, such as the stability of regional allies and the prevention of terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the group’s unique structure makes it more difficult for the United States and its allies to defeat, as ISIS is not simply a terrorist group. Rather, it is at once a state that has controlled and governed territory the size of Indiana, a transnational insurgency that seeks to spread chaos and overthrow regimes across the region, and a revolutionary movement that works to reshape societies and spread an extreme ideology and apocalyptic vision.

A failure to understand and combat any one of these parts of ISIS will ensure a long, frustrating future of tactical victories and strategic defeats, as ISIS uses any remaining part of its organization to prepare the ground to regenerate the others. Therefore, although the recapture of territory from ISIS in Iraq and Syria from 2015 to 2018 is an important and necessary step toward the group’s defeat, it is only the first of many. Nonetheless, the news is not all bad. Just as ISIS’s hydra heads reinforce each other, they also present additional vulnerabilities for the group. By tying the attractiveness of a revolution to the fate of a fragile “state,” and by dooming that state to economic and popular failure due to an extreme, apocalyptic ideology, ISIS helps to sow the seeds of its own demise.

First, I detail U.S. interests in the region and discuss the extent to which ISIS threatens each of them. Next, I present and analyze the three faces of ISIS and how they help explain the group’s past and future behavior. Finally, I conclude with prescriptions for how the United States and its allies can defeat ISIS and protect their core interests in the Middle East.

**U.S. Interests in the Middle East**

The United States has five primary interests in the Middle East (see figure 10-1). First, the United States seeks to avoid the rise of a regional hegemon—a single strong state that dominates the region along with its military and economic resources. A regional hegemon could not be
balanced by its neighbors in the Middle East alone, meaning that it would also present a significant security challenge for the United States and its allies in Europe, Africa, and Asia given the Middle East’s central geographic location. Furthermore, a hegemon in the Middle East would control a significant portion of the world’s oil reserves, giving it the power to potentially destabilize the market or hold the United States and other nations hostage to high prices or low output. U.S. intervention against Iraq’s 1990–91 occupation of Kuwait and threat to Saudi Arabia was driven in part by these concerns.

Second, the United States aims to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. Despite some scholarly claims and historical evidence that the presence of nuclear weapons can help stabilize relations between enemies, the process of creating a nuclear arsenal before the achievement of a secure second-strike capability is inherently destabilizing and dangerous. Furthermore, the stability-instability paradox suggests that even if multiple Middle Eastern states were to acquire secure nuclear arsenals without arms races and intentional or unintentional use, the number and intensity of conventional wars and insurgencies in the region could increase.
Third, the United States has a strong interest in ensuring access to the large oil supplies in the region, which are needed to power the U.S. and global economies. Although oil-rich states have an interest in exporting these resources, some may also have an incentive to cut off the supply chain for political or economic leverage. Therefore U.S. military presence may be required to deter such blockades or swiftly remove them.

Fourth, the United States aims to prevent significant terrorist attacks in general, and on its homeland in particular. Although nonnuclear terrorism is not an existential threat, history has shown that the impact of surprising and deadly attacks on civilians can have outsized economic, political, and social effects. Minimizing such attacks is thus a primary U.S. interest identified by leading politicians and the American public alike.

The fifth primary U.S. interest is ensuring the security of its key allies in the Middle East, including Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the new Iraqi government. The domestic politics of every one of these countries has concerned Washington in recent years, from the jailing of academics and journalists to the spread of settlements and the promotion of sectarianism. Nonetheless, the United States has a long history of political, military, and economic support for these countries and their people, and they, not the United States, are the ones who will largely determine whether the region will become stable, prosperous, and free.

To a lesser extent, the United States also has an interest in peace and stability across the region, as well as in the promotion of democracy. These are certainly admirable objectives with a number of benefits, but their absence does not pose a significant threat to the United States. Furthermore, democratization is often in tension with stability in the short term, and the United States has often not been consistent in its support for the former, especially in the Middle East. Therefore, these are still U.S. interests, but they are less important and less pursued than the five primary interests previously identified.
ISIS Threats to U.S. Regional Interests

ISIS threatens some U.S. interests, but the most significant U.S. interests face the least significant threat from ISIS, and vice versa. For starters, ISIS poses little to no threat to regional hegemony or nuclear proliferation in the Middle East. Despite its grand territorial designs for its “caliphate,” the group has no chance of becoming as powerful as leading states like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, let alone surpassing them to become the hegemon that dominates the region. Furthermore, because ISIS has been fighting a multifront war against almost every state in the region simultaneously, the group is not hastening the rise of another hegemon through the disproportionate weakening of any of the regional challengers.

Similarly, as much as ISIS would like to obtain and employ a nuclear weapon, its chances of acquiring one are quite low, and its chances of building one are even lower. The threat ISIS poses does not significantly affect the desire of regional states to initiate or accelerate their own nuclear programs, which is driven more by regional and international rivalries with other states. Most states in the region desire nuclear weapons for regime security, but ISIS is unlikely to be deterred from attacking nuclear-armed states—indeed, it has already done so on numerous occasions. Therefore nuclear weapons would hold little deterrent effect on the group, and so ISIS does not increase the likelihood of nuclear proliferation by other state actors.

ISIS poses a small threat to the free flow of oil and a small-to-medium threat to the security of U.S. regional allies. ISIS forces have controlled scattered oil fields in eastern Syria and western Iraq; however, they lost many of those in late 2017 and are unlikely to capture larger, more lucrative oil fields in neighboring areas, and they have sold oil from the fields they captured in any case (including to their enemies). They are very unlikely to carry out an operation that could significantly slow the flow of Middle East oil, such as a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, which is a questionable prospect even for far more capable and better-positioned states like Iran. At best, their major attacks could shake up oil markets, but they do not have the power to control them or shut them down.
The threat to U.S. allies posed by ISIS differs. For Israel, ISIS poses no existential threat, but it may spark violent escalation spirals in Gaza and the Sinai as it attempts to expand its foothold there by outbidding Hamas for leadership in the jihadi community. For Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, ISIS poses a threat to the stability of their regimes, not simply through violence, but also through the delegitimization of their forms and effectiveness of governance. ISIS has lost significant territory, but it has a number of members in these countries, which pose significant security threats and can polarize local politics.

Outside the Middle East, ISIS poses a significant security and military threat to Europe, and one that is likely to increase now that ISIS has lost territory and is shifting its focus to what it sees as a region rife with ethnic tension and disaffected Muslim populations. Despite increased security measures put in place after attacks in Belgium, France, and elsewhere, the presence of a significant number of trained ISIS operatives can ensure a series of deadly attacks and ethnic polarization. Beyond the violence, ISIS has already had a significant impact on the politics of European countries; its violence and the refugees it purposely helped create have pushed European politics to the right, and nationalist parties continue to win unprecedented support at the polls by espousing counterterrorism and nativist platforms.

ISIS poses a significant threat to the U.S. interests of regional peace and stability and the prevention of terrorist attacks. Between 2014 and 2016 the group committed nearly 3,000 terrorist attacks (nearly three per day), causing tens of thousands of deaths. From January 1, 2014, through October 31, 2015, in Iraq alone, ISIS killed 18,802 and wounded 55,047 people. ISIS has played a pivotal role in escalating the civil wars in Iraq and Syria, committing ethnic cleansing and genocide against minority populations and stirring up sectarianism that will long outlast the conflicts themselves. Furthermore, ISIS has shown the willingness and ability to carry out and inspire terror attacks both inside and outside the Middle East, including in Europe and North America. The continued loss of territory will likely increase these risks, especially in the short term, as ISIS aims to demonstrate its continued vitality to supporters and detractors alike and the group shifts its focus to new areas.
The best way to remove the threat ISIS poses to U.S. interests is to destroy the organization itself. Its multifaceted nature makes that more easily said than done, however, especially given a lack of understanding of its component parts both by policymakers and by the American public. In the next section, I detail the three faces of ISIS and the best approaches to defeating each one.

**ISIS’s Three Parts: Insurgent Group, State, and Revolutionary Movement**

To defeat ISIS, it is necessary to understand each of its three faces: insurgent group, state, and revolutionary movement.

*ISIS as an Insurgent Group*

Much of the confusion surrounding ISIS and how to defeat it stems from a misunderstanding of what exactly ISIS is. First, ISIS leads a transnational insurgency that is actively fighting to overthrow regimes—not only in Iraq and Syria, but also in Libya, Nigeria, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Yemen, among others. The thousands of ISIS fighters in Iraq and Syria have included a mix of former Iraqi military officers and battle-hardened insurgents from a decade of fighting, as well as foreign fighters from abroad, many of whom came with little or no military know-how or experience. The prominence of former Iraqi military and intelligence officers may seem surprising given the ideological disconnect between the apocalyptic Salafi jihadists of ISIS and the secular Arab nationalism of the Baath Party. However, their common enemy (Shiite political parties and militias), common base of support (the Sunni heartland), and shared power position on the outside looking in after the fall of Saddam Hussein made for an initial marriage of convenience that, for many, became much more. For example, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani was an Iraqi military officer who served under Saddam Hussein and then became ISIS’s second-in-command and governor for all of its territories in Iraq until he was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2015. In fact, former Saddam military officers have run three of ISIS’s most important ministries: security,
military, and finance. Ayad Hamid-Jumaili was a former Saddam-era intelligence officer from Fallujah. Until his death in March 2017, he oversaw all of ISIS’s security and intelligence operations, which mirror those of the Baathists with their reliance on an extensive network of informants and harsh reprisals for any act of disloyalty.

The combination of these former Iraqi military officers and battle-hardened insurgents has led to impressive, innovative performances by ISIS on the battlefield. Its crowning success was the capture of Iraq’s second largest city, Mosul, in 2014 with as few as 800 fighters against 30,000 Iraqi soldiers, many of whom fled in the face of ISIS fighters and their reputation for extreme brutality. ISIS’s desire and ability to take and hold territory allowed the group to gain control of more than 9 million people from Mosul in the east to the edge of Aleppo in the west, from the Turkish border in the north to Iraq’s Anbar Governorate in the south—an area the size of Great Britain at its peak in 2014.

The group’s reach expanded even further through its network of affiliates, which have often grown at the expense of its rival, al Qaeda. Itself a former affiliate of al Qaeda (al Qaeda in Iraq), ISIS has flipped major groups like Boko Haram into its network and set up affiliates of its own amidst ongoing conflicts in Egypt, Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and elsewhere.

The capture of Mosul and retreat of the Iraqi Army helped provide ISIS with the tools it needed for the group’s most deadly and effective tactic: mass suicide bombings. ISIS acquired 2,300 armored Humvees from fleeing Iraqi forces, more than two-thirds of the 3,000–3,500 Humvees the United States had supplied to the Iraqi Army. These vehicles enable highly effective suicide attacks. Their chassis can support a tremendous amount of weight, allowing for heavier explosive payloads and more powerful bombs. Their armored exterior makes them difficult to disable as they speed toward their target, and their familiar appearance makes it difficult for Iraqi forces to recognize them as enemy vehicles until it is too late. ISIS has used these weapons in conjunction with their large ranks of willing suicide bombers to devastating effect. The group took Ramadi in May 2015 by detonating thirty suicide car bombs in the center of the city, “10 of which each were comparable in power to the Okla-
homa City truck bomb of 1995 [which killed 168 people].” In other cases, they have overrun Iraqi and Syrian army checkpoints by blasting through their defenses with multiple suicide car bombs.

Even as ISIS has faced a massive onslaught from a multinational coalition that has retaken over 70 percent of the territory captured by the group, surprise attacks revealed the enduring morale of its fighters and sophistication of its operations under duress. In October 2016, ISIS attackers pushed into the heart of the Iraqi metropolis of Kirkuk despite the ongoing siege against its stronghold in Mosul. Witnesses describe the attack as “ambitious and carefully planned,” as about 100 ISIS fighters gathered in nearby Hawija, an ISIS enclave, and entered the city by truck. The ISIS fighters not only took over key parts of the city, but they also anticipated and set up ambushes for Kurdish reinforcements that responded to the attack. One hundred and sixteen people were killed and 265 wounded in the fighting, including numerous police officers, Kurdish Peshmerga, and civilians. The commander of the Kurdish counterterrorism force, Polad Talabani, said, “What they did to us inside Kirkuk was by far the worst we have ever seen.”

As ISIS’s territorial holdings continue to shrink in 2018, the group will attempt to plan similar strikes to destabilize vulnerable areas and prepare to fill the vacuum created by weak states and polarized societies.

ISIS as a State

The capture and control of territory by ISIS allowed it to expand into its second sphere: statehood. Although no other state formally recognized the “Islamic State” declared in 2014, ISIS developed a state in practice, with a hierarchy of governing institutions and ministries, courts, schools, and other social services. One ISIS fighter claimed, “You look only at the executions. But every war has its executions, its traitors, its spies. We set up soup kitchens, we rebuilt schools, hospitals, we restored water and electricity, we paid for food and fuel. While the UN wasn’t even able to deliver humanitarian aid, we were vaccinating children against polio.”

The majority of the funds ISIS had to pay for such projects came not from oil or foreign donations, but from a variety of taxes the group imposed on the 3 to 4 million people within the territories it controlled, from
According to some who lived under its rule, ISIS was more efficient and effective at governing than its Baghdad or Damascus predecessors. By instituting sharia and brutal punishments, the group claims to have largely eliminated corruption and kidnappings, while maintaining or improving the distribution of resources and social services. Needless to say, its brutality is itself the cause of many civilian deaths, but it also can deter wrongdoing and convince people to adhere to its rule. ISIS nonetheless continued certain practices of the pre-conflict Syrian and Iraqi regimes, especially concerning food distribution. The group continued to subsidize the cost of flour and opened bakeries when necessary to ensure there would be bread for the population under its control.

Of course, the group claims that it is not just any state, but rather the Islamic Caliphate reborn under the guidance of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The vast majority of the world’s Muslim scholars and civilians reject the legitimacy of this “caliphate” and ISIS’s claims, including key religious leaders from Egypt’s Al-Azhar to Saudi Arabia’s Grand Mufti. Nonetheless, the credentials of the declared caliph—al-Baghdadi is a descendant of Prophet Muhammad and has a PhD in Quranic Sciences—coupled with ISIS’s claims about fully instituting sharia law and a “pure” Islamic society have proven attractive to its members and some individuals both inside and outside of its territory. One need only watch a few segments of ISIS’s plentiful propaganda videos to realize that it was at pains to portray the “normal,” happy life inside its “caliphate” in order to keep its subjects content and try to attract more.

Indeed, the establishment of a “state” is ISIS’s most unique and signature accomplishment. Al Qaeda and like-minded jihadists always supported the concept of a caliphate and believed one should be established, but only far in the future once the ground was prepared after the expulsion of the “far enemy” (that is, the United States and the West) and the conversion of more Muslims to their particular strain of jihadism. ISIS turned that conventional game plan upside down. The group argued that the governance of territory and the establishment of the caliphate were both a religious duty and a strategic boon, as these would attract recruits and
provide a true base for expansion and the removal of foreign influence. Furthermore, ISIS exhibited far fewer qualms about using extreme force to establish and maintain its “state” than al Qaeda, whose leadership constantly tried to restrain ISIS in its earlier guises before the rupture in 2014. Although the significant loss of territory all but dissolved the Islamic State “caliphate” by 2018, the fact that it emerged and functioned for multiple years will serve as a milestone, a reminder, and a potential example for the future.

 ISIS as a Revolutionary Movement
Finally, ISIS represents a revolutionary movement that seeks to reshape societies in the Middle East and beyond, as well as redefine what it means to be a Muslim. An insurgent group is a military entity, a state is a political entity, and a revolutionary movement is both of these, as well as a social, cultural, and ideological entity. Revolutions do not simply seek to replace presidents and generals; they aim to overturn the existing social order and replace it with a new vision for how life should be for individuals, their community, and their polity. The nature of ISIS’s revolution can be seen in the other two spheres, as its “state” directly aims to upset the borders and bargains of the Westphalian nation-state system rather than integrate within it. Its insurgencies do not merely seek to replace an unfavorable leader with a favorable one, but to change the demographic makeup of the territory and the mores within it through ethnic cleansing and “religious policing.” The loss of territory may help cripple ISIS’s state, but not necessarily its revolution, as former ISIS propaganda leader and organizer of foreign operations Abu Muhammad al-Adnani explained: “Whoever thinks that we fight to protect some land or some authority, or that victory is measured thereby, has strayed far from the truth.” “O America,” Adnani said. “Would we be defeated and you be victorious if you were to take Mosul or Sirte or Raqqah? . . . Certainly not! We would be defeated and you victorious only if you were able to remove the Koran from Muslims’ hearts.”

Indeed, ISIS’s position as a revolutionary movement goes far beyond its insurgent and statist cloaks. First, the group’s ideology sets it apart, as it not only aims to convert Muslims to its extreme interpretations but also
emphasizes apocalyptic Islamic themes that al Qaeda and other jihadi groups have downplayed. For example, ISIS preaches that the Mahdi will come soon and that ISIS has to prepare to fight alongside him. A series of setbacks in 2006 and 2007 tempered ISIS’s use of apocalypse as a strategic blueprint, but the group still uses related language and ideas to motivate followers and change conceptions of the present and future.\textsuperscript{30} This has significant implications for group behavior, as a world that is about to end in massive battles between the forces of Islam and “Rome” is one in which extreme violence and degradation are not only acceptable, but expected.

Second, ISIS has spent a great deal of time and effort trying to inculcate youth with these ideas and train the next generation of jihadis. ISIS has used its control of mosques and schools within its “state” to recruit and control children, who are desensitized through exposure to beheadings and mass killings and initially used as informants and spies.\textsuperscript{31} Those selected to be “cubs of the caliphate” undergo training for months, take part in the killing of prisoners, and graduate to become suicide bombers and frontline fighters.\textsuperscript{32} Even those not selected for such missions have ISIS’s worldview and ideology drilled into them. Like children everywhere, not all will remember or agree with what they are taught, but some will, and even a small increase in the number of ISIS sympathizers can change the future trajectory for the group and the region.

Third, to attract those it cannot drill in person, ISIS has made more extensive use of social and conventional media to spread its message globally than any previous jihadi group. A 2015 report noted that ISIS “releases, on average, 38 new items per day—20-minute videos, full-length documentaries, photo essays, audio clips, and pamphlets, in languages ranging from Russian to Bengali.”\textsuperscript{33} This propaganda helped the group attract more foreign fighters (approximately 30,000) than any other in history, including more than the combined total of al Qaeda and other insurgent groups during the war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{34} ISIS’s open approach to media and violence is also revolutionary. It crowd-sources the creation and distribution of its propaganda, and it makes attacks by lone wolves in distant lands a key part of its strategy. ISIS claims credit for these unaffiliated but inspired individual at-
tackers, honoring them as soldiers of ISIS in a way that other jihadi groups have not and using them to polarize their societies and lay the groundwork for ISIS’s ideas to take root.\textsuperscript{35}

**How to Defeat ISIS in Three-Level Chess**

The challenge for analysts and states alike is not simply that ISIS has three faces, but rather that ISIS is simultaneously an insurgent group, a state government, and a revolutionary movement (see figure 10-2). Understanding and defeating any one of these entities is challenging; effectively addressing all three at once is nearly impossible given the tensions
in priorities and policies between them. For its part, the United States is far better positioned to defeat some aspects of ISIS than others. The marginalization of ISIS will therefore require a multilateral, multistage effort across a number of fronts: a war of bombs, a war of governance, and a war of ideas. I offer a series of policy recommendations for how these three separate struggles can be pursued in complementary fashion, rather than in isolation or contradiction.

Defeat Sectarianism and Polarization
Polarization is the engine to ISIS’s growth and success in all three areas. ISIS launches attacks across ethnic lines to generate animosity and provoke reactions by the local government and targeted groups, which further inflame sectarian tensions. This strategy polarizes communities and makes individuals less likely to challenge ISIS’s authority and warped ideology and more likely to join the organization itself. The violence also helps create a new set of political grievances against the existing government, opening a vacuum for ISIS to fill with its own governance. The initial rise of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its comeback as ISIS were not random events: the organization’s surge was due in large part to the ramping up of the civil war in Iraq from 2004 to 2006 and the civil war in Syria from 2011 to 2014, as well as the group’s ability to plug into both as engines for growth. ISIS has followed this blueprint of vampyric radicalization and “demographic engineering” from its days as AQI to today in Iraq, Europe, and beyond.\textsuperscript{36} Indeed, ISIS details this strategy explicitly, noting that it aims to eliminate the “gray zone” between true Muslims and non-Muslims by violent provocation and polarization.\textsuperscript{37}

End Regional Civil Wars: To lessen the polarization and sectarianism that ISIS feeds off of, the United States and its allies in the Middle East must first work tirelessly to end regional civil wars. Nothing radicalizes populations and marginalizes moderates more than these conflicts because it is most dangerous for individuals to be neutral in civil wars, as all sides target such people as a threat.\textsuperscript{38} The United States and its allies might believe they have an interest in keeping these wars at a slow burn in order to bleed and bankrupt rivals like Iran and Russia. However, what strength is sapped from problematic but deterrable state rivals is trans-
ferred to dangerous and less deterrable jihadis, not to mention the radicalization of the states themselves who become embroiled in long-term sectarian civil conflicts. Given that over 85 percent of all terrorist attacks globally occur in five countries experiencing ongoing civil wars (Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan), ending these wars would be the single most effective counterterrorism tactic. Since many of these civil wars have become proxy wars as part of a new Middle East cold war, U.S. diplomacy with allies and rivals alike at the state level can have major downstream effects on the power and threat posed by nonstate actors like ISIS.

**FIGHT THE WAR OF IDEAS INDIRECTLY:** Second, the United States must fight the war of ideas against ISIS, but it must do so indirectly. ISIS fights its own war of ideas across multiple levels. Its victories on the battlefield allow it to capture territory; it then uses these victories to trump its ideology online and in the classroom within its newly acquired state; this spreading of the message attracts more supporters to its revolutionary movement and insurgency, and the cycle continues. As a secular government the United States does not win by—and should avoid—engaging in theological debates with ISIS, just as it does not expound on Christianity, Judaism, or other religions. The U.S. brand is so poor in the Middle East that attempts to actively lead a debate against ISIS would only hurt those in the region who are able to engage and discredit the organization. Instead, the United States can help the vast majority of Muslims who reject ISIS more effectively win the debate by shaping the environment in which it takes place.

In addition to ending civil wars to sap radicals and empower moderate voices, the United States can also topple and prevent the reemergence of the physical “caliphate.” Although not normally thought of as a step in the war of ideas, all of the major transnational revolutionary movements in the region centered on states who drove them—and faltered when those states collapsed. Communism in the region—which supported and was championed by numerous political parties and rebel groups—faced major setbacks with the fall of the Soviet Union, while Arab nationalism rose and fell with the fortunes of the United Arab Republic (Egypt). On the other hand, the modern Shia Islamist movement
that ISIS finds itself fighting directly was driven by the Iranian Revolution, and the current state’s decades-long push to spread its ideas and influences throughout the region sustains it. Should Iran’s Islamic regime fall, the impact on its revolutionary ideas across the region would be tremendous. In this sense, ISIS’s tying of its fortunes to a physical state creates significant vulnerabilities for the group, and its toppling delegitimizes it in the minds of many. The United States may do many things poorly in the region, but if there is one thing it has proven to be good at it is overthrowing regimes. A slow squeeze of the caliphate in which ISIS gradually lost funds, could not provide social services, and ruled over an increasingly insecure and unruly population may have been strategically beneficial by further discrediting the group and leaving memories of disorder rather than of effective governance that was swiftly pulled away by outsiders.

On the Internet, it is far less important (and wise) for the U.S. government to directly respond to ISIS propaganda than to work with private corporations to weaken their message and allow other critics to defeat them. Twitter’s commitment to banning ISIS accounts that advocate violence and violate their terms of service help weaken the group’s message. Google’s Jigsaw program places counter-ISIS websites at the top of searches alongside pro-ISIS ones, which help ensures that any aspiring supporters will be exposed to criticisms and failures alongside any praise and successes.

**FIGHT POLARIZATION IN THE UNITED STATES:** Given the significant polarization in American society today, defeating sectarianism in the Middle East is easier said than done. However, U.S. attempts to address polarization in American society can represent an example of humble self-criticism and solidarity, as well as a bulwark against ISIS attempts to gain a foothold on U.S. shores. President George W. Bush was criticized for not asking Americans to make any sacrifices in the struggle against terrorism. U.S. leadership should change course and ask Americans to improve social bonds in their communities across ethnic and religious lines. Not only are such actions in line with American values, but they also help to prevent social alienation, which is one of the most common causes of individuals lashing out and responding to ISIS’s attempts to recruit lone wolves.
Roll Back ISIS Territorial Control with a Revised “Afghan Model”

ISIS has proven that it is often at its best on the battlefield. ISIS not only conquered territory the size of Indiana, but it simultaneously fought nearly every state and group in the region for years and is still standing. Nonetheless, the group can lose, and has lost, territory when facing versions of the “Afghan model” of warfare, where indigenous ground forces partner with U.S. advisers and air strikes to degrade and defeat it. The key to this approach is not simply the capability of these combined forces, but also how their makeup thwarts ISIS’s designs on the battlefield and the “day after” it retreats.

ISIS cared so much about the supposed coming apocalyptic battle in Dabiq, Syria, that it named its English-language magazine after the town. Then, when the invading forces came, ISIS was swiftly removed with little fanfare on the group’s part. Why? It was in part because the attacking forces were Syrian Arabs backed by Muslim Turks, rather than non-Arab, non-Muslim Westerners as anticipated and hoped for. ISIS may be somewhat flexible in its religious prophecies, but it is difficult for ISIS to sell a narrative of Islam versus the West when Arab Islamic forces are the ones directly fighting and defeating them.42

As the situation in Afghanistan reveals, the “Afghan model” has a number of shortcomings. Initial battlefield gains have not translated into a stable, cohesive state despite a decade and a half of effort.43 Many of these failures stem from an inability to appreciate the significant regional interests behind the Taliban (such as Pakistan), however. Although collective action challenges remain, ISIS lacks a similar regional backer and is an avowed enemy of all states in the region.44 ISIS can therefore be pushed back more easily. However, the greater problem of the “Afghan model” with both the Taliban and ISIS is the failure to provide credible, effective governance after battlefield success.

Help Allies Win the War of Competitive Governance

Defeating ISIS as a state requires far more than removing them from control of territory. To ensure that the “Islamic State” does not come back—and is not welcomed back by civilians on the ground—regional powers need to engage in and win at competitive governance.45 Local governments need to demonstrate to their citizens that they can provide public
goods like security and transportation, and private goods like jobs, health care, and schools. On top of this, they need to make citizens feel that they have a stake in the state and its future, especially if they are a minority ethnic or religious community. If and when governments fail to do one or more of these things, those affected individuals will become more susceptible to an extremist group like ISIS that promises safe streets, free schools, and an end to corruption, which some are willing to tolerate in exchange for increased restrictions on freedom. As former U.S. ambassador to Syria Robert Ford explained, “If the new rulers don’t have local support, the Islamic State will always be able to recruit people, especially if the water isn’t turned on, the schools aren’t open and the electricity is off.”

As much as media coverage focuses on ISIS’s extreme violence, the group rose to power in Syria from 2011 to 2014 by focusing on building and governing a state in the Sunni borderlands, while Bashar al-Assad focused on destroying those groups that focused on overthrowing him. Operations that aim at degrading the “Islamic State” and its resources should therefore be understood in the context of delegitimizing its governance in the eyes of its population as much as loosening its physical control of territory. The “economic war” waged on ISIS in 2015 and 2016 forced the group to significantly increase taxation of its constituents and cut its military salaries in half, which led to increased unrest and defections. Even though many residents liked the services that ISIS provided, they did not like the increasing amount of money they had to pay for them. In this sense, the slow squeeze before the recapture of Mosul and Raqqah may prove to be a positive. It forced ISIS to provide poorer governance with fewer resources and so degraded perceptions of its rule in the eyes of civilians over time, rather than disappearing in one fell swoop while memories of reliable, incorruptible ISIS governance remained fresh.

The fact that ISIS is a transnational organization unfortunately means that this competition over governance must be won not just in one place, but in countries across the region. Otherwise the group will certainly try to capitalize on any weak link where there are discontented Sunnis. The discussion of a “ghost caliphate” relies precisely on this concept of
ISIS biding time before seeping back into cracks left by failing local governance, as the group did once before in Iraq and Syria.

Although the struggle over governance is central to defeating ISIS on multiple fronts, it is one in which the United States cannot play the lead role. Nonetheless, the United States can and should set the stage by providing political, economic, and—when needed—military heft to help enact power-sharing deals both within and between Middle Eastern states. The key challenges to quality and inclusive governance in the region are the struggles between groups and states over the distribution of resources and power. The United States can provide incentives and international pressure to help regional states reach and enact deals that give all ethnic and religious communities a seat at the table and a stake in the country. They can also work with key allies like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt and key rivals like Russia and Iran to establish realistic agreements on power-sharing and spheres of influence in the region. Conflicts and disagreements will remain, but the sobering costs of endless proxy wars that go nowhere and help strengthen a common threat like ISIS should help these negotiations move toward a more stable regional order.

**Match Means to Ends**

All of the greatest failures of U.S. intervention in the Middle East can be traced back to a mismatch between available means and desired ends. Despite coming to office having criticized President Bush for his failed intervention in Iraq after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, President Obama noted that his biggest foreign policy mistake was failing to adequately plan for the “day after” Gaddafi was overthrown in Libya. Nonetheless, the Obama administration called for the end of the Assad regime in Syria, yet only devoted enough resources to prevent the rebels from losing, rather than actually winning. After initially criticizing the Obama administration for its Syria policy, the Trump administration similarly stated in April 2017 that Assad should go, but did not subsequently devote resources adequate to the task. Scholars and policymakers debate the merits of intervention and restraint, but there should be no debate over the folly of pursuing the goals of the former with the resources of the latter. The United States has received a dose of humility, having
experienced how little even the world’s superpower can do in a distant region of proud, capable individuals and states with their own interests, about which the United States exhibits little understanding. ISIS can be defeated, but only with strong regional partners and only if the fight is not folded into broader projects of foreign-imposed regime change and poorly formulated plans for democratization. The key to defeating ISIS is to recognize and understand its three faces and capitalize on the vulnerabilities such a multifaceted group presents.

Notes


16 Bethan McKernan, “All the Groups Worldwide that Have Pledged Their Allegiance to ISIS,” The Independent (www.indy100.com/article/all-the-groups-worldwide-that-have-pledged-their-allegiance-to-isis—WyppUO47Kg).


20 Ibid.


29 Ibid.


39 “Global Terrorism Database” (www.start.umd.edu/gtd/).


42 This is one of the main reasons that bin Laden and al Qaeda wanted to first remove the “far enemy” before fighting the “near enemy,” and if recent trends continue he may be proved right (at least in his disagreement with ISIS and its predecessors). Rashmee Roshan-Lall, “The Unfulfilled Dabiq Prophecy an Omen for ISIS,” *Arab Weekly*, October 23, 2016 (www.thearabweekly.com/Opinion/6827/The-unfulfilled-Dabiq-prophecy-an-omen-for-ISIS).


44 See chapter 8 by Feisal al-Istrabadi and chapter 7 by Hussein Banai in this volume.


