

## **ISIL and the New Islamist Challenge**

### **Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee**

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The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (hereafter ISIL) shocked the United States and the world over the last year with its rapid capture of territory through large swathes of Iraq and Syria and declaration of a new Caliphate. Its penchant for broadcasting barbaric spectacles such as decapitations of hostages and the immolation of downed Jordanian pilot Mouaz al-Kasasbeh galvanized the attention of a horrified world. In contrast to earlier experiences with al-Qaeda and its affiliates, the Islamic State has built a seemingly robust proto-state in the territories it controls, with affiliates emerging, with varying degrees of success, in areas such as the Sinai and Libya. The massacre of the journalists of Charlie Hebdo in Paris and brutal attack on a Jewish supermarket in France, like the atrocities committed by Boko Haram and the ongoing horrors of Syria, cast a dark pall over the world.

The United States has responded by forming an impressive international coalition working to cut off its flow of funds and fighters, mount a strategic communications campaign to counter its ideology and undermine its image, and to degrade its capabilities on the ground through air-strikes and support for local partners. The U.S. has thus far crafted an effective strategy in response to ISIL which has halted its momentum while avoiding the worst potential pitfalls.<sup>1</sup> As it moves into the next stages of this campaign, it should maintain a narrow focus on ISIL in its military efforts, concentrating on securing Iraq while avoiding an expansion of the mission in Syria which could drag it into quagmire. It should expand strategic communications campaigns designed to highlight ISIL's extremism and its weaknesses, while resisting the pressure to expand the campaign against ISIL to include other Islamist movements. It should push its allies in the region to curb abuses of human rights and offer a viable, attractive alternative to extremism and violence. Above all, it

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<sup>1</sup> For reference, my own recommendations for combating ISIS were laid out last October in a report for the Center for a New American Security, *The Tourniquet*, available at <http://www.cnas.org/saving-syria-and-iraq>.

must constantly reinforce the message that the United States is not and will never be at war with Islam.

ISIL's shocking propaganda and successes in Syria and Iraq make it easy to exaggerate its novelty and to overly focus analysis on its ideology. It has become common to present ISIL as something unique in world history, an exceptionally ideological actor with unprecedented state-building capabilities and an uncanny ability to inspire new followers and recruits from around the world. The ISIS threat is very real, of course, especially to the states and peoples in the region. But ISIL is hardly the first insurgency to seize territory and seek to govern it through the exploitation of local resources and the attraction of external support. Many non-state violent actors have deployed extreme, public violence for strategic purposes, whether to intimidate local populations and foreign enemies or to maintain the morale of its members. Perhaps the most novel element of ISIL is its ability to attract foreign fighters to its cause, but even this has precedent in past insurgencies, and could prove to be as great a weakness as an advantage as travel to its territories becomes more difficult and local populations grow resentful of foreigners. ISIL's efforts to establish branches in other parts of the region and to sketch a grandiose new Islamic Caliphate mirror the last decade's efforts by al-Qaeda.

A great deal has been written about how the sectarian misgovernance of Iraq by former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki squandered the opportunity for political accommodation created by the Iraqi Sunni Awakening. More could be written about how ISIL evolved within the cauldron of a fragmented, externally-supported Syrian insurgency. Supporters of the Syrian opposition often argue that the Asad regime created ISIL, or at least encouraged its emergence, in order to destroy the moderate opposition and make himself the only alternative to the jihadist trend. This is only part of the story, however. Protracted, multipolar, externally-supported insurgencies often empower the most radical and ruthless groups, as non-violent and moderate actors are killed, disenchanted, or marginalized. Broad, mass movements in support of the Syrian insurgency, especially in the Gulf, favored Islamist and jihadist factions and were accompanied by a disturbing degree of extreme sectarianism. It is highly unlikely that U.S. military support for moderate rebels, an option which rose to the forefront of policy debates in the summer of 2012, would have significantly altered this trajectory.

ISIL's appeal beyond Syria and Iraq should be understood within the political context of the advantage of the chaos and poor decisions which followed the Arab uprisings. The 2011 mass protests from Tunisia and Egypt to Bahrain and Yemen were driven not by Islamist extremism but by profound political and economic grievances. Al-Qaeda initially struggled to respond to this demonstration of the possibility of meaningful, peaceful political change. The reversals of those transitions, and the regionwide repression of both mainstream Islamists and secular activists, has been a strategic gift to al-Qaeda, ISIL and other extremist trends. The failure of almost all of those attempted transitions, with the sole and partial exception of Tunisia, has badly undermined the idea of the possibility of peaceful

political change. The termination of Egypt's troubled democratic transition through a military coup has likely doomed that crucial U.S. ally to turmoil and repression for the foreseeable future. The horrors of collapsed states and civil war in Libya, Yemen and Syria hang over all political life. None of the underlying drivers of those protests have been resolved, and many – from personal insecurity to economic misery – have deteriorated. Focusing only on “radical Islam” to the exclusion of these vital issues of governance, democracy and economic opportunity would guarantee failure. Encouraging or tolerating repression in the name of counter-terrorism will only fuel the grim cycle of repression, protest, and radicalization.

It is vital that the U.S. and its allies not unlearn the hard-won analytical progress of the last decade in our understanding of the variety of Islamist politics, ideas, and trends. Lumping all Islamists together produces poor policy, missing key opportunities to isolate and marginalize extremists such as al-Qaeda and ISIS. The Iraqi Awakening, for instance, rested upon recognizing and exploiting the distinctions between al-Qaeda and nationalist Islamist insurgency factions. A determined effort in recent years to blur those distinctions, as in recent moves to name the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, is an analytical step backward. The Muslim Brotherhood, for all the many issues to be raised with its ideology and discourse, typically served as a competitor with and a firewall against recruitment into violent jihadist groups. Its tight organizational structure maintained discipline and ideological focus among its members. The Brotherhood, like most successful organizations, jealously guarded its place within Islamist politics against potential competitors such as al-Qaeda. Today, following Egypt's military coup, that organization lies in tatters, with much of its leadership in prison and its strategy of democratic political participation discredited. This does not weaken jihadist movements such as ISIL, but rather strengthens them by removing a traditional mainstream alternative to jihadism.

In the years following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the U.S. came to understand the paramount importance of distinguishing between ordinary Muslims and al-Qaeda. Copious survey evidence demonstrates the massive support among Muslim publics for democracy and their rejection of terrorism and violence. Al-Qaeda represented a tiny fringe within the Islamic world, and only one small trend within even Islamist movements. Its strategy of terrorism was designed in large part to create a clash of civilizations and jihadist Islam which did not exist. Its problem has always been that most Muslims don't agree with its ideas, strategy or vision. Its acts of savagery sought in part to overcome the reality of their own marginality by inviting retaliation and polarization which remove the option of co-existence and moderation. Terrorism has aimed to drive a self-fulfilling prophecy of existential conflict from which Muslims, as much as non-Muslims, can not escape. ISIL is operating in a more polarized, shattered Middle East where it can attempt to appeal to a broader (though still extremely small) pool of potential recruits. U.S. policy towards ISIL must focus on rejecting rather than accepting its claims to represent Islam, marginalizing it rather than inflating its claims to authenticity.

ISIL poses a very real threat to U.S. interests and to the people and states of the Middle East, but the response must address the real nature of that threat and not fall into the many strategic traps which lie in the path. The U.S. should continue to support military efforts and political reforms in Iraq, while resisting pressure to be dragged in to the Syrian civil war. It should capitalize on the damage to ISIL's momentum through its high-profile defeat in Kobane and by the popular outrage over its burning of the Jordanian pilot through strategic communications which deflate rather than inflate its image. It should support allies under extreme pressure such as Jordan, while also working to ensure that allies such as the Gulf states and Turkey align their strategies and policies more consistently with U.S. objectives. More broadly, it should recognize the political roots of ISIL's spread, and refocus its efforts to promote political reforms and curb the human rights abuses which fuel popular anger and alienation. And, above all, it should ensure that its strategies consistently work to marginalize ISIL, deny it the strategic gift of allowing it to speak for Islam, and block its efforts to promote a broad clash of civilizations between Islam and the West.