The Growing Strategic Threat of Radical Islamist Ideology

Rick Brennan, Jr

RAND Office of External Affairs

RAND
CORPORATION

Rick Brennan, Jr[1]
The RAND Corporation

The Growing Strategic Threat of Radical Islamist Ideology[2]

Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
House of Representatives

February 12, 2015

Chairman Royce, Ranking Member Engel, and members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify before you this morning regarding the growing strategic threat of ISIS.

My central argument today is that the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and other radical Islamist organizations, both Sunni and Shi'a, continues to grow throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and other areas around the world. While the threat is often portrayed as terrorism, the true danger is the ideology that provides the logic of extremism, violence, and acts of inhumanity. While the direct threat to the United States homeland should not be overstated, some of these radical Islamist organizations pose an existential threat to countries in the Middle East, Near Asia, and North Africa. Today, ISIS controls a large swath of territory in both Syria and Iraq. The unprecedented success of ISIS is attracting large numbers of foreign fighters from Asia, North Africa, East Africa, Australia, Europe, Canada, and the United States. The Iraqi military is currently holding its own around Baghdad and southern Iraq. U.S. military actions in Iraq and Syria have helped to halt the advance of ISIS, especially assisting the Kurds in northern Iraq. Iranian-supported Shi'a extremist groups have provided critical support to the Iraqi government in stropping ISIS in Diyala, Ninewa, and Anbar provinces. Unfortunately, these Iranian-supported militias are also committing acts of violence against Sunni civilians, and pose a continuing threat to a sovereign Iraq that is free from undue Iranian influence.

I have divided my comments into four sections. The first provides an overview of the global threat posed by radical Islamist ideology from both the Sunni Salafist movement and the Iranian version of revolutionary Shi'ism. The second section explores the threat posed by ISIS in Iraq and Syria and throughout the Middle East, Africa, and both Pakistan and Afghanistan, where they are establishing networks and recruiting efforts. The third section will address the causes of the

---

[1] The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

[2] This testimony is available for free download at http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT422.html.

collapse of the Iraqi Army. Finally, the fourth section provides my assessment of how to best utilize the U.S. military in operations against ISIS.

The Global Threat Posed by Radical Islamist Ideologies

In February 1998, Osama bin Laden declared war on the United States and all other western liberal democracies in the statement entitled, "World Islamic Front Declaration of War against Jews and Crusaders." By issuing a fatwa calling for all Muslims to join the jihad against the West, bin Laden asserted both political and religious authority as the Sheikh of the World Islamic Front. The success of the 9/11 attacks increased his prestige in the Islamic world and encouraged other groups to affiliate with and swear allegiance to al-Qaeda. While bin Laden has been killed, the ideology of Salafi-jihadism continues to spread, and the global threat posed by al-Qaeda, ISIS, and affiliated groups is greater than ever.

Over the past decade, al-Qaeda has morphed into a highly decentralized organization while, simultaneously, the core ideology that provides the logic to Salafi-jihadism has both grown and become more decentralized and amorphous. The broader movement can be broken down into five basic categories. First is core al-Qaeda in Pakistan, led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who continues to exert a leadership role in the movement. The second category includes groups that are formal affiliates who have sworn allegiance to al-Qaeda, such as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) operating in Yemen, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operating in Algeria, and Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) operating in Syria. The third category is ISIS, an organization that shares a common ideology with al-Qaeda, but has claimed leadership of the Salafi-jihadist movement for itself and, therefore, is in direct competition with al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The fourth category is a large collection of groups that are committed to establishing an Islamic emirate, but have not sworn allegiance to either ISIS or al-Qaeda. The fifth category is composed of both networks and individuals who share the Salafi-jihadist ideology but are not directly connected to any particular group.[5]

To understand the scale of the challenge, one can look at the rapid expansion of the number of Salafi-jihadist groups over the past 25 years. In 1988, only three Salafi-jihadist groups were in existence. By 2001, the number of groups had expanded to 20. The growth in the number of groups continued at a steady rate until 2010. As a result of the turbulence created by the Arab Spring, the number jumped from 32 in 2010 to 51 in 2013.

---

[5] A previous RAND testimony conducted in March 2014 identified four tiers, but did not identify ISIS as a separate group. However, given the growth of ISIS during the intervening 11 months, it has emerged as a category in its own right. See Seth G. Jones, "The Extremist Threat to the U.S. Homeland: Addendum," Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014, p. 4.

This rapid rise in Salafi-jihadist groups corresponds to a comparable rise in the number of active Salafi-jihadist militants, with estimates indicating a range of between 9,000 and 22,000 in 2001 to between 30,000 and 88,000 in 2013.[6] The success of ISIS in 2014 continues to attract a growing number of fighters from around the world to join its efforts in such places as Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Libya, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

While the tactic of terrorism is frequently the immediate threat focused upon by political leaders, I think it is critical to note that the ideology underlying these actions seeks revolutionary change of the existing political and social order. Thus, the strategic challenge of our generation isn't one particular group of insurgents or terrorists, it is the ideology that gives them cause. Defeating this ideology will require the development of a grand strategy that employs all elements of national power and influence.

It is also important to note that, while the focus of attention is on the Sunni Salafist movement, a Shi'a Islamist movement also exists with designs for dominance in the Middle East. In 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini established the Islamic Republic of Iran based on the principle of rule by Islamic jurists, or *velayat-e faqih*, where clerics serve as the head of state and Supreme Leader of Shi'a Islam. While there is no evidence that Iran seeks territorial gains, it is using its wealth and power to arm, train, and equip violent extremist groups throughout the region, enabling Iran to exert influence through both fear and intimidation. The theological interpretations of Ayatollah Khomeini provided the basis of the revolution that not only ousted the Shah of Iran but also inspired its aggressive stance against the United States, Israel, and most of the Sunni-led countries in the region. Iran continues to be one of the most active and prominent state sponsors of terrorism. Moreover, after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran engaged in what could be viewed as a covert war against the United States in Iraq using its proxy militias. According to one U.S. military estimate, Iranian-supported militias likely caused as many as one-half of the U.S. casualties in Iraq.[7] As will be discussed below, it is the competition between the radical Shi'a Islamist movement led by Iran and the Sunni Salafi-jihadist organizations -- which received at least tacit support from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Turkey -- that has given rise to a regional crisis that amounts to a Sunni-Shi'a civil war.

---

[6] Seth G. Jones, *A Persistent Threat: The Evolution of al-Qa'ida and Other Salafi Jihadists*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014, p. 27.

[7] This staff estimate was developed by United States Forces-Iraq in 2011. See Brennan et.al, *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq: The Final Transition, Operational Maneuver, and Disestablishment of United States Forces-Iraq*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2014, p. 125.

The Threat Posed by ISIS in Iraq, Syria, and throughout the Middle East

From March to July 2011, the revolutionary wave of protests and demonstrations known as the Arab Spring began to challenge the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Despite early attempts to pacify the majority Sunni populace, the Syrian government soon resorted to police and military brutality. As the protests grew, Iran and Russia began to provide military assistance to maintain the stability of the Assad regime. Upon the departure of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, Iran became more active in defending the Syrian regime and began sending a large amount of arms, munitions, and supplies to support the Syrian military. In early 2012, Iran also deployed a large number of Quds Force personnel to coordinate, direct, and support a ground force campaign using its proxy militias -- Lebanese Hezbollah and a number of Iraqi militias, including Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib al-Haq, and others. Together, Iran and its proxies targeted the al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra Front and the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), then calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

While the Assad regime had allowed AQI/ISI to use Syria as a safe-haven to arm, train, equip, and support groups that conducted terrorist operations within Iraq between 2004 and 2011, ISI quickly became the most powerful extremist militia challenging the Assad regime. With nearly eight years of experience fighting U.S. and Iraqi forces, ISI had evolved into a hardened military force that that not only challenged the Syrian military, but also was able to hold its own against Iranian proxy militias.[8] In addition to confronting the Assad regime, ISI started to increase the number of operations it was conducting within Iraq. In what ISI called the "Breaking of the Walls Campaign," the number of attacks within Iraq increased from 75 per month in 2011 to 140 per month by the fall of 2012.[9]

At the same time that ISI was increasing its attacks, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki began taking actions that alienated large segments of the Sunni populace, creating a breeding ground for a new Sunni insurgency in Anbar, Salah ad Din, and Ninewa provinces. By January 2014, ISI had used the growing Sunni disenfranchisement as an opportunity to seize control of Fallujah, a city located less than 50 miles west of Baghdad. Following this success, ISI began an aggressive infiltration into Iraq that set the stage for the June offensive that seized Mosul and most of the Tigris River Valley from Mosul to Samarra, located 78 miles north of Baghdad. Simultaneously, ISI launched a major offensive in the north that pushed to the outskirts of Erbil in the Kurdish region. By August 2014, ISI was in control of approximately 35,000 square miles of Iraq and Syria

---

[8] Iran's role in the Syrian conflict is documented in Brennan et al., *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq*, pp. 301–304.
[9] Brennan et al., *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq*, p. 304.

-- a landmass approximately the size of the state of Indiana -- and had begun to establish structures of governance, calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

The Causes of the Rapid Collapse of the Iraqi Army

During the eight years that the U.S. military was in Iraq, a primary goal was to develop a professional and competent Iraqi military. Billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars were spent to ensure that the Iraqi military could operate without U.S. assistance. Yet, in June of 2014, we witnessed the near total collapse of four of Iraq's 12 army divisions when confronted by the ISIS assault.

There are several factors that led to the collapse of the Iraqi military, many of which were caused or aggravated by actions taken by Prime Minister Maliki to solidify power and create a "praetorian guard" to guarantee his continued rule. For example, starting in 2007, Maliki centralized his control of the Iraqi intelligence and security forces, replacing competent officers with officers personally loyal to him. After the 2010 election, Maliki refused to appoint permanent ministers of Defense, Interior, and Intelligence, electing to control each of these ministries himself through an extra-constitutional organization called the Office of the Commander-in-Chief. This resulted in an overly centralized command structure where leaders at all levels were reluctant to act without instructions.

A second factor that led to the collapse of the Iraqi army was endemic corruption that permeates the political system and military establishment. For example, a common practice was for military commanders to overly report the number of soldiers present for duty so they could pocket the extra pay. While this practice was widely known to occur, the government did little to stop the thievery, resulting in a large number of Iraqi units being undermanned at the time of the ISIS assault.

Finally, it is important to highlight that from 2009 through 2011 the U.S. military in Iraq consistently reported that the Iraqi military had significant shortfalls that would hinder its capability to conduct operations against external threats. These assessments stated that the Iraqi security forces suffered from weak intelligence collection, analysis, and sharing; an inability to sustain combat operations; poor maintenance of equipment and weapons; the lack of a well-developed training program; poor command and control of its forces; a lack of sufficient intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets; and a very limited ability to conduct counterterrorism operations without direct U.S. support. The Iraqi air force was even worse off: It could not do much besides transport forces from one air base to another, and it had no ability to

provide lethal support to Iraqi ground forces in combat.[10] It was because of these shortfalls that General Lloyd Austin, General James Mattis, and Admiral Michael Mullen recommended a residual force of between 14,000 and 20,000 be retained in Iraq beyond 2011.[11]

The Role of the U.S. Military in the War Against ISIS

As ISIS moved toward the city of Erbil in July 2014, President Obama decided to employ U.S. airpower to support the Iraqis. In addition, the President authorized the deployment of a limited number of military personnel to help train four Iraqi brigades, enhance security of the U.S. embassy and facilities, provide intelligence to Iraqi forces, and help the Iraqis plan operations to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIS. The President also placed a cap of no more than 1,500 troops to be deployed in non-combat roles.

The actions by the administration in Iraq are a necessary first step, but, in my professional opinion as a former military planner, will likely be insufficient to ensure Iraq has the capabilities to defeat ISIS. Given what is known about the Iraqi security forces -- and based solely upon my experience in the U.S. military and not based on any RAND analysis -- I believe that in addition to what the U.S. military is doing today, the following will be required to achieve success:

1. Develop a more robust advise and assist mission using conventional forces. The size of the force package deployed today is not large enough to do the mission rapidly, and this is giving time for ISIS to grow and consolidate its gains in Iraq and Syria.
2. Enhance the size and scope of the command and control mission inside Iraq to help the Iraqis coordinate the efforts of the broader coalition, a capability the Iraqi military does not currently have.
3. Employ U.S. special operations forces, with attached Tactical Air Control Parties (TACPs) and Forward Air Controllers (FACs), to accompany Iraqi, Peshmerga, and other coalition ground forces as necessary to help facilitate the effective employment of an enhanced U.S.-led air campaign.
4. Deploy U.S. counterterrorism forces to work with Iraqi special operations forces and special forces from other countries in the region to conduct targeted counterterrorism operations in both Iraq and Syria.

---

[10] For a more thorough discussion of the shortfalls in the Iraqi security sector, see Brennan et al., *Ending the U.S. War in Iraq*, pp. 157–202. See also Rick Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms: The Bungling of the Iraq Exit," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2014, pp. 25–36.

[11] Brennan, "Withdrawal Symptoms," pp. 33.

There is an understandable reluctance to once again put additional U.S. ground forces in Iraq but, at the same time, it is worth noting that this hesitation is likely to be interpreted by regional partners as a lack of commitment, making the challenge of building a regional solution that includes the employment of coalition ground forces all the more difficult. This is not to say that the United States should use conventional forces in a combat role. However, those U.S. special operations personnel serving as advisors to front-line coalition forces could find themselves in a combat situation.

The number of service members required to effectively conduct and support these missions (advise and assist, command and control coordination assistance, forward air control, and counterterrorism) would be relatively small. Based on work I did for the U.S. military while deployed to Iraq as a senior civilian advisor, I believe the requirement would likely be in the range of 5,000-8,000 troops. This estimate could vary depending on changes in the situation or mission, but would not be the type of large-scale operation that existed in Iraq prior to 2012. While small in number, the presence of U.S. forces would serve as combat multipliers; magnifying the capabilities of the Iraqi military, Peshmerga, and potential ground forces supplied by neighboring countries -- such as Jordan. Again, based on my former military experience and not on any RAND analysis, I believe that this type of enhanced U.S. military participation and partnership is something that will be required if Iraq is to successfully regain control of lost territory, especially the cities of Fallujah, Tikrit, and Mosul.

Concluding Thoughts

Since the 1970s, both Democratic and Republican administrations have accepted the responsibility for helping to ensure continued regional security in the Middle East. Close military-to-military relationships have been developed with the majority of countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and all of the Gulf states, using forward military presence, efforts to build partner capacity, and other forms of political, economic, and military cooperation. The threat posed by ISIS provides an opportunity to employ a regional coalition using the partnerships that have been nurtured over the past 40 years. Unfortunately, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011 not only created a power vacuum that has been exploited by ISIS and Iran, but it may also have contributed to the perception by many of our regional partners that the United States is disengaging from the Middle East. Again, my recommendations today are not based on work that I have done at RAND. But, based on my experience as a former military officer who spent five years deployed in Iraq as a senior civilian advisor to the U.S. military, I believe that the employment of U.S. military forces for the types of missions I have identified

would go a long way toward demonstrating U.S. resolve and commitment in a manner that would facilitate building the type of coalition necessary to defeat ISIS.