

# DISRUPTING ISIL GOVERNANCE

*The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) manages to control vast territories in Iraq and Syria despite proclaimed international efforts to damage its structure. ISIL's insurgency has come to a point where it exercises governance in controlled territories and is able to provide state-like services to the population living under its rule. Combating ISIL has been so far focused on targeted killings of its senior cadres or restraining it from launching more large-scale offensives. This article argues that a successful strategy to counter the group must focus on disrupting its governance capabilities. Once ISIL loses its viable economic system and sources of income coming largely from oil smuggling, it will have a hard time sustaining compliance of the population.*

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**T**he Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) swept throughout the major parts of Sunni-populated areas of Iraq in June 2014. A wide US-led coalition against ISIL, formed in September 2014 and now consisting of more than 60 countries, began to provide support to regional actors combating the group – such as the Iraqi Kurds or the Iraqi federal government – including weapons deliveries, training of local forces, tactical airstrikes, and targeted killings of ISIL militants.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, the appealing success of ISIL boosted the growth of its franchise, for example in the Egyptian Sinai, Libya, and even as far as Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> ISIL surely suffered certain territorial losses in the first half of 2015, stripping it of 9.4 percent of its land (namely in Tikrit, north of Baghdad, and in northern Syria to the Kurds), but it seems able to sustain itself despite fighting on several fronts.<sup>3</sup>

### *A Gloomy State of Affairs in Iraq and Syria*

In Iraq, a proclaimed “spring offensive” to retake the ISIL stronghold of Mosul ran out of steam in Tikrit in April 2015. In Al-Anbar province, west of Baghdad, the key city of Ramadi fell into the hands of the terrorist group in May 2015. In the north, Iraqi Kurds, albeit chronically embedded in internal political rivalries, contained ISIL by establishing stable frontlines by early 2015, but since then has not advanced except for in oil rich areas around Kirkuk.

In Syria, ISIL conquered Palmyra in May, delivering a blow to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s forces. In the north, Syrian Kurds supported by US airstrikes managed to attain a symbolic victory in Kobani in January 2015 and the US continued to support the Kurds in their summer offensives.<sup>4</sup> In September 2015, Russia further re-shuffled the cards in Syria with the deployment of more than 30 aircrafts and numerous sorties in support of Assad’s forces, mostly against the rebel groups in Aleppo or Idlib governorates.<sup>5</sup> ISIL is not Moscow’s primary target, at least for now, and its bombing campaign has already empowered ISIL to advance around Aleppo at the expense of other rebel groups.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Justine Drennan, “Who Has Contributed What in the Coalition Against the Islamic State?,” *Foreign Policy*, 12 November 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/12/who-has-contributed-what-in-the-coalition-against-the-islamic-state/>

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Y. Zelin, “The Islamic State’s model,” *Washington Post*, 28 January 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2015/01/28/the-islamic-states-model/>

<sup>3</sup> Columb Strack, “Islamic State territory shrinks by 9.4% in first six months of 2015,” *HIS Jane’s Intelligence Review*, 27 July 2015, [http://www.janes.com/article/53239/islamic-state-territory-shrinks-by-9-4-in-first-six-months-of-2015#.VveipB\\_weRs.twitter](http://www.janes.com/article/53239/islamic-state-territory-shrinks-by-9-4-in-first-six-months-of-2015#.VveipB_weRs.twitter)

<sup>4</sup> Tomáš Kaválek, “Kurdish-led Offensive in Syria against ISIS Makes Ankara Uneasy,” *Sekuritáci*, 23 June 2015, <http://www.sekuritaci.cz/kurdish-led-offensive-in-syria-against-isis-makes-ankara-uneasy/>

<sup>5</sup> Genevieve Casagrande, “Russian Airstrikes in Syria: September 30–October 14,” *Institute for the Study of War*, 14 October, <http://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-airstrikes-syria-september-30-october-14>

<sup>6</sup> “ISIL advances on Aleppo despite Russia air strikes,” *Al-Jazeera*, 10 October 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/10/isil-advances-aleppo-russia-airstrikes-151010012828079.html>

## *ISIL and its Successful Governance*

ISIL continues to claim statehood and its resilience has even provoked essays by Western analysts posing the question of “what if ISIL wins?”<sup>7</sup> Fighting on several fronts, the organization has been facing continuous coalition airstrikes since August 2015 (more than 7,300 airstrikes had been conducted by October 2015). Nevertheless, it is still able to sustainably govern the territories under its control.<sup>8</sup> ISIL’s ability to claim statehood and the sovereignty of its “caliphate” is its core political objective.

Tight ISIL rule with daily presence in the streets is dominant only in major cities such as Mosul, Raqqa, and Deir ez-Zor, where the governance system is most developed and robust. Its administrative system is divided into an administrative branch (policing, rule of law, education, and tribal affairs) and an “Islamic Administration of Public Services” (responsible for water and electricity supplies, food price regulation, agricultural management, and functioning of bakeries and other key businesses).<sup>9</sup> In rural areas, however, ISIL’s presence is limited; it relies on local allies and tribal groups that have pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.<sup>10</sup> ISIL does not overly get involved in tribal affairs neither does it spread its ideology with the same agility as in the cities. ISIL skillfully deals with tribes and ensures their loyalty with various incentives – security for a given community, monopoly for criminal enterprises, money, etc.

ISIL has invested a great deal of energy into crafting the image that it is a more effective and just ruler than that of Damascus, Baghdad, or other rebel groups. By assuming control over existing government structures and services and re-shaping them, ISIL kept providing electricity, running water, fuel, garbage disposal, bureaucratic services, system of courts, agriculture production, etc. Rebels were also

*“ISIL is not Moscow’s primary target at least for now, and its bombing campaign has already empowered ISIL to advance around Aleppo at the expense of other rebel groups.”*

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Stephen M. Walt, “What Should We Do If Islamic State Wins,” *Foreign Policy*, 10 June 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/10/what-should-we-do-if-isis-islamic-state-wins-containment/>

<sup>8</sup> “Operation Inherent Resolve. Targeted Operations Against ISIL Terrorist,” *US Department of Defense*, 6 October 2015, [http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814\\_Inherent-Resolve](http://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve)

<sup>9</sup> Richard Barret, “The Islamic State,” *The Soufan Group* (November 2014), <http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/TSG-The-Islamic-State-Nov14.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> See: Muhammad al-‘Ubaydi et al., “The Group That Calls Itself a State: Understanding the Evolution and Challenges of the Islamic State,” *The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (December 2014), <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/v2/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/CTC-The-Group-That-Calls-Itself-A-State-December20141.pdf>; Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015).

addressing basic needs by regulating the prices of bread, cooking gas, and other key goods. There were numerous accounts of residents in ISIL-controlled cities praising their discipline, dedication to providing services to population, and swift justice, as well as being effective, coordinated, and less corrupt than the central governments of Iraq or Syria, or any other rebels experimenting with “governance” such a Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>11</sup> ISIL’s legitimacy stems from its claim to statehood, and it is obsessed with issuing bureaucratic documents, permits, fees, and receipts with its emblem.<sup>12</sup> It even plans to introduce its own silver and gold currency.<sup>13</sup> It is all part of crafting an image of a functioning state structure (in contrast to ineffective and corrupt Baghdad and Damascus) and the notion that ISIL is omnipresent.

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However, since late autumn 2014, accounts have been surfacing that there are cracks beginning to show in ISIL’s governance. According to these reports, ISIL fails in providing administrative services, power outages are constant, there are not enough professionals such as doctors, engineers, farmers etc.<sup>14</sup> In

Mosul, Raqqa, and Dair ez-Zor – key cities in ISIL’s grip – drinkable or running water, food, fuel, and cooking gas have become scarce, and the price of basic supplies has risen. Also, new “taxes” are being introduced, and al-Hisbah, ISIL’s quasi-police is increasingly corrupt, often simply extorting from the population for their personal benefit.<sup>15</sup> In the words of Mona Alami, a non-resident fellow at the Atlantic Council: “Violence alone can keep ISIL running for a while, but its failings will put limitations on how long residents of the caliphate will remain silent.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See, for example: Charles C. Caris and Samuel Reynolds, “ISIL Governance in Syria,” *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 22 (July 2014), [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS\\_Governance.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS_Governance.pdf); Simon Speakmen Cordal, “How ISIS Governs Its Caliphate,” *Newsweek*, 2 December 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/12/12/how-isis-governs-its-caliphate-288517.html>; Tomáš Kaválek, “Running the Islamic State Part 3: Limits of Governance,” *Sekuritáci*, 25 April 2015, <http://www.sekuritaci.cz/running-the-islamic-state-part-3-limits-of-governance/>

<sup>12</sup> See collection of ISIL’s administrative documents by: Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, “The Archivist,” *Jihadology*, 2015, <http://jihadology.net/the-archivist/>

<sup>13</sup> Tom Wyke, “ISIS release pictures of their new gold coins they say will ‘break capitalist enslavement’ - so why are they still paying their deranged gunmen in US dollars?,” *Daily Mail*, 30 August 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3215910/ISIS-release-pictures-new-gold-coins-say-break-capitalist-enslavement-paying-deranged-gunmen-dollars.html>

<sup>14</sup> Mirren Gidda, “ISIS Is Facing a Cash Crunch in the Caliphate,” *Newsweek*, 23 September 2015, <http://europe.newsweek.com/isis-are-facing-cash-crunch-caliphate-333422#.VgK5vpR6ZEY.twitter>

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Abu Mohammed, “Hesba’ waives its work for money,” *Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Quietly*, 10 February 2015, <http://www.raqqa-sl.com/en/?p=514>

<sup>16</sup> Mona Alami, “ISIS’s Governance Crisis (Part I): Economic Governance,” *The Atlantic*, 19 December 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/isis-s-governance-crisis-part-i-economic-governance>

Oil remains one of the main sources of income for ISIL. According to October 2015 estimates, ISIL is still able to produce 34 to 40 thousand barrels per day, bringing ISIL on average 1.5 million dollars a day.<sup>17</sup> ISIL's oil is sold, for example, to Iraqi Kurdistan, Turkey, and Damascus- and Baghdad-controlled areas.<sup>18</sup> Makeshift refineries also operate to produce fuel, with some being owned directly by ISIL and some only buying the group's crude.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, ISIL is able to satisfy "domestic consumption" (although it is reported that prices are higher; for example, in Mosul the price for gas rose from 30 cents to 2 dollars).<sup>20</sup> None of the above-mentioned "buyers" decisively cracked down on ISIL smuggling activities, thus leaving ISIL's key source of wealth largely intact. For long-term strategic reasons, Western airstrikes do not often target oil infrastructure, such as refineries in the group's controlled territories. ISIL might be a problem, but destroying major oil infrastructure would prove costly to rebuild after the conflict comes to an end.

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ISIL has somewhat hybrid relations with both Damascus and Baghdad (although Baghdad reportedly ended its relationship in August).<sup>21</sup> Rebels do not have enough funds to pay the salaries of public servants, engineers, doctors, and other professionals inherited from central governments.<sup>22</sup> (A considerable number of them actually remained in their places of work and ISIL only assigns "emirs" to oversee them). Professionals are largely being paid by Baghdad and Damascus, with ISIL allowing them to travel from time to time to government-controlled areas to collect their salaries, and subsequently taxing them to up to 50 percent, earning millions of dollars.<sup>23</sup> Engineers and spare parts are also being sent to Syrian power plants, dams,

<sup>17</sup> Erika Solomon, Guy Ghazan and Sam Jones, "Isis Inc: how oil fuels the jihadi terrorists," *Financial Times*, 14 October 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/b8234932-719b-11e5-ad6d-f4ed76f0900a.html#axzz3ocxeYqoz>

<sup>18</sup> See, for example: "Financing of the Terrorist Organisation Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)," *Financial Action Task Force* (February 2015), <http://www.fatf-gafi.org/media/fatf/documents/reports/Financing-of-the-terrorist-organisation-ISIL.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> See, for example: Erika Solomon, Robin Kwong, and Steven Bernard, "Inside Isis Inc: The journey of a barrel of oil," *Financial Times*, 14 October 2015, <http://ig.ft.com/sites/2015/isis-oil/>

<sup>20</sup> Mirren Gidda, "ISIS Is Facing a Cash Crunch in the Caliphate," *Newsweek*, 23 September 2015, <http://europe.newsweek.com/isis-are-facing-cash-crunch-caliphate-333422#.VgK5vpR6ZEY.twitter>

<sup>21</sup> Gidda (2015).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example: Liz Sly, "The Islamic State is failing at being a state," *Washington Post*, 25 December 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/the-islamic-state-is-failing-at-being-a-state/2014/12/24/bfbf8962-8092-11e4-b936-f3afab0155a7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/the-islamic-state-is-failing-at-being-a-state/2014/12/24/bfbf8962-8092-11e4-b936-f3afab0155a7_story.html) ; Kaválek (2015).

<sup>23</sup> Gidda (2015).

and other factories to keep them up and running.<sup>24</sup> Iraqi and Syrian governments do so to ensure the loyalty of professionals and to keep infrastructure running and in good-enough shape.

Basic goods such as groceries or clothing continue to flow to and through ISIL-held areas from Turkey, Jordan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Damascus, and Baghdad. Business is still functioning and it keeps ISIL's economic system running. The prices of basic food and goods actually rose throughout 2014 and 2015, but still, the situation is not dire and the economic system works. ISIL does not largely depend on external financing or donations. It is left with a black market dominated by oil smuggling, "taxation," and extortion that form a crucial source of income for ISIL, bringing it an estimated one million dollars a day.<sup>25</sup>

Also, foreign humanitarian aid continues to flow to ISIL areas, supporting its governance capacities as a by-product.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Forcing a Downward Spiral of Rebel Governance in ISIL-Controlled Areas***

A strategy to counter ISIL should eventually focus on the disruption of rebel governance. ISIL's insurgency has reached a point where it controls a vast amount of territory and cities and operates a quasi-state structure. Disrupting its governance would challenge its claim to statehood and simultaneously create a perception among the population that any other actor is actually a lesser evil than ISIL. The time factor is also crucial. As Cole Bunzel, a PhD candidate in Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, noted: "The longer the group enjoys a plausible claim to statehood, the more likely its organizational and ideological unity will remain intact."<sup>27</sup>

Rebel governance has been a rather under-researched topic in the renewed focus on insurgency and counterinsurgency literatures that emerged with Western experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq in the post-9/11 era. Perhaps this is so because only a few insurgencies have managed to grow to the "large scale phase," in which insurgents "have gained considerable support within the local population. Their numbers may

<sup>24</sup> Erika Solomon and Ahmed Mhidi, "Isis Inc: Syria's 'mafia-style' gas deals with jihadis," *Financial Times*, 15 October 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/92f4e036-6b69-11e5-aca9-d87542bf8673.html#axzz3ooYNeb8g>

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Almukhtar, "ISIS Finances Are Strong," *New York Times*, 19 May 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/19/world/middleeast/isis-finances.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/05/19/world/middleeast/isis-finances.html?_r=0)

<sup>26</sup> See, for example: "Aid and the Islamic State," *Humanitarian Policy Group and IRIN*, Crisis Brief (December 2014), <http://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9390.pdf>; Armin Rosen, "Here's how ISIS abuses humanitarian aid," *Business Insider*, 3 February 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/how-isis-abuses-humanitarian-aid-2015-2>

<sup>27</sup> Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State to Caliphate: The Ideology of the Islamic State," *Brookings*, Analysis Paper No. 19, March 2015, p. 37, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2015/03/ideology-of-islamic-state-bunzel/the-ideology-of-the-islamic-state.pdf>

be in the many thousands. (...) They will have probably established physical control over various parts of the country and will likely be in position to contest government control in other areas.”<sup>28</sup> Even fewer insurgencies have moved to the “conventional phase,” in which they are powerful enough to challenge counterinsurgents in conventional warfare and are able to control and exercise stable governance in controlled territories. ISIL had indeed come to this point in Syria by the beginning of 2014, and in Iraq in late summer of 2014. In this state of affairs, it is key for ISIL to gain the compliance of the population.

*“A strategy to counter ISIL should eventually focus on the disruption of rebel governance.”*

Jennifer Keister, from the Initiative for Global Development, University of Notre Dame and Cato Institute, and Branislav Slantchev, from the University of California, San Diego, argue that simple coercion is not enough to keep rebel governance running.<sup>29</sup> Insurgents also have to be effective (meaning they provide basic services such water, electricity, and garbage disposal, and ensure prices are not skyrocketing, etc). Insurgents should provide security for the population as well as maintain their legitimacy. The key to successfully defeating ISIL lies primarily in disrupting its governance system’s effectiveness.

Strategies to counter ISIL should focus on forcing a “downward spiral of rebel governance” in its controlled territories. The governance performance of ISIL can be damaged by lowering its capability to provide services, as well as decreasing smuggling and trade with ISIL-controlled areas. Cutting off ISIL’s access to supplies and goods will push the group to further extort its poor population to cover its losses, and as a result, the people will be less compliant. Moreover, without large-scale offensives, ISIL cannot count on swift income from looting newly conquered areas (such as bank robberies, confiscation of personal valuables, etc.).

ISIL then must resort to the only tool left to increase the population’s compliance: coercion. This requires more and more resources and manpower. However, coercion cannot be increased indefinitely to ensure compliance if there is no improvement of ISIL’s governance performance. Further, repeated harsh measures create even more dissent. Eventually, compliance becomes so low that it reaches a critical point at

<sup>28</sup> Walter L. Perry and John Gordon IV, *Analytic Support to Intelligence in Counterinsurgencies* (RAND Corporation, 2008), p. 10, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND\\_MG682.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG682.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Jennifer Keister and Branislav L. Slantchev, “Statebreakers to Statemakers: Strategies of Rebel Governance,” 9 June 2015, <http://slantchev.ucsd.edu/wp/pdf/RebelGovern-W079.pdf>

which a larger portion of the population starts to think that “ISIL is no longer the best out of bad options” and some may even opt for changing their allegiances.

### *The Road so Far: Containing*

A hallmark of contemporary anti-ISIL strategy is, on one hand, containing it by preventing large-scale offensives, and, on the other hand, building local defense capacities. The US-led coalition against ISIL has pounded militants since August 2014 with airstrikes to disrupt its offensive and command capacities. The main goal is to prevent ISIL from amassing large forces to repeat offensives similar to the snap taking of Mosul in June 2014. Tactical airstrikes also support allies on the ground, such as the Syrian Kurds in the northern part of the country.

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Targeting senior cadres of ISIL is certainly one of the coalition’s useful tools, considering that ISIL, as every organization, has only a limited number of truly charismatic and capable people. Frequent deaths of commanders can also lead to desirable organizational infighting, or inflict temporary damage on decision-making capacities. For example, in May 2015, US Delta Forces conducted a targeted killing on the ground in Syria. This operation killed a key figure responsible for ISIL economic operations, Abu

Sayyaf, nicknamed the “emir of oil and gas.”<sup>30</sup> In August 2014, an airstrike killed al-Baghdadi’s deputy, known as Fadhil Ahmad al-Hayali, who was one of the military commanders responsible for planning the Mosul operation in 2014.<sup>31</sup>

But these efforts are aimed only at containing ISIL. Bombing campaigns have not resulted in a significant decrease of ISIL income or governance capacities, albeit they certainly made its life more difficult.

### *Seeking Allies on the Ground*

Apart from the obvious need to (re-)build local defense capacities already being pursued, there may be tactical allies and groups, some of them currently living under

<sup>30</sup> Helen Cooper and Eric Schmitt, “ISIL Official Killed in U.S. Raid in Syria, Pentagon Says,” *New York Times*, 16 May 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/17/world/middleeast/abu-sayyaf-isis-commander-killed-by-us-forces-pentagon-says.html>

<sup>31</sup> Christopher Brennan, “ISIS ‘No. 2’ who played key role in terrorist group’s Iraq land grab last summer killed in US airstrike, White House says,” *Daily Mail*, 21 August 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3206478/ISIS-s-No-2-killed-airstrike-White-House-says.html>



auspices of ISIL that will grow unhappy with its rule. The US has already been supporting Syrian Kurds with airstrikes since autumn 2015 in Kobani. The US also provided tactical support for the Kurdish-led offensive against Tel Abyad in June 2015, which effectively stripped ISIL of a vital supply line from the Turkish border to its stronghold in Raqqa. However, supporting the Kurds is problematic from the Western perspective since the key Western ally, Turkey, is highly uneasy with the prospect of further Kurdish empowerment in Syria. Also, there are strong enmities between Kurds and Arabs, thus their idea to advance and actually occupy major Arab areas, or even try to capture the predominantly Sunni Arab city of Raqqa seems far-fetched. If undertaken, such an attempt would surely rally Sunni Arabs around ISIL even more. Moreover, the Kurdish forces lack heavy weaponry and arguably also manpower to take and hold Raqqa.

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The Sahwa campaign in 2007-2008 (sometimes labeled as Sons of Iraq or the “Awakening”) was an integral part of the US plan to stabilize Iraq.<sup>32</sup> The US counted on the cooperation of Sunni tribal militias with the Baghdad government in exchange for financial and power-sharing incentives (very similar to former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s “tribal management”). The Sahwa strategy was generally successful in the short-term. But the replication of the Sahwa strategy itself is problematic since the original power-sharing deals struck between Sunni tribal leaders and their militias and the predominantly Shiite government of Nouri al-Maliki were not upheld. Further, Baghdad marginalized Sunni leaders, especially after 2011 when the US pulled out of the country.

Communities and actors who decide to defy ISIL and receive support either solely from the central government, or with international guarantees must be kept safe. The gradual enlargement of the insurgent-free zones to ensure the safety of the population in classic counterinsurgency terms is necessary. The unfortunate executions of hundreds of Albu Nimr Sunni tribesmen defiant of ISIL in November 2014<sup>33</sup> and October 2015 are certainly not setting a good example.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, as ISIL

<sup>32</sup> Myriam Benraad, “Iraq’s Tribal ‘Sahwa’: Its Rise and Fall,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (2011), <http://www.mepec.org/journal/middle-east-policy-archives/iraqs-tribal-sahwa-its-rise-and-fall>

<sup>33</sup> Faraj Obagi, “IS kills 500 members of Albu Nimr tribe,” *Al-Monitor*, 5 November 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/11/iraq-tribe-albu-nimr-who-are-they.html>

<sup>34</sup> Mat Wolf, “The Tribe That Won’t Stop Killing ISIS,” *The Daily Beast*, 12 October 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/10/12/the-tribe-that-won-t-stop-killing-isis.html>

increasingly coerces, extorts, and limits the autonomy of tribal groups, Baghdad or Damascus governments can gain the upper hand by offering tribes financial rewards, inclusion in power structures, and autonomy, in exchange for not supporting ISIL. Initial success stories must be nurtured and examples must be set. Importantly, these communities must be protected and given whatever incentives promised.

A report by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) highlighted additional useful “allies on the ground” – defectors. Apart from the obvious offering of incentives for defectors, people who defect from ISIL are a loaded gun for counter-propaganda against ISIL. The report concludes that governments ought to “provide defectors with opportunities to speak out; assist them in resettlement and ensure their safety; and remove legal disincentives that prevent them from going public.”<sup>35</sup> Based on narratives gathered from known defectors, ICSR asserts that the most frequently mentioned reason for defection was ISIL’s greater interest in fighting fellow Sunni Muslims than Assad; committing atrocities against Sunnis may serve to weaken ISIL in the end.

### *The Consequences of Disrupting ISIL Governance*

The deliberate disruption of ISIL governance could have far-reaching ramifications or unintended consequences. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why ISIL’s neighbors have not been able to commit efforts toward doing so. For one, the humanitarian catastrophe in Iraq and Syria caused the exodus of more than four million Syrians, many of them becoming a burden for countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon.<sup>36</sup> Europe also feels pressing a humanitarian crisis while facing a record number of migrants, estimated to reach 700,000 by the end of 2015.<sup>37</sup>

Directly targeting ISIL’s governance performance by disrupting the inflow of basic goods and cutting off sources of income would indeed provoke ISIL into higher coercion and cause a worsening of living conditions. With six<sup>38</sup> to eight million people currently living under ISIL’s reign, additional hundreds of thousands would flee.<sup>39</sup> Turkey has already signaled its discontent with the growing number of refugees. In Iraqi Kurdistan, Arab Sunni internally displaced persons (IDPs) are largely viewed as a potential threat to its ethnic homogeneity. In the current prevailing

<sup>35</sup> Peter R. Neumann, “Victims, Perpetrators, Assets: The Narratives of Islamic State Defectors,” *ICSR*, 2015, p. 14, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/ICSR-Report-Victims-Perpetrators-Assets-The-Narratives-of-Islamic-State-Defectors.pdf>

<sup>36</sup> “Syrian Refugees Regional Response,” *UNHCR*, 4 October 2015, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

<sup>37</sup> “UN expects 700,000 migrant arrivals in Europe this year, same in 2016,” *Business Insider*, 1 October 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/afp-un-expects-700000-migrant-arrivals-in-europe-this-year-same-in-2016-2015-10>

<sup>38</sup> Patrick Cockburn, “Life under Isis: The everyday reality of living in the Islamic ‘Caliphate’ with its 7th Century laws, very modern methods and merciless violence,” *Independent*, 15 March 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/life-under-isis-the-everyday-reality-of-living-in-the-islamic-caliphate-with-its-7th-century-laws-10109655.html>

<sup>39</sup> Janine Di Giovanni, Leah McGrath Goodman, and Damien Sharkov, “How Does ISIS Fund Its Reign of Terror?,” *Newsweek*, 6 November 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/11/14/how-does-isis-fund-its-reign-terror-282607.html>

liberal outlook, it might be also hard to advocate such policies directly influencing civilian population's well-being, as they invoke images of long sieges and the starvation of medieval castles.

Secondly, business with ISIL is a profitable one. State actors around ISIL might find it difficult to dismantle local smuggling networks, or to order businessmen not to send their goods to ISIL territories, as this might anger their supporters.

*“Local allies among the Arab Sunnis will be needed for governments in Damascus or Baghdad to keep their grasp over predominantly Sunni areas.”*

### *Need for a Regional Deal*

A new regional deal is critical so that regional actors are not tempted to include radical Islamists in their strategic calculations. On one side, there is Iran and Russia with their allies in Baghdad and Damascus. The second bloc consists of Saudis and their allies in the Arabian Peninsula, such as Qatar, as well as the US and its partners. Each of these major actors claims that combating ISIL is a priority, but they tend to focus on different goals. For example, Turkey regards taking down Assad and limiting Kurdish empowerment as high priorities. A recent example of playing the “ISIL card” is the conquest of Palmyra in May 2015. ISIL forces drove there from the group's stronghold in Raqqa over flatlands for hours while none of the coalition airstrikes targeted it (after all, this offensive was against Assad's forces).

Russia also strongly promotes Assad as an “ally against ISIL terrorism,” and since September 2015 has even attacked other rebels with airstrikes rather than ISIL. This eventually led to empowering ISIL at the expense of other rebels. Additionally, resolving one of the quagmires in Syria or Iraq is not enough. As Research Director at the Institute for the Study of War, Jessica McFate correctly noted: “ISIL will not in fact lose the strategic ground of its caliphate if it continues to hold the cities it controls in Syria, regardless of what happens in Iraq.”<sup>40</sup>

If a satisfactory regional deal is struck, more common steps against ISIL can be taken, including efforts to disrupt its governance capacities. Moreover, a regional deal will more likely provide opportunities for co-opting willing Sunnis and sharing power. In the long-term, it will ensure that ISIL will not easily return to the stage (as

<sup>40</sup> Jessica Lewis McFate, “The ISIS Defense in Iraq and Syria: Countering an Adaptive Enemy,” *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 27 (May 2015), p. 10, <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISIS%20Defense%20in%20Iraq%20and%20Syria%20-%20Standard.pdf>

happened in post-2011 Iraq, when Sunni rebels, including ISIL,<sup>41</sup> began to exploit Baghdad's continuous marginalization of Sunnis).<sup>42</sup>

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The first step to defeat ISIL is to damage its governance performance. ISIL must maintain compliance of the population, a task that is interconnected with rebel governance capabilities. As soon as service provision starts failing, the flow of income from oil becomes strangled, or the economic system falters, ISIL will have to resort to increased coercion and more intensive extortion of an already impoverished population. It will fall into a “downward spiral of rebel governance.” Cracking down on the smuggling of oil accompanied with the overall damaging of ISIL's economic system is essential.

The strategy to counter ISIL so far focuses on “containing” while preventing the group from launching new large-scale offensives, and killing senior commanders. However, such steps cannot be perceived as the hallmark of anti-ISIL strategy. From a long-term perspective, continuous efforts to (re-)build local military capacities are a necessity but ultimately, local allies among the Arab Sunnis will be needed for governments in Damascus or Baghdad to keep their grasp over predominantly Sunni areas.

A regional power-sharing deal between the Saudi and Iranian blocs and their allies must be reached to remove ISIL from actors' strategic calculations and to ensure that the root causes that drove the Sunni population of both Iraq and Syria into thinking that “ISIL is better than other options” can be addressed.

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<sup>41</sup> Hareth Hussein, “IS plays on tribal marginalization in Iraq,” *Al-Monitor*, 16 November 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/11/is-isis-iraq-tribe-sahwa-development-jihadist.html>

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Wicken, “Iraq's Sunnis in Crisis,” *Institute for the Study of War*, Middle East Security Report 11 (May 2013), <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Wicken-Sunni-In-Iraq.pdf>