INTRODUCTION

Since June 2014, the Islamic State (IS) has been advancing throughout Iraq. The group now controls a large amount of territory and has declared the arrival of a new Islamic caliphate spanning Iraq and Syria. The IS has executed perceived enemies, commandeered advanced weaponry abandoned by the Iraqi Army, recruited new fighters and made significant financial gains.

The severity of this threat has had significant geopolitical consequences, including the resignation of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Yet arguably the most significant development was when, on 8 August, the US re-engaged militarily in Iraq in response to the humanitarian threat posed to the Yazidi sect and to protect US interests in Erbil. The US subsequently launched over 100 airstrikes and provided increased military support to Iraqi and Kurdish forces. However, as President Obama admits, the US does not yet have a military strategy for defeating the IS. If this remains the case, the IS will pose a danger for years to come; meaning a greater understanding of how the group operates is needed.

THE ISLAMIC STATE

How much territory does it control?

The IS aims to acquire territory and establish its brand of sharia law there. As the New York Times map below shows, the areas it controls are dispersed throughout Iraq and Syria. This includes cities, towns, oil fields, border crossings and, until recently, a hydroelectric dam. At least eight million people now live under its control. While, according to military officials, the IS have been ‘tactically withdrawing’ from certain areas in the face of US airstrikes, they appear capable of maintaining controlling of much of this territory. Furthermore, their ability to blend in with the local population heightens the risk that airstrikes will also lead to a high level of civilian casualties.
How many fighters does it possess?

The estimates as to the IS’ manpower vary significantly. British intelligence officials have estimated it as being in the low thousands; while US officials’ estimates vary from 10,000 – 15,000. At the higher end, Hisham al-Hashimi, an Iraq-based analyst, believes there to be between 30 – 50,000 fighters, while the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights placed the number at over 50,000 in Syria alone.

In terms of foreign fighters, estimates also vary. Some US officials have placed the number at 3 – 5,000, while others have said that the IS has 10,000 foreign fighters, with approximately 3,000 coming from the West.

Regardless of the exact numbers, there will be those in the group whose commitment is either coerced or as much practical as ideological. This could include disaffected Sunni tribesmen, some former members of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath party and other elements that will hopefully abandon IS’ cause if military defeats for the group are accompanied by genuine political change in Baghdad.

How is it run?

Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is the self-proclaimed caliph of the IS and has been leader of the group since 2010. Below him, the IS’ senior leadership is divided between an eight man shura council (which contains ministers with responsibility for areas such as recruitment, food supplies and finance); a three man war cabinet; below this, military officials with responsibility for specific areas, such as truck bombs and IEDs; and twelve local rulers. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is thought to have met many of these senior figures – which also include some of Hussein’s former army officers – while in US custody between 2005 and 2009.
Below the senior leadership are regional emirs and military commanders that operate throughout Iraq and Syria.

**What are its military capabilities?**

IS fighters have been labelled as ‘professional, well-trained, motivated and equipped’ by military officials. Yet it is also extraordinarily well-armed, and has been described by former CIA Director General David Petraeus as a ‘terrorist army’. They have access to tanks, reconnaissance drones, howitzers, rocket launchers, anti-aircraft and anti-gun weapons, body armour, MANPADS and armoured personnel carriers. Much of this equipment was gained when the Iraqi army abandoned their posts in the face of the IS advance throughout June.

While the IS’ access to this level of equipment is significant, it should also be remembered that they do not have the expertise to keep some of this weaponry in sound working order and it is vulnerable to attack from the air.

**How is it funded?**

US Defense Secretary Hagel has described the IS as, ‘tremendously well-funded’. However, whereas it was once thought to be reliant on donations from individuals in the Gulf, it is now essentially self-sufficient.

The IS has a variety of means of replenishing its coffers. The small oilfields it has captured in north Iraq could provide up to $730 million per year on the black market, and the IS produces between 30 - 70,000 barrels of oil per day. It smuggles crude oil into Iran, Iraqi Kurdistan, Jordan and Turkey via third parties and uses its refineries in Syria to sell locally in Iraq and Syria. It also sells wheat.

Extortion of local businesses, farms and protection money brings in approximately another $8 million a month; while kidnap for ransom payments brings in further finance.

**Is the IS a threat to the West?**

The IS is a clear threat to neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon (the IS and its precursor groups have previously launched attacks in both countries) and Turkey. However, a consensus is also increasingly emerging regarding the severity of the danger they pose to the West. Those who have argued this include:

- British Prime Minister [David Cameron](#)
- British Foreign Secretary [Philip Hammond](#)
- Gilles de Kerchove, the European Union’s [counterterrorism coordinator](#)
- US Secretary of Defense [Chuck Hagel](#)
• General David Petraeus, former CIA Director and commander of American forces in Iraq

• Former CIA Director General Michael Hayden

• Mike Morrell, the former Deputy Director of the CIA

• Mike Rogers, House of Representatives Intelligence Committee chairman

Furthermore, the IS and its precursor groups also already have connections to previous planned and actual attacks in Europe.

• The perpetrators of the June 2007 attacks in London and Glasgow had the telephone numbers of Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) members on their mobile phones. One of the plotters – a British doctor – had previously fought in Iraq.

• In 2010, a senior ISI operative admitted to Iraqi forces that ISI was preparing to carry out an attack in the West at the end of that year. Taimour Abdulwahab al-Abdaly, an Iraqi-born militant, subsequently committed a suicide attack in Stockholm, Sweden. He is thought to have trained with ISI in Mosul for three months prior to the operation.

• In June 2013, the Iraqi defense ministry announced that it had arrested a Baghdad cell planning to manufacture chemical weapons and smuggle them into the US, Canada and Europe.

• In June 2014, Mehdi Nemmouche, a French citizen whom French intelligence agencies believe joined ISIS in Syria in 2012, shot and killed four people at the Jewish Museum in Brussels. His gun was wrapped in an ISIS flag.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Military action against the IS in Syria is a must...

At present, US airstrikes are only taking place against targets in Iraq. However, the IS is firmly embedded in Syria and regards the border between the two countries as non-existent. Therefore, any strategy that aims to defeat the group as a whole must have a component to address its threat there. Despite speculation that the US was set to extend its military operation into Syria after it began surveillance flights there, the Obama administration remains deeply divided on this issue, with the President so far highly reluctant to take military action.

However, the limited military operation currently taking place can only temporarily stunt the IS’ growth, not defeat it. The US must take the fight to IS with airstrikes against its strongholds across Iraq and Syria, supported by US and UK-led special forces’ presence, which will conduct counterterrorism operations, gather intelligence, develop contacts with potential local partners and advise Iraqi forces. This will need to be accompanied by continued military and financial
assistance to Kurdish fighters. However, in order for it to be effective, this will need to be a sustained campaign, not a piecemeal one that only lasts a matter of weeks. To ensure public support for this mission, the US and its allies must continue to explain why defeating the IS is not just a worthy humanitarian cause, but also vital to protecting our own national security in the West.

...but working with the Syrian or Iranian government is not

Despite Bashar al-Assad’s regime overseeing mass killings and human rights abuses in Syria since 2011, in recent weeks, a range of voices have called for the West to co-operate with the Syrian leader to help defeat the IS. Advocates of the strategy have included General Lord Dannatt, the former head of the British Army, Sir Malcolm Rifkind, the chairman of the Intelligence & Security Committee and Richard Clarke, a former senior counterterrorism adviser in the US government. For its part, the Syrian government has voiced its openness to this arrangement. For its part, the Syrian government has remained steadfast in its refusal to co-operate with the Assad regime.

Yet the Assad regime was complicit in the rise of the IS in the first place. It allowed the growth of jihadist groups in Syria by not bombing areas controlled by jihadists with the same intensity as other rebel-held parts of the country; assisting their offensives against other rebels groups; and buying oil from them. This could be part of an Assad strategy to retain control in Syria: bolstering extremist groups so he can then portray himself to the international community as an invaluable partner in stemming the jihadist tide there. Fortunately, so far, the US government, the British government and French government have remained steadfast in their refusal to co-operate with the Assad regime.

It is equally unpalatable for the West to work with the Iranian government, which is aiming to expand its influence in the region and has massively assisted the Assad government. Iran has provided military support via its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Quds Force and Hezbollah proxy. It has also assisted in intelligence gathering, provided weaponry, assisted financially and propped up Syria’s oil industry.

Furthermore, when the US and UK militaries were operating in Iraq after the 2003 invasion, Iran was training, arming and funding both Shia and Sunni militias within Iraq in order to destabilise the country. This led to the death of numerous US and UK troops, and provides further evidence of Iran as an untrustworthy partner.

Regional co-operation is preferable but not inevitable...

The IS threat to the Middle East is even greater than that to the West. The US is attempting to construct a coalition committed to defeating the IS, but faces a variety of challenges in doing so. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey are among the countries whose support will attempt to be harnessed, either in regards to use of military bases, financing or intelligence gathering.

It would be symbolically important for key regional actors to show public support, yet an unwillingness to either strengthen Assad (and, by proxy, Iran) by attacking the IS does not make it inevitable. Furthermore, publicly co-operating with the US poses a domestic challenge in such countries.
...and if Britain can assist further, it should

So far, Britain has helped arm the Kurds, and used its Tornado jets to provide aerial surveillance and help with aid drops in northern Iraq. There has also been a suggestion that British special forces are now preparing work alongside their US counterparts to undertake missions against the IS. While these are all welcome steps, if the US requests that the UK also carry out airstrikes – as has been mooted – the UK should agree to do so.

CONCLUSION

A failure to act now will lead to an expansion in both the size of the IS and the dangers it poses. The consequences of this for Christians, Yazidis, Jews, Shia and all others who the IS perceives to be its enemies will be grave; both in the Middle East and the West. The IS threat is not one that can be contained to the Levant, and for both humanitarian and security purposes, defeating it is vital to the UK’s national interest.

About the Author

Robin Simcox is a Research Fellow at the Henry Jackson Society. Simcox has spoken on a variety of platforms, including testifying to the House of Representatives Homeland Security Committee, and at the White House, National Counterterrorism Center, British Parliament, US Special Operations Command and the European Parliament. Simcox was previously a Research Fellow at the Centre for Social Cohesion, a think tank studying extremism and terrorism in the UK. He has an MSc in U.S. Foreign Policy from the Institute for the Study of Americas, University of London, and a BA in History (International) from the University of Leeds, which included a year at the University of Newcastle, Australia.

About the Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism

The Centre for the Response to Radicalisation and Terrorism (CRT) at The Henry Jackson Society provides top-quality, in-depth research and delivers targeted, tangible and impactful activities to combat the threats from radical ideologies and terrorism at home and abroad.
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The Henry Jackson Society is a think tank and policy-shaping force that fights for the principles and alliances which keep societies free – working across borders and party lines to combat extremism, advance democracy and real human rights, and make a stand in an increasingly uncertain world.