Understanding the Threat: Explaining the Rise the Appeal of the Islamic State (Mr. Jonathon Cosgrove, Mr. Muayyad al-Chalabi, Mr. Lee Slusher, & Dr. Stacey Pollard,[69] Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory)

In summer 2014, Major General Nagata, Commanding General of SOCCENT, requested the Pentagon's Strategic Multilayer Assessment office engage with experts from think tanks, academia, and other research facilities to study the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The general was particularly interested in ISIL's seemingly magnetic appeal. How could such an organization seize so much territory and attract so many recruits in such little time? The APL conducted research on behalf of the Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group to address exactly this topic—explaining the rise and appeal of ISIL. This study concluded that ISIL's ascent was the result of a confluence of favorable conditions—a perfect storm.

First, longstanding grievance-based narratives made Sunnis in the region and farther afield susceptible to ISIL's messaging. Although these narratives were varied, each provided fertile ground for ISIL's master narrative. These include victimization, the plight of Iraqi Sunnis, the Sunni-Shia divide (and broader regional proxy war), an alternative to chaos and an alternative to the modern nation-state.

Second, the sectarian strife in Iraq produced a marginalized Sunni population, especially in the country's northern and western portions. With the US withdrawal, Baghdad's Shia-dominated government intensified its repression of Sunni demands for greater political and economic inclusion. This prompted many Sunnis to form or reassemble various militias. In this chaos, ISIL (then the Islamic State of Iraq) resonated with the local population, not because the people agreed with its worldview, but because the group was effective in fighting the Shia. The Syrian Civil War then provided ISIL an opportunity to attract recruits, receive external donor funding, better organize and, ultimately, grow into a much more formidable force (the Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham, later the Islamic State.) This stronger, more mature entity expanded in Iraq, capturing key cities in western and northern Iraq. The establishment of a caliphate allowed the group to surpass Al Qaeda as the world's most prominent Islamist group.

Third, the organization has made use of several methods to further expand its ranks. The organization has "low barriers to entry," meaning it accepts recruits from diverse backgrounds, forgoing the type of vetting process common in other extremist groups. Also, the group's success has created a snowball effect in that many flock to ISIL simply due to its success to date. Lastly, the group employs a sophisticated media apparatus to propagate its message.

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Key Narratives That Gave Rise to ISIL

ISIL's master narrative paints a picture with a history of lost glory, humiliation, and injustice in the background and ongoing civil war and failed governance in the foreground. In the center of this image is ISIL, and it alone is leading Muslims to the destiny the world has denied them, all the while purifying Islam and vanquishing enemies. This master narrative is, in fact, a cartoonish depiction of the group's ruthless and opportunistic rise. Nonetheless, ISIL is able to recruit from local populations and draw enthusiastic volunteers from around the world. The reason for this supposed magnetism is that a confluence of narratives, some centuries old, continues to produce fertile ground for ISIL propaganda and recruitment.

Victimization

ISIL benefits from long-standing narratives that center on victimization, resentment, and the loss of past glory. Some of these narratives are specific to the Arab world, but many others permeate the broader international Islamic community. This diffusion of ideas occurs because of the Arabian Peninsula's status as the birthplace of Islam and the resulting sense of community felt by Muslims outside of the region. Hence, many grievances that might otherwise have been regional in nature became sources of discord for Muslims around the world. Such grievances are many and varied. Examples include, but are not limited to, a longing for the golden age of Islam, colonialism, the establishment and continued existence of Israel, the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the ongoing drone war.[70] This list of grievances represents many separate issues that have occurred over hundreds of years, but in the context of this victimization narrative, these injustices, real or perceived, blend into a mutually reinforcing story of oppression.[71] This narrative makes it possible for ISIL to posture itself as a savior of sorts, offering both redemption and empowerment.[72]

The Plight of Iraqi Sunni Arabs

The Sunni Arab rebellion in Iraq presents another narrative that favored ISIL expansion.[73] There continues to be extensive opposition among Sunni Iraqi Arabs to the changes that occurred in Iraq after the United States' 2003 invasion, including de-Baathification and the 2005 constitution. They believe the US-brokered Shia–Kurd alliance occurred entirely at the expense of their own communities and that this alliance has produced widespread disenfranchisement. This Sunni Arab narrative exists separately from the Islamist and caliphate narratives ISIL propagates,[74] but it created an opening for ISIL to forge

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[70] Pollack, K., & Hamid, S. (2014). Summary of Dr. Ken Pollack and Dr. Shadi Hamid (The Brookings Institution). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (p. 92). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[71] Haddad, F. (2014). Summary of Dr. Fanar Haddad (National University of Singapore). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (pp. 72-74). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[72] Yahya, M. (2014). Summary of Dr. Maha Yahya (Carnegie). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (pp. 115-117). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[73] The Sunni rebellion in Iraq: Desperate odds. (2014, June 21). *The Economist*.

[74] Natali, D. (2014). Summary of Dr. Denise Natali (Institute for National Strategic Studies). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (pp. 44-46). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

alliances with ex-Baathists and Sunni tribal leaders, many of whom seek security and a means to exact revenge on Baghdad for its neglect of Sunni regions.[75]

Sunni/Shia Antipathy

Although the Sunni–Shia schism has existed for fourteen centuries, it is important to note that the two sects have not lived in perpetual conflict. "Sunni and Shia Muslims have lived peacefully together for centuries. In many countries it has become common for members of the two sects to intermarry and pray at the same mosques."[76] However, it is also true that a cold war of sorts is ongoing in the Middle East, with Saudi Arabia and other Sunni countries engaging in a proxy war with Iran, the Assad regime, and Shia militant groups, such as Lebanese Hezbollah.[77] The fear of Persian and/or Shia domination is a powerful motivator for many Sunnis, to such an extent that allying with Islamists such as ISIL may seem necessary.

An Alternative to Chaos

"An environment of chaos and great suffering has allowed [ISIL] to emerge."[78] The Syrian Civil War and sectarian strife in Iraq have forced many to seek protection. These crises predate ISIL's rise, despite the group's ongoing and active participation in both, and one of ISIL's messages is that it provides stability in the midst of chaos. For many, the decision to join with ISIL has little or nothing to do with the group's purported magnetism or with the tenets of Islam. It is more of an issue of survival. The breakdown of traditional institutions produced a search for alternatives. Although extreme and unforgiving, ISIL's version of governance still provides some measure of order.[79]

An Alternative to the Nation-State

In addition to providing limited security and stability, ISIL brands itself as an alternative to the modern nation-state. At a Ramadan celebration in August 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi presented a map that displayed "a borderless country stretching from the edge of Iran to the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula and across North Africa—a near re-creation of the eighth-century Abbasid caliphate, the first Islamic empire."[80] This goal is more than an attempt to wrest power from regional leaders. The group wishes to replace existing borders and forms of governance with an idealized Islamist model based on

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[75] Khatib, L., & Abou Zeid, M. (2014). Summary of Dr. Lina Khatib and Dr. Mario Abou Zeid (Carnegie). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (pp. 89-91). Strategic Multilayer Assessment; Bew, J., & Maher, S. (2014). Blowback. *New Statesman, 143*(5215), 22-26; and Wood, G. (2014, September 10). The Three Types of People Who Fight for ISIS. Retrieved from http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119395/isiss-three-typesfighters? utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_term=TNR% 20Daily Newsletter&utm_campaign=TNR Daily Zephyr with LiveIntent – 09112014

[76] The Sunni-Shia Divide. (n.d.). Retrieved October 14, 2014, from http://www.cfr.org/sunnishia

[77] Gause III, G. (2014, August 25). ISIS and the New Middle East Cold War. Retrieved from http://www.brookings.edu/ blogs/iran-at-saban/posts/2014/08/25-isis-new-middle-east-cold-war

[78] Katulis, B., Lang, H., & Singh, V. (2014, September 10). Defeating ISIS, An Integrated Strategy to Advance Middle East Stability.

[79] Pollack, K., & Hamid, S. (2014). Summary of Dr. Ken Pollack and Dr. Shadi Hamid (The Brookings Institution). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (p. 92). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[80] Baker, A., Crowley, M., Thompson, M., & Aysha, R. (2014). A Nightmare Returns. *Time, 183*(2), 30.

an exclusionary view of Islam.[81] This narrative gains traction on several levels. Although it rouses historical fervor for Islam's golden age, the narrative also has contemporary appeal, presented as a forceful undoing of the Sykes–Picot Agreement.[82] All the optimism and enthusiasm of the Arab Spring has produced little in the way of better governance. In fact, many Arab countries experience far more insecurity and political exclusion today than before the revolutions. This sense of squandered hope buoys ISIL's alternative state model.

The Exploitation of Regional Instability

While narratives provided the informational backdrop for ISIL's appeal, the group was able to take advantage of regional instability to transform its goal of a state into reality. This is particularly noteworthy because, although the group had not been defeated, it was substantially marginalized by the late 2000s. However, in the span of four years, ISIL became the region's most powerful Islamist actor and even had eclipsed al Qaeda as the world's preeminent Sunni extremist organization.

An Iraqi Sunni Alliance

During the US occupation of Iraq, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was detained for approximately four years until 2010 at the US-run prison, Camp Bucca.[83] This period proved formative for al-Baghdadi and his future Islamic State. It was at Bucca where the leader forged relationships with those who later became his closest deputies. Although some of these individuals were Islamists with no military experience, al-Baghdadi seemed to have "a preference for military men, and so his leadership team includes many officers from Saddam Hussein's long-disbanded army."[84] Furthermore, Mike Knights of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy noted, "discontent in the military was widespread near the end of [Saddam's] rule, and underground Islamist movements were gaining strength, even inside the military."[85] Internment at Camp Bucca created the opportunity for like-minded Sunni Arab Iraqis to congregate and form bonds, thereby strengthening existing Islamist tendencies. The incorporation of such veterans into al-Baghdadi's group offered several advantages. First, these individuals possessed the necessary skills and discipline not just to mount successful military operations (many had experience fighting the Americans) but also to administer bureaucracy, including finance, logistics, and recruitment. Such warfighting and management expertise has allowed ISIL to function more as a government with an army than as a terrorist or insurgent group. Second, many of these Iraqi Sunnis, including former Baathists, had extensive local contacts and knowledge.[86] They had been leaders during the time of Sunni

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[81] Michael, K., & Dekel, U. (2014, June 24). ISIS Success in Iraq and Syria: Strategic Ramifications.

[82] Islamic State. (2014, June 29). The End of Sykes-Picot. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWHn96DXRDE.

[83] McCoy, T. (2014, June 11). How ISIS Leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi Became the World's Most Powerful Jihadist Leader. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/ wp/2014/06/11/how-isis-leader-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-became-theworlds- most-powerful-jihadi-leader

[84] Hubbard, B., & Schmitt, E. (2014, August 27). Military Skill and Terrorist Technique Fuel Success of ISIS. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https:// sslvpn.jhuapl.edu/2014/08/28/world/middleeast/,DanaInfo=www. nytimes.com army-know-how-seen-as-factor-in-isis-successes.html

[85] Ibid

[86] Ibid

Arab hegemony in Iraq. For many, their marginalization at the hands of the Maliki government represented a loss of status, power, and prosperity. By 2013, Sunni protests against the Baghdad government called for greater political inclusion. Maliki and his alliance dug in, responding with the concentration of partisan power and the violent suppression of Sunni protests using ISF, combined with the selective purging of Sunni political rivals.[87] Iraq's various Sunni communities responded by regrouping, reactivating their militias, and retaliating against the Iraqi government and ISF.[88] ISIL was one such militant group, but by this point it had grown stronger than other groups because of the chaos in neighboring Syria.

Capitalizing on the Syrian Civil War

In its 2010 annual report on civilian casualties in Iraq, the U.K.-based Iraq Body Count noted a drop in the number of deaths from previous years but "warned of a lingering, low-level conflict in the years ahead."[89] Although this assessment depicted Iraq as being far from peaceful, it was an acknowledgment that the chaos of earlier years had waned. A primary reason for the decline in violence was that the once-powerful Sunni rebellion had also diminished, due in large part to the popular uprising and successful Coalition operations against ISIL's predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI; formerly known as al Qaeda in Iraq).[90] The Syrian Civil War changed this dynamic because it "left a vacuum of authority in large tracts of [Syria and] fueled a resurgence of the [ISI]."[91] With al-Baghdadi and his new Iraqi allies now out of US custody and with the freedom to operate in neighboring Syria, ISI morphed into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In Iraq, the group intensified its campaign of suicide bombings and car bombings and, by 2013, had caused the "highest monthly violent death tolls since 2008."[92] That same year in Syria, the group had become so strong that it challenged the primacy of the al-Nusra Front, al Qaeda's franchise in the country. Al-Baghdadi "claimed [ISIL] had founded the al-Nusrah Front in Syria and that the groups were merging. Al-Nusrah Front, however, denied the merger and publicly pledged allegiance to [al Qaeda] leader Ayman al-Zawahiri."[93] Al-Zawahiri decided to intervene and publicly chastised Baghdadi. In response, Baghdadi announced "I have to choose between the rule of God and the rule of Zawahiri, and I chose the rule of God."[94] This bold denunciation, coupled with ISIL's increased

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[87] Make or Break: Iraq's Sunnis and the State (Middle East Report N°144). (2013, August 14). Retrieved from http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/144-make-or-break-iraq-s-sunnis-and-the-state.aspx

[88] Rayburn, J. (2013, May 8). Iraq Is Back on the Brink of Civil War: Sectarian Strife Is the Worst It's Been in Many Years – and Syria Isn't Helping. *New Republic*.

[89] Iraq War Deaths 'Drop in 2010. (2010, December 30). Retrieved from http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/ 2010/12/201012302516691853.html

[90] McCoy, T. (2014, June 11). How ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi became the world's most powerful jihadist leader. *The Washington Post*.

[91] Ibid

[92] National Counterterrorism Center. (2014, January 1). Al-Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) - Terrorist Groups. Retrieved from http://www.nctc.gov/site/groups/aqi.html

[93] Ibid

[94] Baker, A., Crowley, M., Thompson, M., & Aysha, R. (2014). A Nightmare Returns. *Time, 183*(2), 30.

stature in both Iraq and Syria, inspired the majority of al-Nusra's foreign fighters and many of its top commanders to defect to ISIL.[95]

Further Differentiating Itself from al Qaeda

Al-Baghdadi's quarrel with al-Zawahiri continued and, in February 2014, al Qaeda formally disavowed any affiliation with ISIL.[96] Nonetheless, ISIL continued its public criticism of al Qaeda and, in spring 2014, an ISIL spokesman criticized Zawahiri for "being slow to respond to revolutions in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt" and "failing to take the fight to Iran and for obsessing about the 'far enemy' (the United States), leaving Sunnis open to the revenge of Shias."[97] By June 2014, ISIL had changed its name to the Islamic State, signifying its belief that the group now represented the singular Islamic caliphate and that al-Baghdadi had become the "leader for Muslims everywhere."[98] ISIL's successful establishment of a Sharia state to demand the loyalty of Muslims everywhere contrasted sharply with al Qaeda's unending promise of an eventual caliphate.[99] Furthermore, ISIL's operations aim to "seize important border crossings, dams, and oil fields or to weaken competing militias in territorial strongholds, but also to purify Islam by force, using brutal public executions and amputations to intimidate and deter potential rivals."[100] In other words, ISIL has begun to engage in the business of state-making, whereas al Qaeda still focuses on "waging a protracted war of attrition against the West, specifically aiming to bleed the United States."[101]

External Support

Because of the clandestine nature of external support to various groups fighting in Syria and Iraq, it is difficult to determine precisely which entities provide material and financial assistance to ISIL, as well as the amount and type of this aid. However, some of the broader issues relating to external support are known. Many external actors view the Syrian Civil War in the context of the wider Sunni–Shia proxy war with "Russia, Iran and the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah helping the government and with Saudi Arabia and Qatar providing the main support for the rebels."[102] Concerning the latter, much aid (money, weapons, and other supplies[103]) has flowed into the conflict zone more as a means to support the

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[95] Ibid

[96] Sly, L. (2014, February 3). Al-Qaeda disavows any ties with radical Islamist ISIS group in Syria, Iraq. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/al-qaeda-disavows-any-ties-with-radical-islamist-isis-group-in-syria-iraq/2014/02/03/2c9afc3a-8cef-11e3-98ab-fe5228217bd1_story.html

[97] Bew, J., & Maher, S. (2014). Blowback. *New Statesman, 143*(5215), 22-26.

[98] Sunni Rebels Declare New 'Islamic Caliphate. (2014, June 30). *Al Jazeera English*. Retrieved from http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/ isil-declares-new-islamic-caliphate-201462917326669749.html

[99] Braniff, W., & Pereira, R. (2014, August 28). A Tale of Two Caliphates. Retrieved from http://www.start.umd.edu/news/tale-two-caliphates

[100] Ibid

[101] Ibid

[102] Hubbard, B. (2013, November 12). Private Donors' Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes. com/2013/11/13/world/middleeast/private-donors-funds-add-wildcard- to-war-in-syria.html?_r=0

[103] Dickinson, E. (2013, November 16). Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home. Retrieved from http://www.brookings.

overthrow the Assad regime than as an endorsement of any particular rebel group[104] (although some individual donors likely support specific causes, including Islamic extremism.) This external support has altered the composition and effectiveness of fighting groups, "exacerbating divisions in the opposition and bolstering its most extreme elements."[105] Even though many actors who provide support, such as those in the Gulf countries, must contend with the domestic security threat that Islamic extremist groups pose, the reality is that extremists tend to be the most effective in combating the Syrian regime.[106] Hence, extremists are often the recipients of such aid, much of which is channeled through the Kuwaiti financial system.[107] A similar dynamic exists in Iraq where the same external actors wish to combat the primacy of the Shia-dominated central government.[108]

In both the Syrian and Iraqi contexts, the motivation of external actors to provide support was to combat the larger threat of Shia and Shia-allied enemies. Perhaps unintentionally, this support aided ISIL's reconstitution after the group's near marginalization in Iraq before the US withdrawal. After all, ISIL was but one of many rebel groups that reaped the rewards of this phenomenon. This represents yet another way in which ISIL's ascent would not have been possible without regional instability.

Successful Recruiting Practices and Trends

Although ISIL has gained many followers through alliances of convenience and outright coercion, the group continues to draw new, willing recruits, many of whom come from outside of the conflict zone and even outside of the region altogether. This is due primarily to ISIL's inclusive membership standards, continued battlefield success, and vigorous media efforts.

Low Barriers to Entry

Many terrorist groups rely on a vetting process to guard against infiltrators and informants, as well as to maintain a common culture or identity within the group. In such scenarios, new recruits are accepted only if an established member of the group vouches for the newcomer.[109] ISIL, on the other hand,

edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2013/12/06 private gulf financing syria extremist rebels sectarian conflict% 20dickinson/private gulf financing syria extremist% 20rebels sectarian conflict dickinson.pdf

[104] Worth, R. (2014, January 7). Saudis Back Syrian Rebels Despite Risks. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/08/world/middleeast/saudis-back-syria-rebels-despite-a-lack-of-control.html?_r=0

[105] Hubbard, B. (2013, November 12). Private Donors' Funds Add Wild Card to War in Syria. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes. com/2013/11/13/world/middleeast/private-donors-funds-add-wildcard- to-war-in-syria.html?_r=0

[106] Worth, R. (2014, January 7). Saudis Back Syrian Rebels Despite Risks. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/08/world/middleeast/saudis-back-syria-rebels-despite-a-lack-of-control.html?_r=0

[107] Dickinson, E. (2013, November 16). Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home. Retrieved from http://www.brookings. edu/~/media/research/files/papers/2013/12/06 private gulf financing syria extremist rebels sectarian conflict% 20dickinson/private gulf financing syria extremist% 20rebels sectarian conflict dickinson.pdf

[108] Rogin, J. (2014, June 14). America's Allies Are Funding ISIS. *Daily Beast*. Retrieved from http:// www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/06/14/america-s-allies-arefunding- isis.html

[109] Maher, S., Neuman, P., & Carter, J. (2014). Summary of Mr. Shiraz Maher, Dr. Peter Neuman, Mr. Joseph Carter

promotes universalism.[110] As long as one submits to ISIL's interpretation of Islam and obeys the group's leaders, ISIL seems unconcerned with a potential recruit's race, native language, country of origin, or even one's previous religious affiliation (converts are welcome.) This constitutes what some experts have referred to as "low barriers to entry," a characteristic that likely contributes to ISIL's appeal and, more specifically, to its ability to recruit foreign fighters. The benefits of such low barriers include the opportunity to attract experienced fighters from places such as Chechnya and Bosnia and the ability of ISIL to stand out as a choice for would-be jihadists.[111] Especially in the case of Syria, many foreign fighters arrived in the region without a preexisting group affiliation. ISIL's accommodation of foreigners has made it a more appealing choice.[112]

Success Breeds Success

A common goal for all Islamist groups is the creation of a caliphate. However, this aim is usually portrayed as aspirational in nature because Islamist militant groups are rarely able to seize large territories or consistently govern these spaces. ISIL has achieved this goal, albeit for a matter of months. In addition, the territory that ISIL occupies has greater historical significance than the ground occupied by al Qaeda affiliates in Yemen, North Africa, and East Africa (e.g., ISIL's claimed capital city, Raqqa, was also one of the capitals of Islam's golden age). To many, this is evidence of ISIL's claim that its empire will grow to the proportions of the famed eighth-century caliphate.[113] ISIL's success has a more modern appeal as well. Its territorial gains "eliminated" one of the international borders created in the Sykes–Picot Agreement, representing a victory against colonialism (another regional grievance) while leveraging decades-old sentiments toward pan-Arabism.[114] Such success presents a more immediate and tangible benefit, allowing it to stand out in the crowded assortment of militant groups currently fighting in Syria. To many would-be fighters, ISIL now represents the winning team, and this fact continues to attract recruits.[115]

Robust Media Apparatus

ISIL has its own media arm, the al-Hayat Media Center, which produces high-quality videos as well as

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(International Centre for the Study of Radicalization). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (p. 41). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[110] Klausen, J. (2014). Summary of Dr. Jytte Klausen (Brandeis University). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (p. 110). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[111] Maher, S., Neuman, P., & Carter, J. (2014). Summary of Mr. Shiraz Maher, Dr. Peter Neuman, Mr. Joseph Carter (International Centre for the Study of Radicalization). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (p. 41). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[112] Baker, A., Michels, P., Urquhart, C., Calabresi, M. (2014). Blowback. *Time, 184*(1), 36.

[113] Baker, A., Crowley, M., Thompson, M., & Aysha, R. (2014). A Nightmare Returns. *Time, 183*(2), 30.

[114] Haddad, F. (2014). Summary of Dr. Fanar Haddad (National University of Singapore). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (pp. 72-74). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[115] Harkins, G. (2014, September 16). 5 Things to Know about Islamic State's Military Capabilities. *Marine Corps Times*. Retrieved from http://www. marinecorpstimes.com/article/20140916/NEWS/309220025/5-thingsknow-about-Islamic-State-s-military-capabilities; Outline of Naval Postgraduate School ISIL Assessment. (2014). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet*. Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

glossy annual and monthly reports on the group's activities. In addition, the group is active on many social media sites, including JustPaste, SoundCloud, WhatsApp, Kik Messenger, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Ask.FM.[116] ISIL's sophistication with social media goes beyond mere usage. The group actively employs strategies to distort its online presence, make it appear more formidable, and drown out competing messages. One such technique is organized hashtag campaigns "in which the group enlists hundreds and sometimes thousands of activists to repetitively tweet hashtags at certain times of day so that they trend on the social network."[117] This approach has been successful, for example, in outperforming hashtags associated with al-Nusra Front, even though the groups have similar numbers of online supporters.[118] It is also worth noting that much of ISIL's presence on social media comes from sharing messages posted by a comparatively small group. One study of ISIL's Twitter usage "identified the top 50 users in terms of centrality made up about 20% of the tweets."[119] When communicating via media, ISIL uses intentional multiplicity in its narratives.[120] Messages contain both harsh images (such as beheadings) and softer images (such as members smiling while holding jars of Nutella).[121] ISIL tailors its messages differently depending on its intended audience and desired outcome. This is a very systematic approach that takes local context into account.[122] Problems are presented as having come from outside the group, whereas solutions are presented as having come from inside the group. This serves to polarize support.[123] "Perhaps surprisingly, most ISIL propaganda focused on securing and expanding the State, not on attacking the West."[124] Therefore, these messages focus on battlefield effectiveness, the provision of essential services and aid, and the imposition of law and order.[125]

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[116] Freakin, T. (2014, September 2). Gateway to Radicalisation. *The Strategist, The Australian Strategic Policy Institute Blog*. Retrieved from http://www. aspistrategist.org.au/gateway-to-radicalisation; [116] Hubbard, B., & Shane, S. (2014, August 30). ISIS Displaying a Deft Command of Varied Media. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/ world/middleeast/isis-displaying-a-deft-command-of-varied-media. html

[117] Berger, J. (2014, June 16). How ISIS Games Twitter. *Atlantic*.

[118] Ibid

[119] Maher, S., Neuman, P., & Carter, J. (2014). Summary of Mr. Shiraz Maher, Dr. Peter Neuman, Mr. Joseph Carter (International Centre for the Study of Radicalization). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (p. 42). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[120] Ibid

[121] Pollack, K., & Hamid, S. (2014). Summary of Dr. Ken Pollack and Dr. Shadi Hamid (The Brookings Institution). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (p. 92). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[122] Khatib, L., & Abou Zeid, M. (2014). Summary of Dr. Lina Khatib and Dr. Mario Abou Zeid (Carnegie). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (pp. 89-91). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

[123] Ingram, H. (2014, September 16). Islamic State: Not Unique. *The Strategist, The Australian Strategic Policy Institute Blog*. Retrieved from http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/islamic-state-not-unique/?utm_source=feedly&utm_reader=feedly&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=islamic-state-not-unique

[124] Hubbard, B., & Shane, S. (2014, August 30). ISIS Displaying a Deft Command of Varied Media. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/31/ world/middleeast/isis-displaying-a-deft-command-of-varied-media. html

[125] Khatib, L., & Abou Zeid, M. (2014). Summary of Dr. Lina Khatib and Dr. Mario Abou Zeid (Carnegie). In *Multi-Method Assessment of ISIL: SME Interview Summaries Booklet* (pp. 89-91). Strategic Multilayer Assessment.

Conclusion

ISIL's dramatic battlefield successes of 2014 brought the organization to the forefront of international consciousness. Many wondered how a group that appeared to have been marginalized only a few years earlier was able to return from the brink of collapse, declare statehood, and even supplant al Qaeda as the world's dominant Islamist entity. ISIL's seemingly unimpeded ability to expand its territory and attract recruits from abroad conveys a sense of magnetism. The purpose of this assessment was to determine the origins of ISIL's charisma—real or perceived. This examination made clear that although ISIL's success is due in part to its capabilities and tangible resources, the organization's rise is primarily the result of a confluence of narratives and events—a perfect storm. Long-standing regional narratives of injustice and victimhood have calcified in the face of the Syrian Civil War and intractable sectarian strife in Iraq. ISIL, in turn, has capitalized on this widespread despair and instability to forge powerful alliances, swell its ranks, and capture sizable tracts of land. The group has used its robust media capabilities to amplify its battlefield successes, thereby allowing ISIL to posture itself as the modern-day caliphate.