The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): Combatting the Challenge of Post-Modern Islamic Terrorism

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The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL): 
Combatting the Challenge of Postmodern 
Islamic Terrorism

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I. Executive Summary

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) poses the gravest threat to regional security in the Middle East and threatens attacks against Western targets. Its rise from its preceding group, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), coincides with a hallmark of brutality and disregard for human life and rights. Rape, enslavement, genocide, murder, torture and violence against children and women are daily occurrences within the territories that ISIL controls (Amos 2014, 2). It operates within the specter of the Syrian civil war – which has resulted in the largest number of displaced persons in any current conflict, with 7.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 3.2 million refugees (Amos 2014, 2) – and the sectarian divisions rife throughout Iraq. Thus, the most violent terrorist group to date is operating within a realm beset by humanitarian deprivation, state instability and increasingly fanatical sectarian warfare. Its vision of a Caliphate ruling through an extreme interpretation of Sharia threatens the livelihood of millions of human beings and breeds irrational, fundamentalist Islamists who cannot be reasoned with or pacified. Accordingly, I address four major points in this paper to resolve the crises imposed by ISIL in Iraq and Syria.

First, I provide a history of the circumstances that caused ISIL’s creation and made its strength possible. The history of AQI, the sectarian divisions within Iraq both before and after the 2003 U.S. invasion, and the present difficulties found within Iraq illustrate how AQI found support among Sunni tribes and scored several stunning military victories against the Iraqi army in 2014. I examine the Syrian civil war’s causes and present conditions, as well as how that conflict’s fanatical nature has fostered an environment friendly to ISIL and allowed its ascension as the most powerful armed group fighting in the region. Understanding these circumstances is vital to defeating ISIL and preventing its resurgence.
Second, I examine three major instances in history where terrorism was combatted and different strategies were implemented to counter or eliminate the groups involved and the subsequent outcomes – the Irish Republican Army, The Tamil Tigers, and Hamas. I give brief histories of the conflicts, draw conclusions from each situation and offer insights on what strategies were effective and potentially useful against ISIL. Third, I offer three policy options for destroying ISIL. “Option 1” recommends minimizing our involvement to reduce civilian casualties, avoid risk to Coalition forces and focus solely on eliminating ISIL’s leadership. “Option 2” involves Coalition airstrikes against all ISIL targets, logistical support for the Iraqi armed forces, the Free Syrian Army and the Kurdish Peshmerga, as well as dissemination of battlefield intelligence to these groups. “Option 3” entails a large Coalition action that would create United Nations Safe Zones in Kurdish-controlled areas of Iraq and Syria to protect refugees and IDPs, undertake airstrikes against ISIL and provide logistical and ground support for the Peshmerga and Iraqi ground troops. It also calls for the declaration of a no-fly zone over Syria, possible strikes against Al-Assad regime targets, increased logistical and political support for Sunni Opposition troops, and forcing a political resolution to end the Syrian civil war.

Lastly, I recommend undertaking a policy that attacks the underlying issues allowing ISIL’s existence, prevents future humanitarian catastrophes in Iraq and Syria, and directly combats the group in both states. “Option 3” offers a strategy to eradicate both ISIL and the forces that make its existence possible: neighboring failed states and the schism between Sunni and Shia in Iraq. While it is the most ambitious strategy, “Option 3” stands the best chance of resolving the Syrian War, forging a federation of states in Iraq, and destroying ISIL through direct action and undermining its bases of support. ISIL and the circumstances that led to its successes occurred over a long time period; thus the remedies for destroying it and rectifying
these circumstances will also require long-term involvement and commitment if any serious effort is to be successfully made. “Option 3” is difficult and is the riskiest approach because it is the only plan that addresses the regional power balance, governmental upheaval in Iraq, and undertakes the responsibility of bringing an end to the Syrian civil war. Also, eliminating the impetus to terrorism is as crucial as dismantling and destroying ISIL. Therefore, I recommend a broad and extensive engagement in the region that ends the Syrian civil war, reconstitutes Iraq as a federation or provides clear governance and political reconciliation, humanitarian intervention, and armed action to destroy ISIL and liberate the territories that it occupies.

II. Introduction

ISIL’s egregious human rights abuses, atrocities against minorities, execution of prisoners and seizure of vast territories distinguish it from previous terrorist groups, which in the past have used violence as a means of political change and not territorial gain. In contrast, ISIL has seized territory to create a Caliphate, enacting its own version of Sharia and political Islam. Forged out of the cauldron of the Syrian civil war and the disillusionment of Sunni tribes in the northwest of Iraq, ISIL advances have caused hundreds of thousands of people to flee and subjected millions of people to its rule. Over 130,000 Syrian Kurds fled into Turkey in a scant three days due to ISIL’s activities near the Syrian city of Kobane (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2014, “Thousands of Syrian Refugees Flee” 1). Thus, ISIL and its numerous atrocities have dramatically exacerbated the refugee crisis hemorrhaging from the Syrian conflict. Further, it has dramatically affected the ever-fluid balance in the Syrian civil war by attacking both Syrian government forces and other armed groups fighting the Assad regime. ISIL has emerged as the most powerful armed group fighting in Syria. It poses a serious existential threat to the Iraqi government and the government of Iraqi Kurdistan.
ISIL emerged from the disarray of post-2003 Iraq as the remnants of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, a group founded and led by Jordanian national Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. The group was notorious for its indiscriminate suicide bombings, beheadings of prisoners and attacks against targets of sectarian significance (Hughes 2010, 168). Al-Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. airstrike in 2006, and eventually Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi assumed leadership of the group (Shadid 2010). ISIL’s entry into the Syrian civil war and seizure of territory has significantly strengthened it, along with an influx of experienced foreign fighters. Amid the chaos of the Syrian conflict and the sectarian divisions of Iraqi society, the group found itself able to seize territory spanning the two states’ borders and expanded its advance into Iraq. It defeated or caused the withdrawal of Iraqi army units defending Mosul - a city of 1.8 million people - and captured it in June 2014. ISIL also captured the 310,000 barrel-per-day producing Baiji refinery, dramatically expanding its ability to extract oil and finance its operations (The Chemical Engineer, 2014).

ISIL presents a unique challenge compared to terrorist organizations of the past. Other Islamist terrorist groups such as Somalia-based Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram in Nigeria have seized territories, managed infrastructure and attempted governance over populations, but never on the scale that ISIL has demonstrated, and never emerging victorious against well trained and equipped armed forces of a state - particularly forces equipped and trained by the U.S. military. The rout of the Iraqi Army and other subsequent defeats suffered by the Iraqi government forces, the Kurdish Peshmerga and the Assad regime demonstrate ISIL’s ability as a capable fighting force. Furthermore, ISIL’s ability to finance itself through the imposition of taxes, extraction of oil, “protection” money from businesses it threatens, and donations by Islamic charities enable it to maintain its operational capabilities and fund administrative bodies over territory it seizes.
ISIL has threatened attacks against the United States, and possesses a number of the estimated 15,000 foreign fighters that have traveled to Syria in its ranks (The White House, 2014). These European fighters pose particular concern due to their ability to return to their countries of origin and attack Western targets. These fighters are a serious threat to the national security of the United States and its allies. The conclusions of this paper provide detailed analysis of the circumstances surrounding ISIL’s expansion, countermeasures to address these circumstances, a strategy for countering ISIL both in terms of policy and direct military confrontation, and a framework for peace in the region. I also examine the histories and circumstances that allowed ISIL’s beginning and evolution into its present strength, and propose policy options to counteract these conditions so that ISIL’s appeal is compromised and its ability to find popular support is degraded. Along with an understanding of the political and ethnic tensions surrounding the Syria-Iraq region, I provide a nuanced explanation of the regional dynamics that comprise what is essentially a clashing trifecta of interests and proxy battles. These insights will help inform varied policy options, and enable policymakers to decide on a cohesive and long-term strategy for containing ISIL and its eventual elimination.

III. The Challenges

ISIL’s formation would not have been possible without years of instability and chaos within the states of Iraq and Syria. In the case of Iraq, a Shia-dominated government alienated a minority Sunni population through political marginalization and purging them from the Iraqi military, subsequently destabilizing what was already a fragile balance of powers between ethnic groups while causing disenfranchisement among Iraqi Sunnis. In Syria, the civil war has entered its third year. Large swathes of the country easily fall within the realm of a “failed state” where complete absence of central authority from the Al-Assad regime or the Syrian opposition have
resulted in a myriad of armed groups seizing areas of influence or complete control of said regions. Islamic State has emerged as the most powerful of the armed groups, even as it battles not only the Al-Assad regime but also the Syrian opposition and other armed groups operating within Syria. Its success is attributable not only to its presence in both countries but also its formidable operational capability and contingency of experienced fighters from its years as Al Qaeda in Iraq and core of ex-Baathist officers. An influx of experienced foreign fighters from Tunisia, Chechnya and Libya has also contributed to its fighting ability. Finally, its longevity is also due to its ability to exploit the populations it controls (through taxes, protection racketeering and donations) as well as oil and resource extraction.

I explore each of these three dynamics – Malaki-era Iraq, the Syrian civil war and the presence of Al Qaeda in Iraq - and their historical contribution to the current circumstances, before extrapolating upon how these dynamics caused the current situation to be an unprecedented and difficult one.

**Sectarian Tensions in Iraq Amid the Rise of Nouri Al-Maliki**

The government led by Nouri Al-Maliki came into power in 2006 - the same year that a vicious cycle of sectarian violence began, leaving thousands massacred through suicide attacks, car bombings, reprisal killings and abductions that ended in 2007. Maliki, a dissident of the Baathist regime and leader of an exiled Shia party until the U.S. invasion in 2003, initially seemed to be a force for sectarian reconciliation and political unity amid the crisis (Parker 2009, 4). Sunnis, particularly those who inhabit the majority-Sunni Anbar and Diyala Provinces, were instrumental in reversing AQI. Although previously allied with AQI due to a disdain for the Shia-majority government and grievances against the military and judicial apparatus of the Maliki government, Sunnis felt even more threatened by AQI’s strict imposition of *Sharia* law.
and its brutality towards civilians (Parker 2009, 4). There were also subtle political connotations to Sunni tribes allying themselves to the coalition: Sunnis felt threatened by the Shia-led government, whose control of Shia militias such as the Al-Sadr Army and others was questionable at best. At least 20,000 to 50,000 Sunni insurgents were battling the Maliki government and Coalition forces in 2006 according to the Coalition’s own estimates, whereas Shias comprised nearly 577,000 members of the Iraqi armed forces (Hughes 2010, 13). By switching sides and joining the fight against AQI, Sunnis hoped to win protection from the central government by drawing themselves closer to the U.S. coalition (Parker 2009, 4).

Malaki, as one might have expected, was less than keen to ally himself away from his Shia-led bloc in the south. The “shadow state” of Anbar, Diyala, Salah-ad-din and Ninawa provinces had previously enjoyed heavy patronage by Saddam Hussein, who bolstered the country’s 20 percent Sunni population while using state terror to subdue the Shia majority and Kurdish north (Hughes 2010, 4). Maliki, whose list of supporters included the Syrian and Iranian governments, was loath to cooperate with what he considered as former Baathists cooperating solely for U.S. favor. The Sunnis’ cooperation with foreign jihadist fighters – who in one estimate were responsible for nine out of ten suicide bombings since spring 2003 – did not endear the Prime Minister to unification either (Hughes 2010, 10). Over 10,000 Iraqis were killed by suicide bombers alone, enraging many moderate Sunnis and leading the Awakening movement to distance itself from jihadist groups, among them AQI (Hughes 2010, 19).

These conditions led to a shaky state held together by a farcical government supposedly designed along confessional lines, when in reality it was sustained by the presence of American and Coalition forces. Tensions between the central government and the Awakening Councils were palpable at one 2007 handover of provincial authority in Diyala (Parker 2009, 2). Several
commanders of the Awakening Councils went so far as to beg an American commander to protect them from pending arrest warrants issued from the Iraqi Government (Parker 2009, 2). Their fears were not unwarranted. Protests against arbitrary detention and imprisonment of thousands of Sunnis by the national government became commonplace in Anbar province and persisted until 2013 (Snyder 2014, 2).

Tensions became so prevalent in January 2014 that AQI began to act more aggressively, and attempted to reclaim territory in Anbar province (Snyder 2014, 2). Political reconciliation with former Baathists proved difficult, as Maliki’s prohibition on ex-Baathists’ inclusion in the 2010 elections divided Sunnis among those who wanted a unity government and others who increasingly feared Maliki represented a Shia bloc vengeful after Sunni-led Saddam-era Iraq (Yamao 2012, 16). Additionally, the Maliki government’s relationships with Kurds in the north of the country became increasingly strained once the American troops departed. This left Arabs and Kurds in mixed units and absent a powerful authority or mutual loyalty (Snyder 2014, 2). A perceived lack of transparency in the national government and the Kurdish desire for a state exacerbated tensions and alienated Kurds from the Arabs (Snyder 2014, 2). As if this was not enough, Maliki had solidified himself as a sectarian figure when Minister of Finance Rafi al-Issawi, Vice-President Tariq al-Hashemi and Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlaq were all placed under temporary house-arrest by troops and tanks led by his son, Ahmed al-Maliki (Dodge 2013, 1). Maliki had previously solidified his hold on the Iraqi Special Forces, Intelligence Services and Iraqi Army by purging officers and members not loyal to his own political party or affiliated with it, thus making the arrests politically possible (Dodge 2013, 9-11).

These combined factors led to a situation wherein AQI found itself welcomed as an
alternative to an increasingly authoritarian Maliki government, and it found support within Sunni provinces. While preserving its power base in Iraq and avoiding direct confrontation with the Maliki government, AQI had established itself and attracted fighters in another area of political instability – Syria.

**The Syrian Civil War**

The uprising against the regime of Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad began in early 2011 as a reoccurrence of the Arab Spring and a manifestation of Sunni grievances against the minority Allawite-led government. Political and administrative powers had been collectively seized by the Assad regime, which filled government positions with members of its Allawite sect (Al-Azm 2014, 2). Most of the government and senior positions within Syria’s armed forces are comprised of Allawites or other minorities, such as Christians or Druze, in a country where 60 percent of the population is Sunni (Carpenter 2013, 1-2). Political repression against the Sunni majority has occurred for decades, and sectarian tensions had risen to the breaking point by the time the Arab Spring reached Syria. The predictable response of the Al-Assad regime was a repressive and severe crackdown; peaceful protestors were arrested *en masse* or shot by snipers. Torture was widespread and numerous members of the military began to refuse orders to fire on fellow Syrians (Al-Azm 2014, 4).

As the protests and revolts became more widespread the regime engaged in wholesale slaughter and destruction of areas it could not control or compel into submission, even resorting to chemical warfare in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta (Al-Azm 2014, 5). The ferocity of the conflict and extreme violence undertaken by the regime began to be mirrored by the forces opposing it, and the conflict dissolved into all-out sectarian warfare pitting the Allawites and their minority allies against a mix of Free Syrian Army (FSA) moderate opposition forces and
numerous Al-Qaeda inspired jihadist groups, such as Al-Nusra Front – once considered the preeminent fighting contingent in Syria, until the advent of ISIL. The Syrian conflict also began to attract an increasing number of foreign jihadists, including as many as 1,000 experienced Northern Caucasian fighters who had already fought against the Soviets and considered the Assad regime to be infidels (Souleimanov 2014, p. 1). This influx also included Chechens, Dagastanis, and Libyans, and in total comprised the second-largest group of fighters next to non-Syrian Arabs. Their arrival was greeted with a mixture of enthusiasm – for their fighting prowess – and dismay for their seemingly oblivious violence towards non-combatants (Souleimanov 2014, 1).

The Assad regime continued to fight with complete disregard for civilian casualties, employing tactics such as razing entire neighborhoods or using so-called “barrel bombs” – essentially barrels packed with explosives and shrapnel – indiscriminately and with devastating effect. The Assad regime relied upon its Iranian backers, along with Iranian Special Forces and Lebanese Hezbollah fighters to bolster its ranks against the jihadist influx and flare-ups in the conflict (Al-Azm 2014, 6). As the fighting became more decentralized and reliant upon the strengths of militias for the Assad regime, so did the level of extremism among the ranks of Islamist fighters fighting against it and – increasingly – the secular Syrian opposition, which was not as well equipped or financed as many of the foreign jihadi groups. While fanatical groups such as Al-Nusra – the Al Qaeda affiliate in Syria – fought against the Assad regime, they also espoused anti-American views and are Sunni extremists (Totten 2013, 3). Fighters from across the Gulf States are driven by the perception that the Middle East has been a pawn of Western interests and post-imperialism since the inception of Israel. (Tudor 2010, 5). A merger between the Al-Nusra Front and ISIL – if it does occur – will ensure yet another civil war between these
Sunni groups and the moderate Syrian Opposition, even if Al-Assad’s forces are defeated (Brinkley 2013, 10). Further, these Sunni fighters could also return to their own states in a form of blowback, or threaten a traditional enemy on the periphery of the conflict: Israel. Al-Nusra has already shelled the Israeli-held Golan Heights and controls the territory adjacent to them (Brinkley 2013, 10).

Al-Assad himself did everything he could to make the conflict as sectarian as possible, both to bolster the claim that he is battling fanatics and to keep his internal allies (Hezbollah, Iran, Iraqi Shias and Russia) closer to him (Totten 2013, 3-4). Besides the wholesale butchery of Sunni neighborhoods through shelling and barrel bombing, Al-Assad also released thousands of jihadist prisoners from his jails as he simultaneously arrested thousands of liberal activists and political opponents (Salloum 2013, 3). And, while in 2013, analysts such as Totten believed that groups such as Al-Nusra Front were doomed due to either the Assad regime’s survival or failure, the sectarian nature of the war in 2014 makes that assertion shaky at best. The protracted conflict has only exacerbated extremism on both sides and made the Syrian Sunnis more desperate. As this coincided with the disintegration of relationships between the Iraqi Sunnis and Shias, AQI realized a power vacuum existed – one that they would fill.

**Al Qaeda in Iraq becomes The Islamic State of Iraq and The Levant**

AQI began crossing into Syria and fighting alongside the Al-Nusra Front, the officially branded Al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria in 2012. The battles against the Al-Assad regime became more fanatical, with the use of suicide bombings and an increasing number of jihadist fighters emigrating from Turkey, Chechnya and European states to participate in a struggle against what they regarded as an infidel regime (Salloum 2013, 1-3). With the influx of foreign combatants came a power struggle among the groups as to who was in charge and carried religious edict. In
the midst of this chaos, AQI branded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). They would later be known simply as Islamic State (IS). The group was reproached by Al Qaeda’s leader, Aman Al-Zawahri, for brutality and for its attempts to assert its authority over Al-Nusra Front and absorb its fighters into ISIL’s ranks (Berger 2014, 1).

As a result, ISIL formally split itself away from Al Qaeda in February 2014 (Phillips 2014, 3). It found sympathy among Iraqi Sunnis who felt disenfranchised from the Maliki-led central government, and recruited numerous Syrian fighters who saw a well-armed and organized group capable of defeating regime forces (Phillips 3-5). The group’s leader, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, projected a vision of jihadist and Sunni Arab revivalism, repeatedly invoking the group’s aim to dispose of states established by the 1918 Sykes-Picot agreement and proclaiming the formation of a Caliphate – an Islamic State with one single religious and political leader – in June 2014. This apparition appealed to many jihadists, who already harbored anti-western resentment following the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, viewed any non-adherents to Salafist Islam as infidels worthy only of conversion or death, and desired a return to “traditional” Islam (Alvi 2014, 2).

Current Circumstances and Actions Taken

ISIL has blistered across both Syria and Iraq, racking up a number of resounding military victories capturing a vast amount of territory spanning both Iraq and Syria (see Figure 1.1). As of September 12th, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency estimated IS’s strength at 31,000 fighters in both Syria and Iraq (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2014, “Islamic State Fighter Estimates Triple – CIA.”), while the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights gauged ISIL’s strength in Syria at 50,000 fighters, not including its fighters in Iraq (Al Jazeera, 2014). ISIL seized the Iraqi city
of Mosul – the country’s second-most populous at 1.8 million – in June 2014, as well as the nearby Baiji refinery, capable of producing 310,000 barrels of oil per day (The Chemical Engineer, 2014). It captured numerous munitions, artillery pieces, armored fighting vehicles and aircraft from the retreating Iraqi army.

In the wake of these astonishing advances, ISIL has committed egregious human rights abuses against religious and ethnic minorities in the areas it controls. The United Nations, in a report published by both the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq and UNHCR, accused ISIL of:

- attacks directly targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure, executions and other targeted killings of civilians, abductions, rape and other forms of sexual and physical violence perpetrated against women and children, forced recruitment of children, destruction or desecration of places of religious or cultural significance, wanton destruction and looting of property, and denial of fundamental freedoms (United Nations 2014, 1).

The report also highlighted numerous instances in which religious minorities had been targeted, their religious or cultural sites desecrated and destroyed, the execution of captured Iraqi soldiers and evidence that these attacks were of a systemic and premeditated nature (United Nations 2014, 1-2).

In light of these facts and the unraveling security situation, U.S. President Barack Obama announced on September 14, 2014 that the United States would conduct airstrikes within Syria and Iraq against ISIL targets, supported by a coalition of 36 other countries that would assist and supply groups fighting against ISIL (Eilperin and O’Keefe, 2014). He also called for Congress to authorize an additional $500 million in aid to train “The Syrian Opposition” rebels, which would presumably fight both ISIL and the Assad regime simultaneously. Meanwhile, Kurdish Peshmerga forces, Shia militias and the regular Iraqi Army have been fighting ISIL in a series of battles ranging from Fallujah to the outskirts of Mosul (see Figure 1.1).
The field of alliances, while decidedly against ISIL’s odds on paper, reflect the schisms of the international community and conflicting regional interests that prevent large-scale coordination against the group. ISIL retains the support of numerous Sunni militias in Iraq and Syria, ordinary Sunni-Iraqis opposed to the central Iraqi government, and an influx of foreign fighters seeking *jihad* and to join what they perceive as the new Caliphate. Against it are arrayed a number of state and non-state actors. The Coalition includes the Iraqi government and its armed forces (including independent Shia militias), the Kurdish *Peshmerga* (in both Iraq and Syria), France, the United Kingdom, and over three-dozen other countries including some Arab Gulf states. Meanwhile, the Al-Assad regime, Iran, Turkey, the Al-Nusra Front, the Free Syrian Army and numerous other armed groups in Syria are also hostile towards ISIL but lack coordination and hold conflicting interests.
IV. Literature Review

Combating the type of terrorism perpetrated by ISIL will be far from easy. In frank terms, ISIL and the conflicts it operates within are unprecedented in terms of difficulty and complexity, and for a variety of reasons. Unlike previous terrorist groups – save for the Somalian group Al
Shabaab (The Youth) and the Nigerian Boko Haram (translating to “western education is forbidden”) jihadists – ISIL seeks to actively control territory, and operated as both a terrorist group and a militia of sorts. Its ideological impetus stems from an archaic, extremist interpretation of Islamic Sharia law, and with it the imposition of the historic Islamic empire, the Caliphate. Thus, while ISIL operates within the confines of the failed Syrian state and the disarray of Sunni Iraq, and launches what traditionally are considered terrorist attacks (suicide bombings, asymmetrical warfare and attacks against politicians and military figures), it also operates as an armed group fighting for and administering territory. It also does so in the midst of conflicting regional powers vying for control in both Iraq and Syria. However, it can still be defined as a terrorist organization due to the extreme tactics of intimidation it commits, its emphasis of attacks upon non-combatants, and its goals of political and territorial change through the intimidation of parties removed from the conflict (Gaibulloev and Sandler, 3).

Subsequently, it is helpful to analyze how previous terrorist groups were dismantled and defeated so as to derive conceivable solutions to defeat ISIL. I will analyze three main instances in which terrorism has been defeated or combated – the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Ireland, the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, and the Palestinian organization Hamas – and draw lessons from these three case studies.

**The Irish Republican Army:**

The IRA stemmed from a resistance organization known as the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) that waged violence against the British Empire's invasion and consolidation of Northern Ireland (Hoyt 2012, p. 5.) It struggled for over 140 years, collectively against both the British Empire and Northern Irish Loyalists that opposed the disintegration of Northern Ireland and the creation of an independent Republic of Ireland (Hoyt 2012, 6-11). The IRA used
effective guerilla and insurgent-style attacks, divesting itself to the countryside and attacking isolated outposts as a means of attrition warfare (Hoyt 2012, 11). When confronted with British military forces, the IRA would instead launch even greater numbers of attacks (albeit some smaller in scale) to give the impression that the British military intervention was ineffective (Hoyt 2012, 11). The IRA experienced fits of success and defeat until 1939, when it disastrously drew both the condemnation of the Irish government and declared a new campaign against the British – nearly coinciding with the outbreak of World War II (Hoyt 2012, 8). Bombings maimed and killed civilians, resulting in condemnations from all parties and not merely the British government (Hoyt 2012, 8). This was not in itself surprising, as the group had been declared illegal by the independent government of Ireland in the 1930s and the British public faced far more lethal bombing from the Nazis in the years following 1939 (Hoyt 2012, 8-9).

Little changed and no concessions were made, even as a military stalemate was evident to both sides by the 1970s; however, the lack of a political settlement or redressing of Republican grievances meant that no solution produced itself until much later than necessary (Jorge et al 2011, p 15). The protracted conflict lasted until the early 1990s, when it finally became clear to all parties that the IRA could not defeat the British forces and that British forces would never fully eliminate the IRA (Hoyt 2012, 15). This coincided with an inclusion of Irish Republican interests in the 1998 Good Friday Agreement – Republicans stated that this was the first occasion where their political concerns were addressed and acted upon (Jorge et al 2011, 13).

The IRA officially declared that it was ending its offensive operations in 1994, leading to consolidation between Irish Republicans and Loyalists, but lingering fanatics still remained (Clubb 2014, 5). To counter the possibility that a fanatic would launch an attack, the IRA had to undergo a process of disengagement, which manifested in three critical steps – (1) disarmament,
(2) de-mobilization, and (3) reintegration, or DDR (Clubb 2014, 5). DDR campaigns reduced the risk of a continuation of conflict, provided avenues of reintegration into military or political structures, and allowed former fighters to report plots from other ex-members, thus preventing a reoccurrence of violence. The IRA formally declared its demobilization and renounced violence in 2005 (Clubb 2014, 6); however, Loyalist fighters who were loath to give up their weapons, disaffected members of the former IRA, and prominent members who went on to create splinter groups (Clubb 2014, 6-7).

The IRA’s legacy and how the conflict between Republican, Loyalist and the British ended are hardly glamorous examples of how terrorism can be resolved. Decades of insurgent-style warfare, bombings, military reprisals and thousands of civilian deaths eventually gave way to political concessions and mutual recognition. While political consolidation is hardly a method applicable to ideological fanatics such as IS fighters, undermining their support by recognizing Sunni grievances and interests in both Syria, and more pertinently Iraq, are examples of where this approach could be applied. If Sunnis were not disenfranchised by the Iraqi government they would almost certainly exchange its authority for ISIL’s brutal rule and massacres against their religious-minority neighbors. However, this phenomena – the switching of sides by Sunnis opposed to ISIL rule – would almost certainly not occur in a uniform fashion, hence the need for DDR campaigns and the long-term imposition of a peace-building process. Sunnis will need mediums for reporting radicalism to a central authority, a trust-building reconciliation that results in either disarmament or inclusion of Sunnis into the Iraqi armed forces. Reintegration into the Iraqi government – or stronger political processes that guarantee transparency – will be imperative in ensuring a successful transformation.
Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers:

The struggle waged by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) underlined an ethnic conflict with similarities to the current situation in Iraq. The indigenous Tamils, who comprised approximately 12.5 percent of the population, are of different ethnic identity, language, and religion than the majority (74.5 percent) Sinhala (Samaranayake 2007, 2). The Sinhala-speaking Sinhalese, who are of Indian descent and Buddhist, consider themselves the authentic inhabitants of the country, whereas the Tamils believe in Hinduism, speak mostly Tamil and are geographically separated from the south-western and central-dwelling Sinhalas, instead being concentrated mostly in the north and east of the country (Samaranayake 2007, 2-3). The schism between the two groups resulted in a Tamil separatist movement. Violence broke out beginning after the withdrawal of British forces and subsequent independence of Sri Lanka in 1948 (Samaranayake 2007, 2). Ethnic riots occurred in 1956, 1958, 1978 and 1983.

These only served as the impetus for the separatist movement to take action, as the 1983 riots were especially ferocious (Samaranayake 2007, 4). High levels of Tamil unemployment, disenchantment with the Sinhala government and a weak security state all contributed to the rise of the LTTE, which grew into prominence out of an initial 35 groups and a great deal of infighting (Samaranayake 2007, 4-5). The LTTE employed guerilla warfare, political assassinations, insurgent attacks, massacres against civilians and most notably suicide bombings as its operational tactics. This tactic in particular drew notoriety; LTTE was the first group to “perfect” the use of suicide vests and bombings according to the FBI (DeVotta 2009, 2). In some manners these preconditions and tactics deployed draw similarities with the situations in Syria and Iraq presented by ISIL; however, the LTTE had little ideological impulse aside from a smattering of Tamil nationalism. Its grievances stemmed largely from a sense of political
impotence and ethnic grievances against the Sinhalese. The scale of the conflict also draws less comparison to Iraq or Syria; although horrific, a total of 6,749 civilians were casualties of LTTE attacks from 1984 to 2004 (Samaranayake 2007, 8).

The resolution of the LTTE insurgency came about through a variety of external and internal factors. As with the Irish Republican Army, the paths to inclusion and peace were unglamorous, hampered repeatedly and hewn out over a long and arduous process. First, a number of external peacekeeping forces were deployed to bear in an attempt to end the conflict or draw buffer zones between the combatants. This began with the Indian Peacekeeping Force in 1987. The force’s inception derived from an agreement between the Sri Lankan government and India–LTTE was not a party to the agreement – but ultimately resulted in failure, with the force’s withdrawal in 1990 after suffering 1,200 losses (Roberts 2014, 5). A 2002 Norewigan peacekeeping delegation spearheaded the creation of a ceasefire agreement (CAF) and the deployment of a peacekeeping force, The Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM). Both the Sri Lankan Prime Minister and the LTTE leader signed the CFA, but sporadic violence still continued despite the presence of the SLMM (Roberts 2014, 5-6). Despite its initial aspirations, the CFA was repeatedly broken by the LTTE and resulted in the termination of the SLMM in 2008. The Sri Lankan government withdrew from the CFA a scant two weeks later (Roberts 2014, 5).

The third and final external intervention came about amid more attempts at political solutions. The presence of UN and NGO personnel in designated “safe areas” within the country compelled an end of hostilities in these limited areas, although they were frequently violated by both the Sri Lankan government forces and the LTTE (Roberts 2014, 6). The result was an international outcry underlining every instance in which the safe areas became death zones due
to shelling or suicide bombings, and the UN was able to pursue peace initiatives under the auspices of Right to Protect (or R2P) doctrine. Subsequently, the UN took humanitarian crises and civilian deaths as much more serious violations than it had before the adoption of the R2P doctrine in 2005 (Roberts 2014, 6-7). However, an international presence of UN and NGO personnel was not enough to stop the conflict.

The unraveling of the LTTE occurred for a number of reasons. First, it attracted international condemnation through its use of suicide attacks and high-profile political assassinations (DeVotta 2009, 21). The group was responsible for the assassination of the Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, and engaged in money-laundering, financial fraud and human trafficking within numerous states, leading thirty countries to label it a terrorist organization by the end of 2001 (DeVotta 2009, 21). Second, the group supported a nationalist presidential candidate, Mahinda Rajapaksa, who in turn had no qualms over resolving the conflict through pure military force rather political concessions or a distributive system of power. Third, and perhaps most fatally, it underwent internal fissures that doomed its capability as both a political and military threat (DeVotta 2009, 21-22). The Sri Lankan military, at the behest of Rajapaska, finally seized control of the entire country in May 2009, leading to the LTTE’s surrender.

What can be learned from the LTTE example? External intervention is sometimes ineffective despite the best intentions, and that the creation of “safe zones” is not a guarantee that the areas will be a sanctuary for civilians or act as effective buffers between warring parties. Another observation to be made is that the creation of safe zones made the conflict international, with nations paying attention and popular outcry following every violation of these safe havens. One route to defeating ISIL lies in securing the Syrian state as prerequisite to uniting both the
Al-Assad regime and the Free Syrian Army against their common existential enemy. A method of accomplishing a small manner of cooperation would be the establishment of humanitarian corridors to be controlled or policed by a neutral third party or UN detachment, such as the case with the UN mission to the Balkans. However, as was the case in the Balkan conflict and above demonstrated in the LTTE insurgency, such safe zones can be easily compromised and exacerbate rather than mitigate the conflict.

Military defeat and international ire were the main components to defeating the LTTE and ensuring its final demise. However, these options are not immediately available for use against ISIL, nor would they necessarily be effective if employed against it. The LTTE never posed much more than an internal threat to the Sinhala population. While it carried out the assassination of a prominent foreign political leader, it did not have territorial ambitions beyond Sri Lanka itself. Nor did it attract numerous foreign fighters to its cause, massacre thousands of prisoners and civilians or threaten the regional balance of powers, as ISIL has done and seems poised to do if it remains unchecked. Moreover, the LTTE did not carry a significant ideological or religious impetus as part of its appeal; its struggle was purely political and ethnic. The failures of external peacemakers to solve the LTTE crisis should be observed as possible lessons or cautionary notes for external action in areas controlled by ISIL.

**Israel and Hamas:**

Hamas’s origins stem from the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (*Harakat the Mouqawama of Islamiyya*), as an offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Cepoi 2013, 4). Hamas emerged from this organization as an armed militant group combating the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip during the *Intifida* (Cepoi 2013, 4). However, this was not the original composition of Hamas. Its initial charter declared itself as the Palestinian branch of the
Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and derived its authority from Islamic principles of law. It proclaimed that *Jihad* was a struggle every Muslim should seek, even to death, particularly in instances where Muslim lands were occupied (Cepoi 2013, 5). Hamas benefited from numerous charities, social organizations and schools the Muslim Brotherhood had established in Israel prior to its inception (Cepoi 2013, 5).

While founded on militaristic Islamist concepts, Hamas became an authoritative movement when a right-wing Israeli political coalition rose and continued oppressing the *Intifada* in 1989. The group called for the destruction of Israel, liberation of Palestinian lands, and combined principles of Islamism with a populist movement emerging from the suffering Palestinians endured.

Israel confronted Hamas in a particularly heavy-handed manner, sealing off access to the West Bank in 2004 in the aftermath of the 2000 Second *Intifidah*. In the preceding three years, 867 Israeli deaths were attributed to terrorism perpetrated by Hamas and other Islamist militancy groups (Byman 2012, 1). These attacks involved shootings, suicide bombings, and cross-border fire from the Gaza Strip. Following the death of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, Hamas won 74 out of 132 seats in the 2005 Legislative Council elections for the Palestinian Authority, compared to Fatah’s 45 (Rolston 2014, 5-6). The Islamic tenants of Hamas stood in contrast with Mahmoud Abbas’s nationalist Fatah movement, which was confined to the occupied West Bank following the 2005 elections. Thus, Hamas formally seized control of the Gaza Strip in 2006 (Marshall 2014, 2). The Gaza War of 2008-2009 caused significant damage to the Gaza Strip, with much of it demolished (Marshall 2014, 3). However, Israel was unable to wrest Hamas from the Gaza Strip, and it remained in control of the entire territory. Israel’s unilateral ceasefire was followed by a strict embargo on most goods crossing into the Gaza Strip. A double fence,
concrete barrier, numerous guard towers and a naval blockade cordon the entire Gaza Strip, allowing Israel to control all economic and personal movement in and out of the area (Al-Haq 2014, 4).

Cross border rocket-fire by Hamas in retaliation for the murder of a Palestinian teenager by Jewish radicals resulted in Israel launching Operation Protective Edge in July 2004 (Sprusansky 2014, 4). This war involved heavy bombing and shelling by Israel, including a limited ground invasion, resulting in 73 Israeli and in excess of 2,100 Palestinian deaths (British Broadcasting Corporation 2014, “Gaza Crisis.”). Despite the conflict, Hamas still remains more popular than Fatah because of the popular perception that it “stands up” to Israel, rather than engaging in political negotiations (Marshall 2014, 3).

What can be learned from the Israeli and Hamas conflict? First, that unlike ISSL, Hamas has civilian and political interests at stake that Israel can leverage and negotiate with (Vick 2014, 1). Secondly, that direct armed conflict without redressing of political or social grievances only protracts conflict rather than ending it. Israel possesses the best equipped and supplied military in the Middle East, has blockaded Hamas’s area of control for years, invaded the Gaza Strip twice in the last decade, and still has not defeated the group. Budget considerations of the Israeli Defense Force aside, pure military action against Hamas has only backfired on Israel, resulting in Hamas’s increased popularity among Palestinians in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. Therefore, we can conclude that even protracted and heavy military action alone will not eradicate a terrorist group that enjoys popular support among the population it originates from. Political negotiations and ideological warfare must also be considered in any long-term effort to address the causes of terrorism. While direct political negotiations with ISIL extremists are unlikely to be successful, attempts at redressing Sunni tribal grievances in Iraq may succeed if
the new Iraqi government can either grant more local autonomy or govern in a more inclusive fashion.

V. Proposed Responses

Option 1: Minimalist Approach – no boots on the ground; support existing allies financially and logistically; conduct “targeted strikes” against ISIL leadership

The Policy: Direct American involvement in the Middle East has only resulted in protracting conflicts without addressing the causes behind them, while incurring American casualties and extremely expensive operations. The chaos of the Syrian civil war or the schisms within Iraqi politics are issues that cannot be resolved by external forces. This policy recommends an absence of large-scale airstrikes and advocates instead for as small a footprint as possible for the U.S. coalition. Coalition countries would support Peshmerga, Iraqi Army and FSA forces against ISIL through financial contributions and the provision of weapons and supplies. Bankrolling these armed forces will allow them to purchase the equipment they need and pay their fighters. Additionally, it gives them the latitude needed to bribe or buy local tribes’ loyalty if needed, as is common practice in Sunni tribal areas and has been done by ISIL. The United States and its coalition would also support commanders and armed forces through intelligence-gathering and sharing, political backing, and granting international legitimacy to their efforts and gains. The use of drones to gather intelligence is already being conducted by the United States within Syria, and drones are also able to provide real-time battlefield intelligence for ground forces (Entous, Barnes, Nissenbaum, 2014, 1). Armed action would only be undertaken through precision airstrikes or drone attacks against ISIL leadership targets or clearly identified convoys. The goal of this strategy is to minimize civilian casualties caused by Coalition involvement and avoid repeating shock-and-awe tactics that may have been militarily effective but vaporized popular
support for Western forces.

This policy offers two main strengths. First, it abstains from Coalition airstrikes that could potentially kill civilians and turn local ire against the West and bolster support for anti-Western groups, such as ISIL. Second, it keeps a large-scale deployment of U.S. and Coalition forces out of the region. This avoids the possibility of Coalition casualties and instead places the onus of ground fighting on the indigenous forces that will control the territory they seize. Shared intelligence centers would be instituted between the Coalition and the Baghdad government in Baghdad, while similar centers would be established in the Kurdish city of Erbil. Meanwhile, the Coalition can still contribute to the cause through supporting the different groups with arms, supplies and financial backing, while avoiding the entanglements that airstrikes or deployment of ground forces would entail. This strategy allows the Coalition to focus on eliminating the leadership of ISIL while the regional ground forces take ownership of the fight – a fight for territory that they will eventually control.

Option 2: Proxy Warfare and Coalition Airstrikes - advise and support Kurdish, FSA and Iraqi ground forces

The Policy: This policy recommends attacking ISIL through Coalition-led airstrikes while simultaneously lending logistical, training and field-advising support to regional ground forces. Coalition airstrikes will degrade ISIL capability by attacking field positions, convoys, logistical centers, communication lines and individual ISIL leaders, while regional ground forces advance and roll back ISIL militants and reclaim lost territory. Coalition forces will also provide training and weaponry to our allies in the region that oppose ISIL and the Al-Assad regime. In Iraq this involves directly supporting the Iraqi-Kurdish Peshmerga and the regular Iraqi Army (currently Shia-dominated), while in Syria it entails aiding Syrian Kurds and the overwhelmingly Sunni –
This approach strengthens the moderate FSA, bolsters the Iraqi Army and Kurdish
_Peshmerga_ and provides a roadmap for the retaking and rehabilitation of ISIL-controlled areas in
Iraq and Syria. While it involves increased Coalition involvement, it minimizes risks to Coalition
personnel and still gives the responsibility of ground fighting to the forces that will eventually
control the territory. Coalition airstrikes will attack targets outside of regional ground forces’
reach and provide local air superiority when the ground forces are engaged. The CIA has
indicated that a sustained bombing campaign would require ground-level spies in order to
facilitate accurate strikes; therefore a substantial covert presence will be essential in order to
ensure successful attacks (Stein 2014, 2). These combined factors will prove decisive in battles
where logistical support and the ability to bring up reinforcements for protracted conflicts are
essential.

It also allows regional Coalition members to play a wider role in the effort, as they can
provide host cites for training moderate Syrian rebels and bases for airstrikes against ISIL. They
would also be able to financially and logistically support elements fighting ISIL and other
extremist groups while keeping their own armed forces safe, avoiding a “boots on the ground”
strategy. This is largely the policy being conducted now by the Obama administration. However,
airstrikes alone along with training support may not prove sufficient to destroy ISIL (Stansfield
2014, 11).

**Option 3: Direct Action and Détente in Iraq and Syria – airstrikes against Assad to force a
détente and political resolution to the Syrian Civil War, establishment of UN Safe Zones
within Kurdish territories, and an all-of-the-above military strategy against ISIL**

**The Policy:** Destroying ISIL cannot be accomplished so long as the Syrian civil war continues
and areas of the country lay outside of control of either the Assad government or the Free Syrian Army. The humanitarian crisis is a concern as well. Refugee camps are often ideal breeding grounds for extremism, such as they were for the Taliban when Afghan refugees fled to camps in Pakistan during the Soviet-Afghan conflict. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 3.2 million refugees had fled from Syria by November 2014 (Amos 2014, 2). The possibility that these refugees could be radicalized by the brutality they have witnessed should not be ignored. Therefore political, humanitarian and Machiavellian concerns call for an intervention to end the Syrian civil war before more radicalization occurs.

We should well consider the Balkans conflict of the 1990s, wherein NATO airstrikes played a crucial role in causing Slobodan Milosevic to assert more authority over Serbian groups and generals and helped bring an end to the conflict at the Dayton Accords. In the case of Syria, the “Right to Protect” protocol should be invoked and Coalition airstrikes should bomb Syrian targets that are instrumental to their war effort. The targets of this bombing would include munitions dumps, airfields, artillery units shelling innocent civilians in cordoned-off cities, and critical military infrastructure such as command and control centers. These airstrikes should be undertaken with a mind towards saving lives and weakening – not destroying - the Syrian armed forces, as the ultimate aim of the strikes is to force Al-Assad to the negotiating table with the Syrian Opposition and mete out a peace deal. Weakening Al-Assad too much could upset the regional balance of power and cause regime areas to be overrun by ISIL and other jihadist groups.

The former United Kingdom Chief of Defense, General Sir David Richards was quoted as saying “air power alone will not win a campaign like this…You have to put your own boots on the ground at some point or else you have to very energetically and aggressively train up those
who will do that for us and with us” (Stansfield 2014, 13). Accordingly, an all-encompassing approach is required to put a permanent end to this conflict. Intelligence gathering and airstrikes will be helpful but not decisive methods of achieving victory.

This policy proposes the creation of United Nations Safe Zones (UNSZs) within Kurdish-controlled areas of Syria and Iraq, along with both Kurdish and FSA border corridors of both Iraq and Turkey once these areas are firmly controlled by the forces concerned. Specific cities and sites would include Kirkuk and Erbil in Iraq, and Hassakeh and northwest of Aleppo in Syria (see Figure 1.1). These UNSZs would be created and maintained in the style of the safe zones that were implemented in the Balkans Conflict and the LTTE Conflict, with Coalition air support and UN or Coalition troops securing the areas in conjunction with Peshmerga ground forces. Steps such as DDR campaigns would help reintegrate Sunnis into a new Iraqi civil society and provide a bulwark against new insurgencies in Sunni tribal areas. Meanwhile, Peshmerga forces would be expected to conduct the bulk of frontline fighting against ISIL, while Coalition forces would provide territorial security, artillery and airstrike support as needed – all while mediating between the Sunni tribes and the new Iraqi government.

In Syria, these combined actions would bring a temporary halt to the refugee crisis. Furthermore, this process would hasten the process of negotiations between the Assad regime and the Syrian opposition, as both elements would be subjected to further international scrutiny amid the presence of UN personnel. Jihadist elements would be attacked and rooted out from within the UNSZs by Coalition airstrikes and Peshmerga forces working in conjunction with U.S. ground advisors.

This development is designed to cause ISIL to react in one of two ways – either intensify their attacks against the newly-created UNSZs and Peshmerga-controlled areas, or retreat from...
these areas and focus its fighting against the Assad and Free Syrian Army forces. If the first case were to occur, superior Coalition and UN forces would be able to destroy ISIL troops, which would then be forced into an insurgency or hit-and-fade style of warfare. If the latter were to occur, both the Syrian Opposition and the Assad regime would face increased pressure as they would be bearing the brunt of ISIL and jihadist attacks, and both sides would be further compelled to end the war and accept a political solution. Whether this resulted in power-sharing or the splitting-up of Syria into different states (balkanization) would have to be determined during direct negotiations between the Assad government and the Syrian Opposition.

In either case, securing borders and defining state boundaries would be of foremost importance to both sides. A successful political outcome would allow both the opposition forces and the Assad regime to fight against their common enemy: ISIL, Al-Nusra Front, and other jihadist groups fighting in the country. ISIL would find itself caught between the UNSZs and the united forces of the Syrian Opposition and the Assad government, and likely be annihilated. Such an agreement would also curtail ISIL’s ability to control border crossings with Turkey and Iraq that are not under Kurdish control, and deprive ISIL of the benefits it enjoys by controlling these crossings.

Forcing a political solution would require Western powers to actively force equilibrium between Assad’s forces and the Free Syrian Army, thus compelling Assad to undertake negotiations. While it is unlikely that Assad will give up the Presidency of his own state, it is possible that he will grant control of local or regional areas to opposition forces. If the outcome of political negotiations is balkanization – the creation of separate states for pro-Assad areas and opposition territories – Assad would likely remain as head of state for the area of regime control. In either case, the Syrian opposition and the Assad regime would still have to contend with areas
of Syria held by the Al-Nusra Front and ISIL. Fanatical Salifist and Islamist groups are a common enemy of both the Allawites and the “moderate” Sunni-majority opposition; thus both they and the Kurdish forces would be free to concentrate their combined capabilities against jihadist-controlled territories in Syria. This option offers a more permanent solution to the problem – the ability of jihadist groups, such as ISIL, to fester in conflict areas and the ending of the increasingly fanatical and destructive Syrian civil war. It also addresses the issue of failed-state areas that have been controlled by ISIL and other jihadist groups, such as Al Nusra. It also preserves the fragile balance of powers between Sunni and Shiite in the broader Middle East; Iran will not lose its client state (Assad-controlled Syria) while Hezbollah will retain the protection of its-cross border ally. All neighboring states will benefit from the resolution of the conflict and the refugee crisis may be abated.

VI. Getting Started – Option 3

“Option 1”’s weakness is a result of its crafting – a minimalist approach is likely to have a minimal effect upon events and the course of the conflict. Regional forces are liable to pursue their own intentions rather than the interests of the Coalition or resolution of the conflicts. Minimal interference by the Coalition risks ISIL continuing its advances and solidifying its control over the territory it holds, committing more massacres and building strength. It is true U.S. airstrikes proved extremely effective when conducted in coordination with Northern Alliance troops in Afghanistan, with the assistance of CIA operatives on the ground (O’Hanlon 2014, 2). However, this limited engagement will not solve the problem of unit cohesion in the Iraqi Army, or allow political redress of Iraqi Sunni grievances, nor will it force an end to the Syrian civil war.

“Option 2” calls for a stronger and more sustained response but also has its own risks. Any
instance of aerial bombing or missile strikes carries the danger that civilians will be inadvertently killed or caught in the midst of ISIL positions or convoys. ISIL has adapted to Coalition airstrikes by spreading itself within heavily populated civilian areas and avoiding travel via large convoys; therefore the risk that civilians will be harmed by airstrikes is increased. Misguided airstrikes that kill civilians will inevitably outrage the population, an outcome that would strengthen ISIL and play into its hands (Stein 2014, 3). Providing weaponry and ammunition to Syrian opposition and Iraqi ground forces may result in their capture by opposing forces. The full-scale retreat of the Iraqi army during ISIL’s first offensives resulted in huge amounts of equipment being captured and reused by ISIL. This scenario cannot be repeated. Simultaneously, it is difficult to determine what elements of the Syrian opposition are “moderate” and will not engage in extremism or war crimes if they retake territory held by the Assad regime. Such war crimes would involve culpability of the Coalition forces that supplied these groups.

According to Daniel Benjamin of the Brookings Institution, a Washington-based think-tank, striking ISIL with only airstrikes will not solve the problem of terrorism (Benjamin 2014, 2); a more overarching strategy is required to address the crisis ISIL poses. Michael O’Hanlon of the Council on Foreign Relations calls for a force of 1,000 to 5,000 U.S. troops to be embedded within “indigenous” forces inside Iraq (O’Hanlon 2014, 3). These would serve as “advisors” to conduct training in the field, call in tactical airstrikes against ISIL positions, improve cohesion of Iraqi units, and establish a Coalition presence on the ground (O’Hanlon 2014, 3).

“Option 3” requires heavy involvement from the Coalition or a UN force and is unlikely to have public or international backing. Both the Syrian and Iraqi Kurds would have to agree to the implementation of UNSZs and the negotiations would likely be tedious and result in many false starts before a resolution of differences could be achieved. Ethnic cleansing – already a brutal
aspect of the Syrian civil war – could become more pronounced if balkanization were to occur.

Furthermore, the question of a Kurdish state would undoubtedly arise, and pose difficult questions for the relevant countries that would be affected – Iraq, Syria and Turkey. Turkey has historically been opposed to any idea of a Kurdish state (especially one in which Turkey cedes territory), while the question of Kurdish autonomy in Syria is largely unknown. Iraqi Kurdistan already enjoys regional autonomy from the central government in Baghdad. At larger question would be the position of the combined *Peshmerga* forces should they force a defeat of ISIL and accept the idea of UNSZs within their territory. The creation of a Kurdish state would almost certainly be advocated for by many in the Kurdish community (Stein 2014, 4), causing instability in Turkey, Iraq and post-war Syria.

*ISIL’s ascension was made possible by the existence of two failed states fighting pitched battles along Islamic sectarian divides. These conflicts have heightened extremism in the area and proven conducive for ISIL’s appeal among many of its fighters and to prospective recruits (Stansfield 2014, 4). Accordingly, while eliminating ISIL as a terrorist group is the underlying objective, resolving these conflicts is the only path of ensuring the impetus to terrorism is defused permanently. In other words, it requires the Syrian civil war’s resolution and the creation of either a politically stable Iraq or a federation of states in Iraq – states that ensure that Kurdish, Sunni and Shiite interests are represented equally. Sunni Iraq was peaceful following the Awakening, when Sunni militias allied themselves to the American forces and were hostile towards AQI.*

Destroying ISIL requires a recognition of it as both a terrorist and militia group, and choosing a strategy that best addresses the underlying and long-term causes of its development. “Option 3” is the most thorough approach and answers the humanitarian catastrophe, political
tensions, failed-state situations and regional challenges. It is a far-reaching and ambitious strategy, but it has the best chance of destroying ISIL and its capacity to reconstitute itself. Denying ISIL safe haven in both Iraq and Syria is not an impossible goal in “Option 3”.

“Option 3” best addresses what is in essence a two-part problem: the conflicts in both Syria and Iraq and the regional powers perpetuating them. This involves both combating terrorism and pursuing effective foreign policies that resolve the states’ interests at hand. I will now address these in sequence: Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, the Assad Regime, the Syrian Opposition and the regional Kurds.

Turkey has indicated it will not pursue action against ISIL without actions being taken against the Assad regime by the Coalition (Christie-Miller, 1). This was especially evident during the battle for Kobane and Turkey’s unwillingness to aid the Syrian Kurds. Once allies of Syria, Turkey has been overwhelmed by the influx of over 400,000 Syrian refugees into its borders (UNHCR 2013, 2) and incurred $800 million in costs as of May 2013. Estimates by the UNHCR show that the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey alone would reach a million by the end of 2014 (UNHCR 2013, 2). Subsequently, Turkey has both a practical and a political interest in resolving the Syrian civil war. Turkey will likely endorse the idea of UNSZs outside its borders in order to relieve the strain on its own refugee camps and services. However, Turkey will strongly object to any autonomy of Kurdish territories within Syria due to the conflicts it has held with the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). Turkey fought an insurgency led by the PKK from 1983 to 2013, resulting in 40,000 deaths (Celebi et al 2014, 1), and would be unwilling to aid in the creation of a Kurdish state.

Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the majority of Gulf States may regard the Coalition with suspicion, and voice their own concerns over regional stability. While it is true that ISIL poses a
serious threat to the ruling regimes of these countries, many of them view Iran as a greater threat than ISIL. They would want reassurances that a stronger Iraq would not prove a stronger ally to Shia Iran. They are also concerned with the possibility of radicalized fighters from their countries returning and conducting terrorist attacks against their own citizens.

Lebanon’s response would be more intriguing and dangerous, as the country has already absorbed a refugee influx that accounts for nearly 20 percent of its overall population. In addition, Lebanon already balances a difficult sectarian divide between Sunnis who want to fight against Al-Assad and the terrorist organization Hezbollah, whose fighters proved instrumental in bolstering Al-Assad in a number of battles. Backdoor diplomacy and additional aid would be required to keep the status quo and prevent a breakout of sectarian conflicts. The Lebanese government in particular would need to be convinced that they would benefit by allowing tacit approval of the Coalition action – putting a temporary halt to the refugee crisis and attempting to bring about an end to the Syrian civil war would legitimately be in its best interest.

Iran would likely welcome any action taken against ISIL by the United States and its Coalition, but would be extremely concerned by the idea of the Assad regime collapsing. The goal of bringing about peace to Syria while maintaining Allawite and Shia power bases in the country would be their primary goal. The destruction of ISIL would be a step towards this goal; however, Al-Assad would likely have to step down as leader of either a re-integrated Syria or enjoy a much weakened Syrian Allawite state if the country was divided in a peace deal. Iran would find either scenario galling, as Al-Assad has been their long-time client and ally. However, working with Coalition forces may well help Iran gain regional influence and re-enter the international community as it continues to negotiate over its nuclear program.

VII. Conclusion
ISIL’s success is attributable to a combination of multiple factors: its appeal to marginalized Iraqi Sunnis, its fighting prowess against other forces battling in the Syrian civil war, its ideological appeal to fundamentalist Salafist Muslims and its past military victories. It operates with impunity due to the failed-state status of northern Syria and western Iraq. Dislodging ISIL from its territories will require sustained, prolonged action conducted by regional actors supported by Coalition forces with intelligence, logistical support, training and political mediation. It will also require long-term thinking on the part of both regional and international powers as to how terrorism can be recognized pre-emptively, and question when protracted civil conflicts should be forced to an end by external forces to prevent terrorism or extremism from developing within failed states. The international community has remained gridlocked on the question of the Syrian civil war for over three years, despite the brutality of the conflict and the incredible difficulties placed on neighboring states by the mass exodus of Syrian refugees.

Addressing and forcing an end to the Syrian civil war is therefore integral not only to defeating ISIL but to ensuring regional stability. While the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has been rendered incapable of action by Russian vetoes, a UNSC-approved action would not necessarily be required in order to bring about sufficient change in Syria. Russia has largely played its hand and ignored international sentiment through its seizure of the Crimea and its involvement in the Ukrainian Conflict; as such, it has little legitimacy to denounce foreign intervention in Syria.

Terrorism is an issue that has persisted for decades, and in the case of the IRA, the conflict between it and the United Kingdom lasted nearly 140 years. Terrorism is nothing new to the Middle East, yet the threat that ISIL carries is both real and a radical departure from past terrorist
groups. Addressing new challenges requires trying original solutions, while incorporating the lessons of the past. In the literature review of this essay, I discussed how DDR campaigns proved effective following the disbandment of the IRA, massive military action against Hamas proved costly and ultimately ineffective, and the protracted struggle against the LTTE combined with international mediation, the creation of safe-zones, and a multilateral presence finally culminated in a bloody end to the Tamil Tigers. Elements of success can be found in all three of these instances. Massive military engagement is needed in order to bring about an end to the Syrian civil war, reestablish local and regional balances and combat ISIL directly, while international mediation is needed to ensure a ceasefire or peace process between the Assad regime and the Syrian Opposition. Implementation of DDR campaigns in both Iraq and Syria stand a chance of helping reintegrate disillusioned Sunnis into a new nationalist Iraqi identity and aid security forces in their fight against extremism.

Perhaps the most daunting aspect of the conflict ISIL is its location: as we have discussed before, ending the Syrian civil war is an almost certain prerequisite to eradicating ISIL. This may prove more challenging on a multilateral and international level rather than directly confronting ISIL in a “boots on the ground” scenario. However, the international community has overlooked the Syrian civil war and its horrors for the past three years, and ISIL is one of the consequences of following this naïve approach. Eliminating failed-state situations and fanatical, inter-Islamic sectarian warfare is imperative to depriving ISIL of its extremist message and basis for support by desperate Sunnis. Once the international community recognizes and addresses this reality, it will be in a much better position to deprive ISIL of its safe haven in Syria.

Resolving Iraq’s internal differences and political tensions will require equal effort. Sunni support must be won back, in a process that will require time and genuine goodwill by the new
Iraqi government. Granting local autonomy or instituting a quota or confessional system of government akin to Lebanon’s system may help smooth over sectarian differences, and convince Sunnis that membership in a united Iraq better serves their interests rather than aligning with the likes of ISIL. Resolving the inadequacies of Sykes-Picot and the practices of patronage the West has pursued, in the eyes of many, may well be the key to crippling anti-Western sentiment in the area, and depriving ISIL of another argument in its ideological appeal. The creation of new nation-states has never been easy – but the existence of arbitrary states with fundamental, irreversible differences has proven to be difficult also. In combating and destroying ISIL, new countries may emerge that will enforce security and stability in the region in ways current states cannot. The path that the United States and its Coalition take will decide the fate of the region – and whether it suffers from the blight of terrorism – for decades to come, just as western powers once divided the region up for their own interests nearly a century ago. This time, however, the West should act with both its and the inhabitants’ interests at heart – the destruction of ISIL and the creation of states and governments that best represent the nations and tribes present.
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This work complies with the JMU Honor Code.

Signed (digitally),

Colin MacGregor Bowie
December 5th, 2014