Beating the Islamic State

Selecting a New Strategy for Iraq and Syria

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Preface

This report presents findings and recommendations intended to help the U.S. government revise its strategy to defeat the Islamic State, a hybrid insurgent-terrorist group that, as of mid-2016, controls considerable territory in Iraq and Syria and that claims over 30 global affiliates. This report presents research derived from a series of workshops and subject-matter expert elicitations on how to defeat the Islamic State in the heart of its so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Research for this report was undertaken for the Office of the Secretary of Defense under RAND's Center for International Security and Defense Policy. The research began in January 2016 and was completed in August 2016.

RAND conducted this research in accordance with all applicable Department of Defense protocols for human subject protection, including Department of Defense Instruction 3216.02, *Protection of Human Subjects and Adherence to Ethical Standards in DoD-Supported Research*. The anonymized opinions and information provided by individuals for this research do not necessarily reflect official policies or positions of the RAND Corporation, the U.S. government, the Department of Defense, or the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

This research was sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community.

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Summary

As of late 2016, the U.S.-led coalition and the Iraqi Army was seeing progress in the fight to push the Islamic State (IS) out of Iraq, but at the same time, the group continued to plan and conduct international terror attacks. While losing ground in such places as Sirte, Libya, IS retains control of the core terrain of its so-called caliphate in Syria. IS continues to inspire young men and women around the world to conduct spontaneous acts of violence, unsettling Western democracies and threatening American national security. New options are needed to defeat IS, stabilize the Middle East, and reestablish a sense of domestic security in the United States and Europe. To that end, this report presents findings from research on the strategy to counter IS. It offers three options for a new strategic design and recommends a long-term approach that seeks to defeat IS by establishing legitimate governance in Iraq and Syria. Success against IS can best be achieved by removing the political, social, and physical space that it needs to survive. There is little hope for immediate resolution of this complex problem or for the rapid emergence of good governance in Iraq or Syria; this strategy will necessarily entail a long-term commitment to both countries.

IS is a hybrid insurgent and terrorist group that, as of mid-2016, controlled significant territory in Iraq and Syria. It also has global reach, with affiliates and close connections to extremist groups in over 40 countries. But the group's capital is in Syria; it places great religious significance on territory in Syria; and its origins and leaders are primarily Iraqi. Current U.S.-led military operations seek to defeat IS in both Iraq and Syria, while U.S.-led counterterror operations seek to destroy IS worldwide. As of late 2016, the U.S. military strategy to defeat IS centered on providing aerial and training support to proxy force ground campaigns.

There has been considerable criticism of the strategy to collectively degrade, defeat, and destroy IS, much of it focused on the impracticality of these objectives, disunity of strategic command, and the failure to address underlying issues. Focus on short-term, tactical gain has come at the expense of addressing the political, social, and economic conditions that allowed IS to emerge—or, more accurately, reemerge from at least three previous incarnations—and thrive in Iraq and Syria. A new moderate long-term strategy focused on gradually, patiently addressing root causes will help stabilize the heart of the Middle East and reduce future unrest. Any new strategy that fails to pursue long-term resolution of root causes will have to recognize the likelihood of continuing instability; the periodic recurrence of destabilizing, large-scale social violence; and the continual reemergence of international terror groups, such as IS.

While there is limited opportunity to adjust course in 2016 or early 2017, the next U.S. administration can and should direct the National Security Council to conduct a bottom-up review of the counter-IS strategy. Findings and recommendations in this report are intended to inform that review and to help improve strategic design. They focus on addressing IS in Iraq and Syria, the core of the so-called IS caliphate, with the understanding that global activities

against IS emirates in such places as Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan, and elsewhere must also be addressed. If the recommended strategy in this report is accepted and applied, IS emirates outside Iraq and Syria will likely either wither or change allegiance as the so-called caliphate collapses.

Key Findings

These findings are derived from a literature review, discussions and interviews with U.S. officials and key figures in the Middle East and from subject-matter expert elicitation workshops.

The Strategy to Defeat and Destroy IS Needs a Bottom-Up Review and Revision

Each expert opinion we reviewed, in literature and in workshops, reflected a nearly idiosyncratic perspective on the problem. Some experts argued for a version of containment, others for tactical destruction of IS, and others for a lengthier approach to address such challenges as political and social disenfranchisement. No two experts saw the problem the same way, and each expert criticized the current strategy through a unique lens. Nongovernmental experts were, however, nearly unanimous about the lack of clarity and effectiveness of the current strategy. The resulting impression is that the community of experts—including government officials and senior policy analysts in the United States, Europe, Iraq, and Syria—has not settled on the most effective way to defeat IS.

The U.S. administration that assumes office in 2017 should direct the National Security Council to lead a full-scope, bottom-up review of the strategy to counter IS. This review should address specific issues with the current strategy, including a lack of internal consistency in objectives, poorly defined objectives, and a narrow focus on defeating and destroying IS with insufficient emphasis on changing the conditions that allow such groups to exist and thrive. The last point speaks directly to the issue of root causes.

Root Causes Can Be Bypassed or Suppressed, But Doing So Ensures Lasting Instability

As of mid-2016, both the U.S. military and the broader U.S. government were arguing that, as a rule, insurgency cannot be defeated without examining and addressing root causes. This argument is fully supported by the literature on irregular war, and particularly on counterinsurgency, which makes a strong claim that instability and violence will outlast the survival of individual armed groups, such as IS, if root causes are not addressed. As retired U.S. Army GEN David H. Petraeus once said, "You don't kill or capture your way out of an industrial-strength insurgency" (Bailey, 2011). This presents a significant challenge to U.S. policymakers. There is little appetite for the kind of effort it would take to address root causes in Iraq and Syria, but IS and regional instability present real and growing threats to U.S. national security. As a result, the current strategy to defeat IS reflects a muddled middle-ground approach that does not truly reflect U.S. understanding of irregular war.

The U.S. military describes root causes as deep, often enduring and widespread socioeconomic issues that set conditions for the growth of violent armed groups and the popular support for, or acquiescence to, these groups.[1] In all likelihood, a definitive and broadly agreed on understanding of root causes in Iraq and Syria will probably never emerge. Absent some kind

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[1]   This is an aggregated description from multiple sources. See Chapter Two for additional details.

of empirical, unitary causal understanding of IS, all interpretations of the root causes of social violence are subjective. Yet it is still necessary to pursue a better understanding of the factors that lead to violence so they may be addressed. This research centered on the two most prominent root cause theories to explain IS: (1) that the primary root cause of instability in Iraq and Syria is ethnosectarian discord: violence reflects a "sorting out" of longstanding intergroup grievances and (2) that the root cause of IS is Sunni Arab disenfranchisement in Iraq and Syria. Clearly, in either case, the widespread failure of governance across the Middle East has profoundly affected the rise and acceptance of IS. This report accepts that ethnosectarian divisions reflect and influence discontent and violence but argues that the deeper cause of the primarily Sunni Arab violence *in Iraq and Syria* is disenfranchisement from the central government and from the protections it should, by law, extend to the entire population of Syria and Iraq.

Debate over what do to about this disenfranchisement is ongoing. Some experts suggest that attempts to address it are too ambitious and costly, while others argue for addressing root causes to defeat IS. Both these interpretations are reflected in the three strategic options offered here. We argue the case for addressing root causes *to* defeat IS and prevent its return in another form. We *do not* suggest a binary differentiation between political and military approaches to addressing instability and terrorism. Instead, this recommendation reflects a shift in emphasis toward political action while sustaining constant military pressure against IS. We articulate this approach in option 3—legitimated stability—below and in Chapters Four and Five.

No matter which option is selected, policymakers should pay close attention to the socioeconomic issues underlying the success of, and support for, IS in Iraq and Syria. If they choose not to address these issues, policymakers must find a way to effectively bypass or suppress them to contain IS and other extremist groups. Bypassing and suppressing root causes all but ensures the continuation of violence over the long term. The cost of this endless low-level, and periodically high-level instability must be weighed against the initial higher costs of attempting to address root causes to achieve lasting stability.

Three Strategic Options to Counter the Islamic State

These options are predicated on the assumption that current counter-IS strategy needs review and revision. These approaches emerged from the subject-matter elicitations and reflect an amalgamation of the broad array of perspectives our 14 experts offered, each of whom has between ten and 40 years of experience on Middle East, international security, irregular warfare, and terrorism issues. Chapter Four presents all three options in greater detail.

This report ultimately recommends option 3, legitimated stability. This approach builds from the broad acknowledgment that instability and violence will continue in Iraq and Syria even if IS is defeated on the battlefield. Here, Najmiddin Karim, the Kurdish governor of Kirkuk, Iraq, explains what he thinks will happen after IS is defeated on the battlefield:

> If there is no solution to the political problems, they will just go back and become Al Qaeda, or Ansar al-Sunna or Naqshabandi [other terror groups] . . . . I don't think it is going to end. There has to be political reconciliation, and it has not happened. (as quoted in Gordon, 2016)

Rather than condemn the United States to continual surprise attacks, global instability, and periodic and unproductive military intervention in the Middle East, it is time to commit to the admittedly costly but necessary effort to address root causes over the long term. This process of legitimization—coupled with continuing military pressure—will eventually reduce the conditions that allow IS and similar groups to emerge and thrive.

Option 1: Continuous Counterterror

In this option, sometimes referred to as *containment* (or, more simply, as "mowing the grass"), the United States accepts that terrorism is a fixed reality and the dominant threat in the global security environment. It would be better to have global peace and stability, but reality demands a continuous focus on reducing existing threats, preventing the emergence of new threats, and stopping attacks against Americans before they can occur. This will require partnership but not the kinds of lasting entanglements that might lead to future quagmires. Root causes are endemic, enduring, and can never be successfully addressed; the costs of attempting to do so are excessive and success so unlikely that continuous counterterror is more efficient. This strategy entails building and maintaining a network of temporary regional alliances to obtain basing and access rights and a heavy and continual focus on intelligence, aerial bombing, and high-value individual targeting. International terror groups will continue to exist in both Iraq and Syria indefinitely but will be suppressed to the point of being generally incapable of attacking U.S. interests.

Option 2: Practical Stability

Here, the United States seeks to defeat IS by stabilizing Iraq and Syria by the most expedient means available. Terrorism is a constant fixture of the national security environment and must be countered, prevented, and reduced; the best way to do this is by reinforcing the pre-Arab Spring status quo in the Middle East. A stable state controls its territory, countering, preventing, and reducing terrorism without presenting a threat to U.S. interests. This strategy seeks to reestablish strong, centralized nation-states, even if the states are, unfortunately, controlled by autocrats or oligarchs. Powerful nation-state governments can suppress root causes and address them, at least piecemeal, over time. Practical stability might solve some root causes but might exacerbate others; this risk is accepted to effect an immediate reduction in violence. Practical stability entails diplomatic, military, and economic actions that ensure strong central government control, with an emphasis on military action in the short term. Over the long term, the strategy seeks to emphasize low-level, low-cost advising. But because this strategy assumes indeterminate and continual periods of instability, it also emphasizes establishing a strong forward U.S. military presence in Iraq and other Middle Eastern states.

Option 3: Legitimated Stability (Recommended)

This option acknowledges that the best way to reduce and, eventually, end insurgency and terrorism is to address root causes or, at least, to establish legitimate and capable governance. Stability is most consistent and enduring when it emerges naturally from popular satisfaction with governance and other socioeconomic conditions, rather than from government oppression or military action by external powers. Violent groups are defeated primarily through indirect methods, such as legitimization, democratization, economic aid, and regional coalition building. Military force is necessary but is used to support diplomatic and economic efforts rather than as the primary tool for achieving strategic objectives. This military action is neces-

sary primarily in the short term but becomes less so over time as support for extremism and violence ebbs. The aim of this strategy is to establish legitimate governments in Iraq and Syria. Each government would be capable of addressing Sunni disenfranchisement while protecting the rights of all other groups. Ultimately, strong and legitimate central governments—perhaps federated or confederated to address regional challenges within each state—will reduce the current, dangerous emphasis on ethnosectarian identity politics and violence.

This recommendation calls for a patient, long-term U.S. effort to develop legitimate governance in Iraq and Syria. Its success will depend on renewed U.S. commitment to regional stability, seeking to address the root causes behind what in late October 2016 the *New York Times* called "A Splintered Middle East in a 'Free Fall'" in a headline (Baker, 2016). This strategy depends on a renewed commitment to democratic reform and on modest investments to help both Iraq and Syria rebuild from the devastation IS and other armed groups have wrought. Building from the literature on social violence and from the U.S. government's official acknowledgment of the importance of addressing root causes, this recommendation rejects the neoisolationism suggested in continuous counterterror. It sees long-term impracticalities inherent in the short-term vision that undergirds the practical stability approach. It rejects the notion that democratization is a failed approach to stabilization: Success must be obtained by applying pressure toward legitimacy over time, rather than in the kind of hectic, ill-considered rush that would be redolent of failed efforts in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Rather than pursuing a cost-prohibitive, all-in approach to nation building, the United States should seek to defeat IS and other threats by enacting a patient, graduated, but persistent strategy of legitimization.

Additional Recommendations

These additional recommendations are proposed separately from the three strategic options offered in Chapter Three. They could be applied in accordance with any of the three options. Chapter Four offers some additional details on these recommendations.

Unify Command and Control

Currently, the counter-IS strategy falls under two separate chains of command, one to address the IS insurgency in Iraq and Syria and the other to address the global IS terrorist threat. Disparity in objectives and language and the existence of two separate campaign leaders give the impression—fairly or unfairly—of disunity.[2] This, in turn, reinforces expert analyses that suggest the strategy to counter IS lacks a cohesive vision. The next U.S. administration should seek to unify the joint and interagency organization to improve efficiency and strategic effectiveness.

Reset and Carefully Manage Expectations

Unrealistic objectives reduce a president's ability to maintain public support; they also undermine military campaign planning. Poor expectation management undermined political support for the irregular wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. One of the primary criticisms of the current campaign is that it presents unclear objectives and unclear timelines. Future

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[2] There were reports of friction between the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL and U.S. Central Command, highlighting the separation between the two organizations and their respective views of the strategy. For example, see DeYoung, 2015.

articulations of counter-IS strategy should clearly explain the challenges and timelines associated with objectives, even if this means setting the most reasonable expectation for irregular war: dynamic strategies with uncertain timelines. This report recommends a phased approach to strategic planning that should help make this expectation of dynamism more acceptable to the public and to military planners.

Consider Reframing the Problem, U.S. Regional Objectives, and U.S. Activities

As of this writing, the United States has organized its highest-priority military and political efforts in the Middle East to defeat and destroy a single, named insurgent-terrorist organization. At the same time, the United States seeks to address Al Qaida and other terrorist groups; to help foster legitimate governance in the region; to solve the Israeli-Palestinian crisis; to defend allied states, such as Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia; to prevent increased Iranian hegemony; and to stabilize countries, such as Yemen and Somalia. If the nation succeeds in defeating or destroying IS or if the group splinters and is no longer targetable as a single entity, it seems that the entire basis for Operation Inherent Resolve and the Global Task Force to Counter ISIL would become moot. It would be more practical and effective to organize military and political activities around a broader effort to bring lasting stability to the Middle East.

Consider Changing the U.S. Approach to Strategic Design for Irregular War

This report uses current Department of Defense terminology to describe strategic alternatives to defeat IS. This includes the essential terms in all U.S. strategic planning documents and literature: *end state*, *ends*, *ways*, and *means*. An *end state* (and *ends*) is the condition the United States seeks to achieve with its strategy; *ways* are the approaches to be used to achieve these conditions; and *means* are the tools and resources necessary to supply the ways. This approach is logical, practical, and generally effective for conventional warfare planning. However, it has proven to be ineffective in irregular wars, such as those in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Chapters One, Three, Four, and Six describe how this straightforward approach to strategy planning sets unreasonable expectations for rapid success. Chapter Five offers a strategy that employs a phased approach.

Acknowledgments

Introduction

This report analyzes, presents, and recommends strategic options for addressing the challenge the Islamic State (IS) poses in the heart of its so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria.[1] The purpose of this research is to provide senior U.S. policymakers and the American public with an understanding of policy options available to address IS, their implications for American political commitment and resources, and the likely repercussions of various actions. We recommend a new strategy that seeks to address Sunni disenfranchisement by establishing government legitimacy in Syria and Iraq. There is little hope for achieving this kind of legitimacy in the short term. Therefore, this challenging, long-term process will require extensive *but graduated* American commitment and resources, reflecting the same kind of commitment the United States demonstrated in Japan and Europe after World War II, in the Republic of Korea after the Korean War, and in Kosovo after the mid-1990s war. Such a long-term commitment is preferable to the alternatives some experts have described: either a never-ending counterterror (CT) campaign with inestimable costs and no guarantees of reduced international terrorism or a return to a pre–Arab Spring status quo of dictatorial rule. The latter approach aligned American policymakers with regimes that disenfranchised large elements of their respective populations, contributing ultimately to societal collapse, a global refugee crisis, and a sharp increase in international terror.

Near–Clean Slate Strategic Analysis for a New U.S. Administration

Research into a new counter-IS strategy began with two assumptions. First, the current strategy was in many ways unclear and therefore difficult to operationalize and realize. This assumption is explained in Chapter Two, but criticisms of the strategy are widespread. Since mid-2014, many of our RAND colleagues have critiqued and identified opportunities to improve the current strategy.[2] But as international security expert, former U.S. Army colonel, and professor Andrew Bacevich has convincingly argued, the inadequacy of America's Middle East strategy is longstanding and spans at least ten presidential terms. He wrote about the failure to implement strategies that matched American ambitions to "shape" the Middle East:

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[1] Complementary, ongoing RAND Corporation research will provide a holistic strategy for defeating IS affiliates and bases external to Iraq and Syria. Various accounts differ, but IS claimed at least 30 affiliates worldwide as of mid-2016.

[2] See, for example, Connable, 2014a; Dobbins, 2014; Jenkins, 2014; Jenkins, 2015a; Jenkins, 2015b; Johnson, 2015a; Johnson 2015b; Jones, 2015; Liepman and Mudd, 2014.

> Unfortunately, no administration, from [James E.] Carter's to the present, ever devised a plausible strategy for achieving these ambitious American aims. Each in turn has simply reacted to situations it confronted. Nor has any administration made available the means needed to make good on the grandiose ambitions that it entertained. Indeed, on the U.S. side, one of this conflict's abiding qualities has actually been its paltriness. (Bacevich, 2016, p. 3)

There may be plausible counterarguments to Bacevich's assessment, but his central point—that the weaknesses in America's Middle East strategy are longstanding—underlies the present analysis. We also assume that the U.S. administration taking office in the first part of 2017 will conduct a bottom-up strategic review and be prepared to make significant, far-reaching changes in the counter-IS strategy.

Focus on Iraq and Syria

We recognize that IS exists as a global organization, but our analysis and findings center on defeating IS in Iraq and Syria. This mirrors the Department of Defense's (DoD's) focus on defeating IS in Iraq and Syria within a broader coalition effort to defeat IS worldwide.[3] While a full defeat of IS might require a worldwide effort, much can be accomplished by effectively addressing IS in the heart of its so-called caliphate. IS exists as a global entity, but as of mid-2016 it is headquartered in Raqqa and claims the greater Iraq and Syria region as the center of the caliphate. The group's origins are in Iraq, and it places special religious significance on the town of Dabiq, Syria, located approximately 10 km from the Syria-Turkey border (McCants, 2014). Most of the IS budget is generated from oil sales, taxation, agriculture, theft, and black market activity in Iraq and Syria.[4] Defeating the group in Iraq and Syria or expelling it from the area it has designated as central to the caliphate would probably cause it to lose considerable resources, influence, and military and terror capabilities. While defeating IS in the heart of its so-called caliphate would not *necessarily* lead to the total defeat of IS—this report and others cited in it argue that it almost certainly would not—such a defeat would be a significant step toward reducing the IS threat and stabilizing the Middle East. Analysis and findings from this research can and should inform a broader, worldwide effort to defeat or at least minimize IS.

Names Matter: ISIL, ISIS, DAISH, Daesh, or Simply Islamic State?

This analysis assumes some knowledge of the group known alternatively as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), the Islamic State (IS), or by the derogatory term *DAISH* (from *Doulet al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham*, a transliteration from Arabic).[5] Selection of terms matters because the terms themselves have become

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[3] This is explained in the section on counter-IS organization and planning in Chapter Two.

[4] See, for example, Brisard and Martinez, 2014; Shatz, 2014.

[5] Prior to declaration of the so-called caliphate the group referred to itself as ISIL or ISIS. It is not clear if or how using ISIL or ISIS instead of IS undermines the group; no evidence of damage was uncovered during the research for this report. DAISH, or alternatively, DAESH, has multiple, interrelated meanings as both an acronym and as an Arabic transliteration. Transliterations of the acronym versions vary, but they generally stand for the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham, with

deeply politicized (Fuller, 2015). As of mid-2016, the U.S. government refers to the group as either ISIL or *Daesh*, perhaps in an effort to undermine its legitimacy. One U.S. military officer stated that the term *Daesh* is used to avoid offending Arab allies, who do not wish to legitimize the organization as an Islamic state (Tilghman, 2014; Irshaid, 2015; Elghawaby, 2016).[6] For the purposes of scientific objectivity, we refer to the group as it refers to itself: as "the Islamic State" (IS). This approach seeks to avoid the politicization of terminology. Our use of *IS* does not endorse the existence of the so-called caliphate; previous RAND studies have referred to groups with self-aggrandizing names, such as the Peruvian Shining Path (*Sendero Luminoso*) and the Pakistani Army of the Good (*Lashkar-e Taiba*), by their chosen titles without affirming the shininess or goodness of either movement.[7]

Methodology

The complex and almost idiosyncratic nature of the challenges IS poses recommended a multiple-method research approach and a willingness to accept that some of the applied methods might have to be modified or discarded if they did not prove useful. This approach was doubly useful: It ensured redundancy and flexibility in research design and allowed us to simultaneously and sequentially test several methods without risking the viability of the entire project. Each method provided some useful insight.

To assess the IS problem and devise appropriate strategies, we applied a combination of (1) literature review, (2) expert elicitation, (3) military strategic planning methodology, (4) workshops, and (5) modifications of several methods from the U.S. government's guide to intelligence tradecraft (U.S. Government, 2009). While our report is not intelligence analysis, the methods in this government primer are suitable for a wide array of analytic challenges. We also accessed a range of literature on logic models to inform the development of our methodology, and of the reverse planning model.[8] We focused our efforts on (1) how to develop a long-term vision for defeating IS in Syria and Iraq that might lead to enduring stability and (2) how to articulate a national—and specifically military—strategy to make progress toward that vision.

We first conducted a review of the literature on strategic design and on the U.S. government's publicly available strategies to counter IS. This literature review fed a series of analytic sessions—guided by the U.S. government's tradecraft primer and the literature on logic models—that led to the selection of two methods (U.S. Government, 2009, pp. 27–31). First, we assessed the U.S. military planning process and developed a reverse planning approach tai-

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al-Sham being a regional Arabic term for Syria or the greater Levant. See Guthrie, 2015, for analysis of DAISH/DAESH. It should be noted that the use of acronyms is particularly rare in Arabic.

[6]   There is much speculation as to why the U.S. government uses ISIL instead of other terms, and various official explanations have been offered. Since mid-2014, President Obama and other officials have referred to the group as ISIL, ISIS, and Daish or Daesh interchangeably. See, for example, Obama, 2015a; Obama, 2015b.

[7]   See, for example, Connable and Libicki, 2010, and Blank, 2013. Alternative translations for the transliterated *Taiba*, or *Tayyibeh*, include righteous and legitimate.

[8]   This included a review of RAND efforts to describe logic models for analysts, for example, Greenfield, Williams, and Eiseman, 2006.

lored for the counter-IS challenge.[9] This process began with establishing clear end-state condition statements and criteria, worked backward to devise necessary actions, and then worked forward to identify various branches and sequels that might occur in the execution of the strategy. This process was tested and discarded after it became apparent that the current approach to campaign design—articulating clear end states and then devising concrete steps to achieve the end states—was not directly applicable in the case of IS.[10]

To develop the end states for the reverse planning process, we engaged five Middle East subject-matter experts (SMEs) as part of a point-to-point (electronic communication) expert elicitation exercise. Each of these experts had at least ten years of experience in Middle East policy and strategy, and two were former senior executive officials. Working from a template we developed in a second analytic session, each SME produced end-state condition statements for both Iraq and Syria for a total of ten end states. While these were not used for the reverse planning process, they were used to further develop the counter-IS strategy in the second approach: SME workshops.

These two four-hour workshops engaged two new groups of SMEs—all Middle East experts with between ten and 40 years of experience in political and military affairs—to analyze and refine the first set of ten end states, develop improved versions, identify end-state criteria (conditions needed to achieve the end state), and discuss the overall process of end-state development and planning against IS. These processes engaged a total of 14 SMEs for four hours each, for a total of 56 SME analytic hours dedicated to parsing strategic pathways and outcomes.

Workshop output led to a third, modified analytic session that resulted in the development of three "grand strategy" or vision categories to help channel the selection of a counter-IS strategy appropriate to global and regional policy. In turn, the perspectives shared during the workshops helped generate three grand strategic approaches to defeating IS and stabilizing Iraq and Syria: (1) continuous counterterrorism, (2) practical stability, and (3) legitimated stability.[11] Figure 1.1 presents the approach.

During these analyses, it became clear that the present U.S. military and government approach and terminology for strategic design was ill suited for planning and executing long-term campaigns against large-scale irregular and hybrid threats, such as IS. To avoid complicating the discussion and recommendations, this report only gently modifies the current end state, ends, ways, and means approach to strategic design.

Organization of This Report
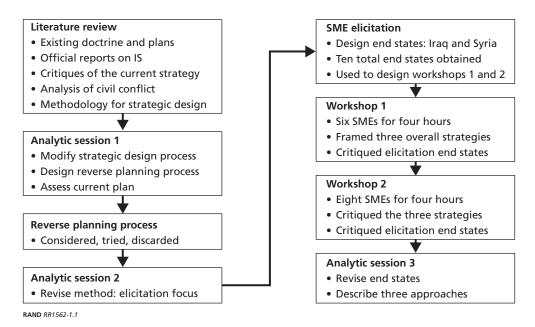
This report recommends options for defeating IS in Iraq and Syria. Chapter Two briefly examines the rise of IS and the threat it presents, more closely examines the challenges inherent in the present strategy to defeat IS, and examines the issue of root causes and their relevance to strategy selection. Chapter Three assesses the current, mid-2016 strategy and examines the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (National Security Council [NSC], 2005) as an alterna-

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[9]   This approach was derived from a range of joint and service publications but primarily from the U.S. Army's Military Decision Making Process. This is articulated most clearly in FM 101-5, 1997, and Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2015.

[10] See Training and Doctrine Command Pamphlet 525-5-500, 2008, pp. 8–12.

[11] Chapter Four explains each of these in turn.

Figure 1.1
Methodology and Analytic Approach

Literature review
- Existing doctrine and plans
- Official reports on IS
- Critiques of the current strategy
- Analysis of civil conflict
- Methodology for strategic design

Analytic session 1
- Modify strategic design process
- Design reverse planning process
- Assess current plan

Reverse planning process
- Considered, tried, discarded

Analytic session 2
- Revise method: elicitation focus

SME elicitation
- Design end states: Iraq and Syria
- Ten total end states obtained
- Used to design workshops 1 and 2

Workshop 1
- Six SMEs for four hours
- Framed three overall strategies
- Critiqued elicitation end states

Workshop 2
- Eight SMEs for four hours
- Critiqued the three strategies
- Critiqued elicitation end states

Analytic session 3
- Revise end states
- Describe three approaches

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tive model. Chapter Four provides the three strategic options, with analysis of the likely outcomes of each option. It is written with the explicit understanding that IS exists across international borders and cannot be successfully isolated within either country. Chapter Five presents the recommended strategy in detail. Finally, Chapter Six concludes with an assessment of the available options and further recommendations for the counter-IS strategy.

The Rise of IS and Root Causes

This chapter describes the emergence of IS in Iraq and Syria to set the stage for the analysis of options. It is unrealistic to treat IS as an independent entity devoid of regional and local context. Developing an effective strategy requires at least a basic understanding of the history and context of IS. The first section in this chapter presents a brief overview of IS in mid-2016, when the research for this report was completed. The next section describes the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria in local political and social context. The final section offers a brief analysis of the root causes described throughout the chapter.

Mid-2016 Situation: The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

IS is a hybrid insurgent-terrorist group: It is at once a large-scale, semiconventional insurgent force that has seized considerable territory from the governments of Iraq and Syria, and an international terrorist organization that encourages or conducts clandestine operations and attacks around the world.[1] As of mid-2016, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi leads the group with the intent of building and expanding an Islamic caliphate stretching across a large part of the Middle East.[2] IS emerged from previous iterations of what is typically called Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and now competes with Al Qaida for dominance of various regional and global radical Salafi-Jihadi networks.[3] It is organized hierarchically in Iraq and Syria but with overlapping local and international networks of terroristlike cells. The so-called caliphate is divided into emirates, or princedoms, both within Iraq and Syria and in its affiliate locations in Nigeria, Libya, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

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[1] IS has entered Mao Tse-Tung's third phase of insurgency. A phase-three insurgent group has sufficient popular support, resources, freedom of movement, and survivability to organize into conventional or semiconventional military formations to seize and hold territory and fight government forces on the group's own terms. This final phase of traditional Maoist insurgency indicates that the insurgents have had a great degree of success and that the insurgency poses a serious and perhaps existential threat to competing governments. See Mao, 2000.

[2] Al Baghdadi claims lineage to the Prophet Mohammad and also claims the original name Ibrāhīm Ibn ʿAwwād Ibn Ibrāhīm Ibn ʿAlī Ibn Muhammad al-Badrī al-Hāshimī al-Husaynī al-Qurashī. Neither claim appears to be sufficiently verified to stand as uncontested fact. See, for example, Jihadist News, 2014.

[3] AQI has had various iterations, both before and after the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in 2006. Transliterated names include Jamaʾat al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad [Group for Unity and Jihad], and Tanzim (alt. *Tandthim*) Qaʾidat al-Jihad fi al-Bilad al-Rafidayn [Organization for Leading Jihad in the Land of the Two Rivers (TQJBR)].

The group's physical boundaries in Iraq and Syria fluctuate on a daily basis and may have changed considerably by the time this report is published.[4] Generally, as of mid-2016, IS controls parts of the Euphrates River Valley in Iraq, the city of Mosul, portions of the disputed territories along the new Kurdish line of control, and large portions of the Iraq-Syria border. In Syria, it controls Raqqa, its declared capital, as well as oilfields and other small cities and towns, primarily in northeastern, central, and eastern Syria. The group is mostly able to finance its own operations through a combination of oil revenue, taxation, theft, and extortion. As it controls and seeks to expand its territories in Iraq and Syria, IS is extending its reach through direct representation in such places as Libya and through over 40 affiliate groups from Afghanistan to Indonesia and from Nigeria to Russia. Figure 2.1 depicts estimated IS zones of control in Iraq and Syria as of August 19, 2016.

While the assessments of IS control will change over time and while the group may have contracted by the time this report is published, it will remain a significant local, regional, and global threat even in a weakened state. Barring an unexpected and total defeat of IS, the findings and recommendations in this report will retain their relevance. In the unlikely case that IS has been completely eliminated by the time this report is published, the reader should view this as a case study and argument for changing the entrenched approach to developing strategies to defeat complex irregular threats.

The following two subsections describe the rise of IS in Iraq and Syria. The Iraq subsection focuses more on the evolution of IS as a group, with Sunni disenfranchisement as context, while the Syria subsection focuses more on the political and social contexts that set the stage for the dissolution of stability and the rise of IS in Syria.

The Rise of IS in Iraq

In the late 1990s, Al Qaida terrorist cell leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi formed the group that would go on to become IS.[5] Zarqawi's Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad (JTJ) worked in parts of northern Iraq beginning in the early 2000s but did not fully settle in Iraq until after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003. Between 2003 and 2004, Zarqawi's group competed and collaborated with a variety of emerging Sunni nationalist insurgent elements, as well as a few groups, such as Ansar al-Islam, that lay claim to a Salafi-Jihadi agenda.[6] JTJ was able to survive and then thrive in the six provinces with heavy Sunni populations—Anbar, Nineweh, and Salah-al-Din, with smaller percentages in Diyala, northern Babil, and Baghdad—because the invasion had upended nearly half a millennium of Sunni domination in Iraq (Haddad, 2014). As the Shi'a Arab majority in Iraq began to assume control of the state and as the Coalition Provisional Authority implemented de-Ba'athification and the dissolution of the Iraqi Army, Sunnis found themselves mostly unemployed, unemployable, and essentially disenfranchised from the gov-

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[4]   It is not at all clear that various analyses of the group's physical boundaries are accurate; precision of IS mapping products should not be confused with accurate mapping of IS boundaries. Further, the group influences people in Iraq and Syria beyond its boundaries and has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to conduct attacks in areas it does not physically control.

[5]   Zarqawi's actual name is Ahmad Fadeel Nazal al-Khalayleh. For details of Zarqawi's life and the rise of AQI, see Kirdar, 2011; Weaver, 2006; and Gambill, 2004.

[6]   There were links to Zarqawi and Ansar al-Islam, later called Ansar al-Sunna (alt. Sunnah) prior to the 2003 invasion (Weaver, 2006). For a summary of armed insurgent groups in Iraq during this period, see Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), 2004a, one of a series of documents declassified and presented as part of the government of the United Kingdom Iraq Inquiry.

Figure 2.1
Islamic State Estimated Zones of Control in Iraq and Syria

SOURCE: Forrest, 2016.
RAND *RR1562-2.1*

ernment they once controlled (see Dobbins et al., 2009). These conditions fed the rise of the diffuse Sunni insurgency, a de facto sectarian civil war, and the eventual rise of IS.

Nationalist groups led by former regime officers, Sunni religious figures, and Ba'athists dominated the insurgency through early 2004 up to the first Battle of Fallujah in early April.[7] While JTJ was not necessarily the dominant insurgent group between mid-2003 and early 2004, it made a name for itself as the most ruthless and the most focused among its peer competitors. Where other Sunni insurgent groups, such as the 1920 Revolution Brigade and the Islamic Army, sought primarily to expel the U.S. occupation force and regain lost authority, Zarqawi had a complex local and international strategy that would presage Abu Bakr al-Bagh-

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[7] This battle resulted from the killing and mutilation of four U.S. contractors in Fallujah in late March 2004. The first effort to assert control over Fallujah resulted in the withdrawal of U.S. forces and a deal that ceded control of the city to the so-called Fallujah Brigade, which was really a loose coalition of insurgents. See Chandrasekaran, 2004.

dadi's hybrid insurgent and international terror agenda. He simultaneously sought to eject the U.S. occupation force, turn Sunni Arabs against the government of Iraq (GoI), break apart the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq, and foment civil war between Sunni and Shi'a Arabs (Gambill, 2004). The last effort was intended to give JTJ the opportunity to position itself as defender of the Sunni faithful, something they were able to accomplish only in early 2006, just before Zarqawi's death that summer.

Zarqawi led JTJ's ascension in Iraq during the summer of 2004, after the United States had ceded control of Fallujah to a motley group of Sunni insurgents. Zarqawi leveraged his organization's seemingly limitless brutality to dominate and then subsume cells from non-Salafi insurgent groups.[8] In October 2004, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Al Qaida and changed the name of his organization from JTJ to Tandhim Qaidat al-Jihad fi al-Bilad al-Rafidain, more commonly known as AQI. This formal connection to Osama Bin Laden gave Zarqawi immediate, global credibility with international Salafi-Jihadis and elevated his stature to de facto leader of the otherwise fractured Sunni Arab Iraqi insurgent movement. From 2004 through 2006 Zarqawi implemented a ruthless strategy of suicide bombings, murder, blackmail, kidnapping, hijacking, and direct military attacks against coalition and Iraqi forces. He targeted both Sunni and Shi'a Iraqis, but he leveraged bombings of Shi'a civilian targets to stoke sectarian resentment.

Zarqawi, and then his successor Abu Ayyub al-Musri, developed or improved on a number of organizational approaches in Iraq from 2003 to 2006 that would reemerge under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's leadership of IS. Criminal activity allowed Zarqawi and al-Musri to self-fund their Iraq operations, which in turn ensured their relative independence from Al Qaida leaders, who were appalled by the group's more extreme tactics (see Weaver, 2006, and Bahney et al., 2010). AQI made expert use of the media, proliferating videos of attacks, beheadings, and propaganda messages on videodisks and the Internet. Zarqawi organized the group in hierarchical lines, designating emirates and emirs across Iraq that could and did operate with semi-autonomy (Bahney et al., 2010). He took control of Iraq's smuggling routes and black markets, which delivered profits and gave him leverage over local Sunni notables who were now forced to work with or for AQI; for a while, their economic and social fates were dependent on AQI's continuing success (see McWilliams and Wheeler, 2009; Montgomery and McWilliams, 2009; and Bahney et al., 2010). AQI emirs coerced local women to marry their fighters in an effort to both reward loyal members and to further entangle local tribes with AQI. This forceful, all-encompassing cooption of the Sunni Arab Iraqis is a hallmark of IS operations in Iraq.

In late 2005, Sunni Iraqi Arabs made their first real foray into the new electoral process, demonstrating a modicum of trust in the Iraqi government. This was accompanied by a lull in Sunni insurgent violence from late 2005 to early 2006 and the emergence of the Anbar People's Committee, a precursor to the Anbar Awakening (McWilliams and Wheeler, 2009). Zarqawi probably sensed that he was losing control of the Sunni Arabs.[9] By mid-January, AQI had murdered the key members of the Anbar People's Committee and forced the others into hiding (McWilliams and Wheeler, 2009; Gordon and Trainor, 2012). On February 22, 2006, AQI demolished the Shi'a al-Askeri, or Golden Dome mosque in Samarra. This

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[8] The degree to which Zarqawi controlled the Sunni insurgents in Fallujah during this period is debated. For example, see "Two Locals . . . ," 2004.

[9] Interviewees in both McWilliams and Wheeler, 2009, and Montgomery and McWilliams, 2009, make this observation from a number of perspectives.

attack triggered a massive wave of intersectarian violence that allowed AQI to undertake a self-serving defense of Sunni interests (Crowley, 2014). By mid-2006, intelligence officials in the 99-percent Sunni Arab province of Al-Anbar assessed that AQI was the dominant group there, even more powerful and influential than the U.S. military (JIC, 2006a; JIC, 2006b; Multinational Forces West, 2006). At the zenith of AQI's success, Zarqawi was killed in a U.S. aerial bombing attack and was succeeded by al-Musri, who would go on to lead the group with Abu Omar al-Baghdadi through 2010 (JIC, 2006b). Al-Musri and al-Baghdadi would lead AQI to a major strategic defeat in the face of the Sunni Awakening movement.

The growth and death of the so-called Sunni Arab Awakening, or in transliterated Arabic, *sahwah*, holds perhaps the most important lessons for improving the counter-IS strategy. The al-Anbar-centric *sahwah* evolved into a widespread Sunni Arab Iraqi revolt against AQI that resulted from and was successful due to a complex range of factors, including ongoing and egregious AQI abuses of the Sunni population, tribal infighting, criminal disputes, coalition engagement, elite payoffs, and the surge of U.S. military forces.[10] Sunni Arabs joined anti-AQI militia groups and subjected themselves to nominal coalition and GoI control. They helped identify AQI leaders for targeting and were crucial to reversing AQI's momentum. Many of those who joined such groups as the Sons of Iraq and Concerned Local Citizens militias were former insurgents; in some cases, *sahwah* recruitment represented a one-for-one swap from anti- to progovernment armed groups. Intense debate continues over the reasons for the *sahwah*, but the results were clear: AQI lost its control of the Sunni population and, by 2008, was forced into internal exile in the most remote areas of Iraq.[11]

Between mid-2008 and early 2010, there was a weak but legitimate honeymoon between the Sunni Arabs, the U.S.-led coalition, and the GoI. While Sunni Arab attacks against the government continued, they had significantly abated from the 2003–2008 period. Then–Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki impressed the Sunni with his aggressive military action to bring Shi'a cleric and militia leader Muqtada al-Sadr to heel in Basra; this demonstrated his nationalist, supersectarian bona fides (Iron, 2013). Al-Maliki had an opportunity to build on the *sahwah* and on Sunni Arab willingness to participate in the government. Instead, the al-Maliki government exercised what analyst Myriam Benraad called a "profound hostility" toward members of the Sons of Iraq and Concerned Local Citizens (Benraad, 2011). Even as AQI was being forced into retreat, al-Maliki's government began cutting militia pay; stopping pay; and harassing, disarming, and arresting members. Today, former members of *sahwah* militias remember their experience with deep bitterness toward both the GoI and the United States.[12]

Whatever good will had been gained from late 2006 to mid-2008 was squandered by March 2010, when the al-Maliki government was widely viewed as playing a role in the removal of Sunni Arab candidates from the parliamentary election lists.[13] Even after losing the elec-

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[10] For better insight into the Awakening, see Smith and MacFarland, 2008; McWilliams and Wheeler, 2009; Montgomery and McWilliams, 2009; Gordon and Trainor, 2012; Jensen, 2014.

[11] Jensen, 2014, summarizes some of this debate; also see Benraad, 2011. For a summary of Sons of Iraq and Concerned Local Citizens militias, see Ahmed, 2008.

[12] This observation is derived from the chapter author's ongoing interactions and over 60 long-form interviews with Sunni Arab Iraqis from Anbar and Nineveh Provinces, Iraq, from 2012 to 2016.

[13] Whether or not these removals were legally justifiable under Iraq's de-Ba'athification law, they gave the perception that al-Maliki and his Shi'a Da'wa Party was purposefully disenfranchising Sunni Arabs. See Wicken, 2012; Vissar, 2014; Khedery, 2014.

tion, al-Maliki leveraged a corrupt judiciary to maintain control of the government. With his ambitions laid bare, al-Maliki made little effort to hide what amounted to a four-year targeted campaign to consolidate his hold on power at (primarily) Sunni Arab expense. He replaced competent Sunni and Kurdish military officers with loyal but incompetent Shi'a; he used the courts and security forces to harass and pursue Sunni Arab politicians; and, most important, his security forces violently suppressed peaceful Sunni protests.[14]

At the same time, al-Maliki moved closer to Iran and allowed the existing Sunni Arab perception that he led an Iranian puppet government to grow. In 2011, he did little to facilitate the retention of U.S. military forces in Iraq, and in December of that year, the last U.S. military unit left Iraq (Khedery, 2014; Brennan et al., 2013). While the United States retained a presence in Baghdad and in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) after 2011, it no longer had direct influence on the growth and stability of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). Sunnis generally perceived the U.S. withdrawal as an abdication to Iran and as a signal of Iran's growing primacy in Iraq. Physical suppression of Sunni Arabs in Hawijah, Ramadi, and other areas destroyed the last vestiges of Sunni Arab support for al-Maliki (Vissar, 2014; "Iraqi Sunni Protest . . . ," 2013; Arango, 2013). By the time IS forces rolled into the city of Fallujah in January 2014, the Sunni Arabs of Iraq were in de facto revolt against their government.

IS's rise in Iraq followed its reemergence in Syria (see the next subsection). The group continued to conduct attacks in Iraq between 2008 and 2014, but at relatively low levels that did not attract significant attention (Lewis, 2013). This allowed the group to infiltrate agents into Iraqi cities, coopt local leaders, cut deals with nationalist and Ba'athist insurgents, and set the stage for a full-scale military assault into Iraq (Filkins, 2014). In January 2014, IS launched a column of armed trucks and fighters across the Syria-Iraq border, down the western Euphrates River Valley, and straight into Fallujah (Ghazi and Arango, 2014). In collusion with nationalist insurgents, IS took control of this city, thereby establishing a base of operations in the heart of Sunni Arab Iraq, less than 60 km by road from the center of Baghdad.[15] This surprise attack left the GoI reeling. Iraqi Army units trained by the United States either collapsed or withdrew to their bases, unable to face IS on the battlefield. Police units were either overrun or dispersed. Prime Minister al-Maliki responded with force in an effort to address the immediate threat, ignoring the broader implications of the reemergence of what was, essentially, AQI (Nordland, 2014). While it may have been too late to try to address Sunni grievances in early 2014 to stem the IS advance, no efforts were made to do so.

In June 2014, IS made another major advance, this time seizing Iraq's second largest city, Mosul (Sly and Ramadan, 2014). In the process, it murdered over 1,500 ISF recruits in what would be known as the Speicher Massacre; this kind of extreme violence would become the hallmark of IS operations ("Camp Speicher . . . ," 2015). Soon, IS had control of most major urban areas in the Sunni provinces and had seized oil fields, military bases, police stations, and the critical Bayji refinery. It took control of the Syria-Iraq border crossings. By mid-2014, IS was successfully coopting hundreds—and perhaps thousands—of previous members of nationalist insurgent groups into its ranks; this approach mirrored the AQI tactics from the

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[14] See, for example, Boot, 2010.

[15] This distance can be measured in many different ways. We used city centroids in the Google Maps application.

previous decade.[16] The group was reportedly able to capture hundreds of millions of dollars in cash even as it coopted and increased the black market oil trade, greatly increasing its ability to self-finance (Shatz and Johnson, 2015). U.S.-led coalition military operations to counter IS began in summer 2014; in October 2014, the United States established Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the military mission to degrade and defeat IS.[17] At the same time, the United States established a global coalition task force to degrade and destroy IS.[18]

Initially, the ISF proved incapable of defending Iraqi territory, and as IS threatened the outskirts of Baghdad in 2014, Shi'a Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a general call for Shi'a to join militia forces to defend Baghdad and Shi'a areas ("Iraq Cleric . . . ," 2014). This resulted in the explosive growth of Shi'a militia groups, all beholden to different and some-times competing leadership; the strongest groups, such as Badr Corps, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Katibat al-Hezbollah, have strong ties to Iran. These militia groups, known as *hashed al-shabi* [people's militias], helped stem the IS advance but have become as powerful as or, in some cases, more powerful than the ISF. Also in 2014, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) forces expanded their presence in Iraq, entering into direct conflict against IS and supporting both the *hashed* groups and the ISF. Collectively, this direct Iranian involvement, the Iranian backing of some *hashed* groups, and the presence of senior Iranian military leaders reinforced Sunni perceptions that Iran had taken control of the GoI.[19] Meanwhile, the United States provided direct support to Kurdish elements fighting IS in the north of the country but only limited and indirect support to fledgling Sunni militias. Sunni efforts to obtain direct support were rebuffed, as were efforts to pass a national guard law that would have allowed Sunnis to organize their own defense (el-Ghobashy, 2014).

In the two years since the United States began its campaign to degrade, defeat, and destroy IS, the group has both expanded and contracted in Iraq. Since the beginning of the U.S.-led intervention, it threatened the KRG capital of Erbil and seized Anbar's provincial cap-ital, Ramadi. By late 2015, IS had suffered some setbacks but retained control of large portions of Iraq (Gilsinan, 2015). As of mid-2016, the ISF has proven more effective—primarily because of improved U.S. airstrikes and through the overuse of its special Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) force—and IS has lost significant territory, including the cities of Ramadi and Fallujah (Forrest, 2016). DoD claimed that, as of mid-2016, IS had lost 47 percent of the territory it had once held in Iraq (McGurk, 2016, p. 4). Whether or not this is the case, as of mid-2016 IS retains control of Mosul, large portions of the Syria-Iraq border, and of many populated urban and rural areas across northwestern Iraq. The IS incursion led to the explosive growth of the Shi'a *hashed*, which, in turn, inflamed Sunni anti-GoI and anti-Iran sentiment. Iraq's security forces are improving, but they are predominantly dependent on cooperation with the CTS to conduct offensive operations and traditional, population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN). Finally, while IS may be contracting in Iraq, it is also dispersing into the population for what appears to be a protracted guerrilla warfare and terror campaign.

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[16] Estimated numbers of IS fighters are wildly inconsistent. There is no way of knowing how many current IS members were former nationalist insurgents. This assessment is drawn from the literature review and from interviews with former Sunni nationalist insurgent leaders in Amman, Jordan, from 2013 to 2015. For example, see Boghani, 2015.

[17] See the OIR website for details (OIR, undated).

[18] See the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL website for details (DoS, undated).

[19] See, for example, Muir, 2015.

The Rise of IS in Syria

Syria's Civil War, which erupted as part of the broader Arab Spring movement in 2011, created the environment that allowed ISIS to emerge. Therefore, this subsection focuses more on Syria's recent history than on IS itself. There is a complex, nuanced legacy of power politics, violent oppression, international influence, and geographic, class, and ethnosectarian division in Syria that cannot be given adequate treatment here, but a brief summary is necessary to explain the proposed solution.[20] This section describes how the primarily Alawi Arab regime of Hafez al-Assad, and then that of his son Bashar al-Assad, oppressed and disenfranchised a significant proportion of Syria's population. This longstanding oppression ultimately led to the 2011 revolt, and then to the rise of IS. It is important to understand not only the depths of the Alawi government's oppression of the Syrian people but also the longstanding bonds between the government of Syria (GoS), Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH). This recommended strategy requires addressing the interests and concerns of all four parties.

Hafez al-Assad rose to power in a coup in 1970, emerging as the president, the leader of Syria's Ba'ath Party, and the de facto leader of Syria's Alawi community. At this point, Syria had already established a firm diplomatic and military relationship with the Soviet Union: Syria benefited from Soviet protection against real and perceived threats from Western powers and Israel, and the Soviet Union benefited from direct access to the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea.[21] Al-Assad did everything possible to strengthen this relationship, and Bashar al-Assad inherited close and enduring diplomatic, military, cultural, and economic ties between the Alawi regime and post-Soviet Russia. Russia maintains military airfields and port facilities in Syria, which serve as its only substantial forward presence in the Mediterranean basin. In mid-2016, Russian leadership views Syria as part of Russia's traditional sphere of influence and the stability of the GoS as essential to maintaining Russia's global power and network of regional ties (Herszenhorn, 2012).

From the 1970s through the 1990s, Hafez al-Assad also built and cemented a close partnership with Iran. Because Syrian and Iraqi Ba'athists had long since separated under a cloud of distrust and anger, al-Assad found himself in direct and isolating opposition to Iraq's Ba'athist government. Al-Assad aligned himself with Iran's new revolutionary Shi'a Islamic government after Egyptian President Anwar Sadat signed the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. This alignment with the Iranian Shi'a theocracy deepened the divide between al-Assad's Alawi-led regime and both Syria's and the region's Sunni Arabs.[22] Iran would leverage its relationship with Syria to influence Lebanese Shi'a and to provide direct and indirect support to LH and other terror groups as part of an Iranian-led axis of resistance against Western and Sunni Arab powers. This axis constitutes what some Sunni leaders perceive to be a "Shi'a crescent," ranging from the Palestinian Territories to Lebanon through Syria and Iran, and into such Persian Gulf states as Bahrain. Through this lens, continued pro-Iranian governance in Syria is critical to Iran's ability to stem Sunni influence. Many dispute this primordialist view of regional politics, but it is sufficient to say that Iranian leaders view Syria as essential to Iran's ability to influence the Levant and to support LH and its networks of agents (Ma'oz, 2007). In turn, LH views ongo-

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[20] For a sampling of relevant historical and topical analyses, see Yapp, 1996; Leverett, 2005; Perthes, 1995; Hokayem, 2013.

[21] See, for example, Even, 2016.

[22] See, for example, Barfi, 2016.

ing GoS support as essential to its survival and, with Iranian support, has committed military force to back its stake in Bashar al-Assad's—or at least the Alawi government's—future (Sullivan, 2014).

Under Hafez al-Assad and his immediate predecessor, Alawi Arabs, a small minority religious sect and identity group in Syria that had little influence or authority through the mid-20th century that had sometimes suffered under Sunni majority domination, emerged as the dominant class.[23] Alawi Arab Ba'athists came to dominate the Syrian government at the expense of all other ethnosectarian groups, primarily Sunni Arabs. But three dynamics of Alawi domination are important to note.

First, as Emile Hokayem argues, "*asabiyya* (group solidarity or kinship), rather than outright and primal sectarianism, better explains [Alawi] family and regime dynamics and decision-making" (Hokayem, 2013, p. 32). GoS regime control is thus less about religion than it is about group organization for survival and power dominance. This mitigates against perceptions that Shi'a religious solidarity to the Alawi sect—which some Shi'a view as heretical—is either guaranteed or even critical to the Iranian-Syrian relationship. Second, and perhaps more important for a prospective strategy to safely remove Bashar al-Assad and other Syrian leaders most closely associated with oppression and alleged war crimes, Bashar consolidated Alawi power even further within his close familial circles. While this has helped him retain control of the state throughout the civil war, it has also provided a more isolated target for transition than, by comparison, Iraq's entire ruling and working class of Sunni, Shi'a, and Kurdish Ba'ath Party members. Third, while the Alawi are the dominant group in Syria's government, Sunni Arabs have been consistently represented throughout government and the armed forces. They may not hold the most important positions, but it would be inaccurate to say that all Sunnis are completely disenfranchised and separated from the Syrian state.[24]

Syria's Kurds add another complicating factor to any prospective counter-IS strategy. Located almost entirely in the north of the country, Syrian Kurds have a longstanding history of opposition to the Assad regime. But Syrian Kurdish political and military groups also have close ties with radical anti-Turkish groups, such as the Kurdish Workers Party; the main Syrian Kurdish political party—the Democratic Union Party (PYD)[25]—was originally an off-shoot of the Kurdish Workers Party. This places Syrian Kurdish political and military groups in opposition to the government of Turkey, which views Kurdish unification in northern Syria as a direct threat to Turkish interests (Tabler et al., 2016). Yet since the Syrian Kurds have not taken a strong or militant position against the GoS, the Russians have balanced their relations with al-Assad and the PYD.[26] As of mid-2016, the PYD is reportedly hedging its bets between the United States and Russia: It is receiving strong U.S. support to fight ISIS. But it is not clear whether the United States will withdraw this support after the defeat of IS as the United

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[23] This is not to say that Sunnis, Kurds, and other Syrians had no official role: In fact, Sunnis made up a majority of the Army, and many were loyal to the regime. As with assumptions of monolithic Shi'ism, primordialist assumptions about the Sunni in Syria or across the Middle East are erroneous.

[24] The issue of Sunni inclusion in the Syrian government and armed forces and broader assumptions about sectarianism and policy were recently debated in a series of articles on the *War on the Rocks* website: Malik, 2016a; Malik, 2016b; Khan, 2016; and Knights, 2016.

[25] The abbreviation is from the transliteration of the party's Arabic name. Similarly, the abbreviation for the party's military wing, YPG, is from the transliteration of the Arabic for *People's Protection Units*.

[26] Antagonistic relations between Russia and Turkey have reinforced Russian relations with the Syrian Kurds.

States tries to maintain its relationship with Turkey. Syrian Kurds are pressing forward against IS with U.S. military support, and their surging confidence led them to claim an independent state in the northwest. But, ultimately, the Syrian Kurds lie at a dangerous crossroads between Turkey, Russia, Iraqi Kurds, Turkish Kurds, the United States, IS, and other dangerous armed groups. While some of Syria's Kurds might make a strong play for an independent Kurdish state in the north, others may be eager for a negotiated solution to their status as part of a larger stability program for Syria.

Syria's civil war emerged as a result of oppression, as well as a range of economic, regional, and tribal factors. From the early 1970s through 2000—at which point Hafez died and Bashar assumed power—the Alawi Arab, Iranian-aligned, Russian-backed government oppressed Sunni (and many Kurdish) Syrians, jailing; torturing; and, in the case of the Hama Massacre in 1982, reportedly slaughtering Sunni by the thousands.[27] This event set the tone for future relations with Syria's Sunni community and almost certainly factored in to the eventual 2011 revolt. High hopes for the seemingly moderate Bashar al-Assad were dashed by 2001 when reformers inspired by the death of Hafez al-Assad sought greater freedoms in a collective effort known as the Damascus Spring (Wikas, 2007). Within a year, Bashar al-Assad shut down the reforms and began to oppress the reformers. This behavior continued through 2011, although with a glossier veneer of anocracy (pseudodemocracy) than under Hafez al-Assad. At the same time, Bashar shifted economic power to urban areas, alienated rural Sunni tribes, and failed to improve the economic or social situations of the average Syrian outside Damascus. What began as a mild protest of intellectuals quickly spread to Dara'a in the south, then to Homs and other cities. By the end of 2011, Syria was in a full-fledged civil war.[28] As of mid-2016, Syria has been decimated by over five years of high-intensity warfare. Bashar al-Assad remains in power with the direct support of Russian military forces; Iranian and LH advisors and fighters; and a solid core of loyal Alawi military, political, and civic leaders. IS emerged out of this chaos.

IS claims its capital in Syria but did not settle there until after the onset of the Syrian civil war and the departure of U.S. military forces from Iraq. The group's connections to Syria, however, have been constant since at least 2001, when al-Zarqawi shifted operations from Afghanistan to the Middle East. AQI maintained networks in Syria throughout the 2003–2011 U.S.-led coalition war in Iraq. It utilized Syria's airports, road networks, and Syrian facilitators to help launder money and move foreign fighters to and from Iraq (Bahney et al., 2010; Felter and Fishman, undated; JIC, 2004b). The group known as JTJ, then TQJBR (AQI), then Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), then IS has consistently benefited from cross-border tribal connections between Iraq and Syria, particularly along the historic Euphrates River smuggling routes between al-Qa'im, Iraq, and Deir az-Zour, Syria ("U.S. Cross-Border Raid . . . ," 2008; Holliday, 2013). Therefore, while the IS brand is relatively new to Syria, the group had a nearly 15-year history there by mid-2016.

Al-Baghdadi established a strong presence in Syria in 2012, first as an offshoot of ISI. In early 2012, al-Baghdadi attempted to unify Jabhat al-Nusra (JaN)—which he viewed as one of his subordinate elements—into the renamed IS. But JaN rejected this unification effort, and

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[27] In 1982, al-Assad faced a Muslim Brotherhood revolt in Hama, Syria, and sent the military to destroy the group. Casualty estimates of the Hama Massacre are disputed, but the end result was a widespread perception that al-Assad was a ruthless dictator who would not shy away from murdering Sunni Arabs to retain power. See, for example, Amos, 2012, and Rugh, 2015.

[28] For a narrative of the 2011 uprising, see Hokayem, 2013.

the ensuing internecine squabble resulted in a split between the two groups and al-Baghdadi's withdrawal from Al Qaida.[29] This placed IS in opposition to both JaN and Al Qaida, and it recharacterized the Sunni opposition: It now consisted of a fractured array of groups seeking to overthrow Bashar al-Assad and a new group—IS—that pursued total regional dominance. This means that any effort to stabilize Syria will require greater effort than simply defeating IS: JaN, Ansar Al-Sunnah, and other opposition groups, many of them associated with Salafi-Jihadi ideology, are prepared to assume control of the mostly Sunni anti-Assad revolt.

By mid-2013, al-Baghdadi had begun a concerted campaign to acquire territory in Syria, seeking to eject or absorb all Syrian opposition groups in the process. By early 2014, IS had established total control of Raqqa and had begun its expansion into Iraq, absorbing many of the original members of JaN.[30] By 2015, IS controlled large portions of Syria's oil resources, its eastern road networks, vital dams controlling its water resources, and population centers outside the western-Damascus-to-Aleppo corridor. External intervention by the United States in the north and by Russia, Iran, and LH in the west has blunted and even reversed some of IS's earlier gains. As of mid-2016, the Kurdish YPG militia, along with some Syrian Sunni Arabs, is pressuring IS north of Raqqa. The Turkish border has become less hospitable to IS human and material smuggling, and GoS forces are squeezing opposition territory from the west. But IS maintains its caliphate and continues to self-fund its operations in Syria; deluge social media sites with propaganda generated in Syria; and plan and execute local, regional, and global insurgent and terror attacks.

What Are the Root Causes That Allowed IS to Emerge and Thrive?

One of the most important prerequisites to designing an effective counter-IS strategy is to try to understand what the U.S. military calls the "root causes" of the IS movement.[31] A root cause is a deep, often enduring and widespread socioeconomic issue that sets conditions for the growth of violent armed groups and the popular support for, or acquiescence to, the groups. All analyses of root causes are subjective. However, there is general expert consensus that IS leverages deep Sunni Arab dissatisfaction with governance in both Iraq and Syria.[32] Iraqi Sunni Arabs believe they have been disenfranchised from their government, and many believe they have no other recourse than violence or the support of violent armed groups, such as IS. Many Sunnis disliked AQI and dislike IS but have been unwilling to support GoI en masse in the absence of reconciliation. Contributing factors in Iraq include the fear of Iranian domination, sectarian resentment, lack of economic opportunity, destruction of Sunni provinces, massive

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[29] Reports detailing IS's relationship with Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (JFS)—what was JaN through mid-2016—claim either that al-Baghdadi established JaN and then was rejected by JaN leadership when he attempted to unify them under the ISI umbrella (renamed IS) or that IS and JaN were separate groups. For example, see Stern and Berger, 2015, and Caris and Reynolds, 2014.

[30] A good summary timeline of IS's rise in Syria can be found in Stern and Berger, 2015, pp. XVIX–XXVI. The authors provide detailed analysis of the timeline throughout the remainder of the book. Many alternative timelines exist, all with varying degrees of detail and agreement. None appears to be empirically definitive.

[31] For a U.S. military explanation of root causes, see Joint Publication (JP) 3-24, 2013, p. II-3.

[32] This assessment is derived both from the literature review conducted for this report and from the multiple iterations of expert elicitation conducted as part of the research process.

population displacement, and fear of government security forces and militias. In Syria, the Sunni Arab majority was also historically disenfranchised. The Arab Spring revolt in Syria was an expression of this deep discontent. The ensuing chaos from 2011 through 2014 allowed the precursor versions of IS to expand and then dominate competing antigovernment groups.

Foreign fighters make up a considerable percentage of IS manpower.[33] This reflects the hybrid nature of the IS threat and highlights the complications its global and online presence poses. IS actively seeks out Islamic extremist recruits and supporters worldwide. Therefore, even as the group's presence shrinks in Iraq and Syria and as local Sunni Arabs there become increasingly frustrated with its abusive behavior, it can continuously revitalize itself by leveraging root causes everywhere. People from more than 70 countries, motivated by idiosyncratic combinations of religious, social, economic, and political issues, continue to flock to IS as of mid-2016 (Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler, 2016).

The title of this subsection is a question because there is no empirically defensible assessment of a concise set of root causes that fuels and sustains IS. Yet analysts and policymakers must still seek to understand the causes of violence to be able to address them. Selecting an effective counter-IS strategy will require both making a reasonable assessment of these root causes and then determining what can and cannot (or should and should not) be done to address them. Chapter Four presents options that range from tactical containment—assuming the root causes cannot be identified or cannot be addressed—to the long-term pursuit of grievance resolution.

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[33] Exact numbers are unknown, and the most specific data are classified. See, for example, Dodwell, Milton, and Rassler, 2016.

Assessing the Current Strategy to Defeat and Destroy IS

This project was undertaken with the assumption that the early to mid-2016 strategy to degrade, defeat, and destroy IS was in need of review and revision. This assumption was drawn from the extensive body of expert literature criticizing the strategy and was reinforced by the research conducted for this report. This chapter describes and assesses the mid-2016 strategy to support an eventual policy review and identifies the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (NSC, 2005) as a flawed but useful template for revision.[1]

Counter-IS Organization and Planning as of Mid-2016

This "nearly clean slate" analysis does include some assessment of current efforts to help justify change and to help design improvements. Organization and planning under the current U.S. administration (mid-2016) offers opportunity for both. This short section provides an overview of current organization and planning.

The United States leads the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, operating out of the U.S. Department of State (DoS) in Washington, D.C. The 66 countries that make up the coalition in mid-2016 seek to "degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy."[2] Within—or perhaps in conjunction with—this coalition, DoD executes a military campaign against IS under OIR. This effort is coordinated by a three-star general officer leading the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) OIR (CJTF-OIR), under U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM).[3] This group's mission is to leverage the Iraqis, Syrian resistance, and other partners to "militarily defeat Daesh in the Combined Joint Operations Area [Iraq and Syria] to enable whole-of-coalition governmental actions to increase regional stability."[4] At least at first glance, the coalition represents the national strategic effort, while the task force represents the military campaign designed to achieve the military objectives within that effort. However, the actual relationship between the two efforts and the degree to which they are integrated and complementary is not particularly clear. For example, the CJTF-OIR organization chart in Figure 3.1 shows a command relationship with

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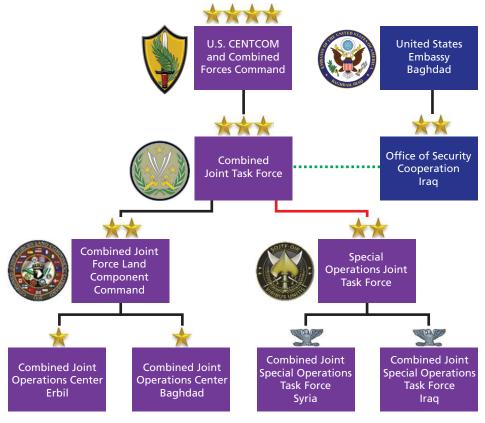
[1] U.S. National Security Council, 2005.

[2] This information was recorded from the website of the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL (DoS, undated) on May 10, 2016.

[3] This information was drawn from the CJTF-OIR website on May 10, 2016 (OIR, undated).

[4] CJTF-OIR website (OIR, undated), as of May 10, 2016.

Figure 3.1
CJTF-OIR Command Relationships

SOURCE: CJTF-OIR, undated.

RAND *RR1562-3.1*

USCENTCOM, which in turn reports directly to the Secretary of Defense and the President, but no observable, direct relationship with the global coalition.

There are also apparent distinctions between the coalition mission and the task force mission. The coalition seeks to *degrade* and *destroy ISIL* through a *counterterrorism strategy*, while the task force seeks to *militarily defeat Daesh* by disrupting its command and control, removing safe havens, cutting its funding, destroying its equipment, and killing its fighters.[5] One seeks to degrade and destroy terrorists, while the other seeks to defeat a military force, but the group is a hybrid insurgent-terrorist force. In one of many other signs of inconsistency and lack of unified effort, the coalition calls the group ISIL, and the task force calls the group Daesh. It is not clear whether the mostly conventional and advisor-driven military campaign is part of, or separate from, the counterterrorism strategy. While the task force makes a limited effort to describe "defeat," the coalition does not explain what it would mean to "destroy" IS. As the next section argues, these semantic issues present real challenges both to the people attempting to execute the counter-IS strategy and to nongovernmental experts and the public attempting to understand the strategy.

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[5]   CJTF-OIR website (OIR, undated), as of May 10, 2016.

U.S. Government Strategies for Countering IS as of Mid-2016

This report is predicated on the assessment that the current strategy to defeat IS is inadequate or at least inadequately articulated.[6] While the operational military campaign to roll back IS territory, kill its leaders and fighters, and destroy its equipment and finances in Iraq and Syria may have succeeded to a great degree by the time this report is published, these successes may be reversed over time if the military strategy is not refined and then better situated within regional and grand strategy. This section briefly describes shortcomings in the current strategy and its articulations. The challenge IS poses is incredibly complex; the planning process available to the civilian and military planners is partly inapplicable and inadequate; and hundreds, if not thousands, of complex, nuanced debates over various options and policies have taken place behind closed doors between seasoned professionals, all of whom may understand the resulting flaws in the public strategy. This critique is intended to address a flawed process, not necessarily the thinking or effort that went into the process.

Critique in this section addresses the public incarnations of the U.S. strategy to defeat IS. While there may be clearer strategies in the classified realm, these would be of limited relevance to building and sustaining the kind of global support necessary to fight IS around the world and over the kinds of extended timelines U.S. leaders have envisioned.[7] While specific military strategies may benefit from restricted information and deception, regional strategies involving coalition partners cannot sustain this kind of secrecy; classification of the strategy is neither useful nor practical. Some technical and tactical elements of the counter-IS strategy should remain secret, including the specific military campaign plan. But the strategy itself must be available both to the public and to the governments and citizens of the more than 60 countries currently supporting—either with direct military force or with little more than de jure membership—the counter-IS coalition. At the very least, the public strategy must offer an honest, logical, flexible, and realistic plan for success, or it risks losing public support. That risk is evident in the current public strategy, particularly in its vague and inconsistent end states.

Ends: Degrade, Destroy, and Defeat

Chapter One reported two official end states for IS. The first is to *degrade* and *destroy ISIL* (IS), and the other is to *militarily defeat Daesh* (IS). While one might nest the military strategy to defeat IS within a broader global effort to degrade and destroy IS, this linkage is not made clear, as we will discuss later. More important for the counter-IS strategy, the government has made insufficient effort to define *degrade*, *destroy*, and *defeat*. *Degrade* could be interpreted in so many ways that it is rendered meaningless without clear explanation. Degradation is a process, not an end, so it cannot be aligned with termination criteria and is therefore not specifically helpful to the staffs executing the strategy. Degrading IS is a necessary and inclusive part of the process of destroying IS, so its mention as an end is superfluous.[8] This is not to say that

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[6] See Chapter One.

[7] For example, former Army Chief of Staff Raymond Odierno stated that defeating IS might take "10 to 20 years" (Mehta, 2015).

[8] Some argue that the use of the term *degrade* is intended to convey process rather than end, so it is appropriate and useful. See, for example, Chuck, 2014.

the inclusion of *degrade* as an end state is unusual. Use of similarly unclear terms in describing an end state is common for ill-structured problems.[9]

Destroy offers prima facie simplicity, but the term is actually a complex one even for the U.S. military. Joint military doctrine offers definitions for an incredible array of military acronyms and terms, but not for *destroy* (JP 1-02, 2010). Joint doctrine does not define the term but, in almost every instance, uses it to describe a singular tactical activity focused against a physical asset, such as a tank or a small military unit in conventional war; *destroy* is the physical result of a physical action. For the field artillery, *destroy* has the specific meaning of "30-percent effects," or destruction of about one-third of the physical capability of the targeted enemy force (FM 3-09.21, 2001, p. A-17). Since the current strategy does not envision leaving 70 percent of IS intact, this definition is inapplicable. But the government offers no public definition of *destroy* that can be used to define termination criteria or to explain the desired end of IS in Iraq and Syria.

Defeat is similarly undefined, both in the counter-IS strategy and in joint doctrine.[10] Like *degrade*, *defeat* has a range of prospective meanings. For the counter-IS strategy, it might mean complete physical destruction, expelling the group from Iraq and Syria, breaking the leaders' will to fight, or reducing the threat they pose to a level manageable by police or paramilitary police in Iraq and Syria. Nothing in the public domain clearly explains what *defeat* means in the context of CJTF-OIR's military strategy. Absent a clear explanation, it does not seem possible to derive the kind of termination criteria the military needs to plan a campaign or determine the end of its involvement.

More troubling is the application of military terms most suitable for tactical operations or campaigns to describe national strategic end states. *Destroy* is sometimes used to describe a tactical outcome in a conventional battle—the military might seek to completely destroy an enemy force that it can see and fix in place—but the term is rarely if ever used to describe a strategic outcome against an entire enemy force deployed across two large nation-states. Even in the context of the coalition's counterterror campaign, the word is arguably misused. Joint doctrine describes *counterterror* as "activities and operations taken to *neutralize* terrorists, their organizations, and networks to render them incapable of using violence to instill fear and coerce governments or societies to achieve their goals" (JP 3-26, 2014, p. vii, emphasis added). For the military and its special operations elements, *neutralize* means to render incapable but not necessarily to destroy. Joint doctrine recognizes that complete destruction of an entire organization is not only exceptionally difficult but often unnecessary for achieving the desired end state.

The larger, more complex, and more amorphous the organization, the more inapplicable such terms as *destroy* are. Defeating IS might be a more reasonable objective for the U.S. military, at least within the context of a military strategy. Military defeat could be accomplished by rendering the group incapable of holding territory or conducting terrorist attacks against the United States, its people, or its interests. But this end state does not describe what conditions should be left behind in Iraq and Syria or indicate whether the U.S. military will have to stay in both countries indefinitely to suppress IS, just as it remains in Afghanistan to try to

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[9] This assessment is based on a cursory review of operations orders for coalition operations in Afghanistan and Iraq between 2001 and 2016.

[10] It is not included in JP 1-02, 2010.

suppress a reemerging Taliban and Al Qaida.[11] More important, it does not describe defeat in the context of joint counterinsurgency doctrine, which describes the process of defeating insurgency as "primarily a political struggle" (JP 3-24, 2013, p. ix). As the end states are described, military defeat does not connect the military strategy to the regional strategy to an American grand strategy.

At least in the official explanations on websites and policy papers—with one exception described in the following subsection—neither the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL nor the CJTF-OIR end states appear to be connected to a broader regional or global strategy. Both groups have described tactical and operational objectives against an armed group, not end states for two of the most significant nation-states in the Middle East. This problem is either fed or exacerbated by the most recent joint counterterror doctrine—JP 3-26—which purposefully removes the term *root causes* to help counterterror planners focus on tactics (JP 3-26, 2014, p. iii). This establishes a clear division between CT and COIN that does not exist in reality and that does not apply to a hybrid insurgent-terror group, such as IS. The vague and inadequate linkage between the global coalition and the CJTF-OIR end states, the inadequate definitions of these end states, and the seeming contradictions of terminology make the strategy to defeat IS difficult to understand or explain even to expert practitioners. This confusion is magnified by the diverse and inconsistent descriptions of the strategy in the public domain.

Muddled and Inconsistent Articulation

Figure 3.2 presents a sample of four of these descriptions from the White House and the global coalition websites, all of which are available and appear to remain in effect simultaneously as of mid-2016. From left to right, in 2014 the White House describes nine "lines of effort," including supporting effective governance in Iraq; then the global coalition describes its five lines of effort; then the White House presented the four "pillars" of its counter-IS campaign from 2015; then the White House describes eight "things" it is doing to defeat IS in April 2016, including seeking a diplomatic solution in Syria. Supporting effective governance in Iraq, listed as one of the nine lines of effort in 2014, was not mentioned as one of the things the White House was doing in April of 2016.

These various efforts are inconsistent; do not describe how all the pillars, lines of efforts, and things will lead to the end states; do not coalesce the end states in to a national strategy; and do not clarify the global coalition or the CJTF-OIR end states. It is difficult to identify a clear set of ends, ways, and means for any of these individual efforts, even by looking across them collectively. As a result, the mid-2016 strategy presented to the public gives the appearance of activity without unified purpose.

One has to dig further to put the counter-IS strategy in context, and to identify where the government has articulated clearer regional end states. USCENTCOM plans and executes the military strategy to defeat IS, and a simple but clear regional strategy for the greater Middle East can be derived from its "Mission and Vision" statement. The ultimate purpose of all its activities is to "to establish the conditions for regional security, stability and prosperity"

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[11] If the conditions for IS revival are allowed to remain in both countries or in either country, the campaign would have no end. As it is currently executed in mid-2016, the military campaign centers on the physical destruction of IS by air and proxy ground forces. This kind of tactical counterguerrilla approach is incompatible with all the tenets of U.S. government counterinsurgency, which seeks to defeat insurgencies by addressing root causes. But it is not at all clear from the CJTF-OIR end-state description that the current strategy seeks to address the root causes of violence in either Iraq or Syria. See JP 3-24, 2013, and U.S. Government, 2009, for descriptions of U.S. government counterinsurgency tenets.

Figure 3.2
Various Official Articulations of the Counter-IS Strategy as of Mid-2016

Nine lines of effort November 2014 White House strategy	Five lines of effort September 2014 coalition strategy	Four pillars July 2015 White House strategy	Eight things we are doing April 2016 White House strategy
Supporting effective governance in Iraq	Providing military support to our partners	A systematic campaign of airstrikes against IS	Supporting and enabling global partners
Denying IS safe haven			Pursuing IS leadership
Building partner capacity	Impeding the flow of foreign fighters	Increasing support to forces fighting IS on the ground	Shrinking IS safe havens
Enhancing intelligence collection on IS			Protecting the homeland
Disrupting IS's finances	Stopping IS's financing and funding	Drawing on our substantial counter-terrorism capabilities to prevent IS attacks	Disrupting IS's finances
Exposing IS's true nature	Addressing humanitarian crises in the region		Humanitarian support
Disrupting the flow of foreign fighters			Disrupting foreign fighters
Protecting the homeland	Exposing IS's true nature	Providing humanitarian assistance to innocent civilians displaced by IS	Protecting the homeland
Humanitarian support			Diplomatic solution in Syria

SOURCE: The White House, 2014; U.S. Department of State, undated; Somanader, 2015; The White House, 2016.
RAND *RR1562-3.2*

(USCENTCOM, undated). This meshes closely with the joint DoD and DoS report to Congress on the government's policies for the Middle East and to counter violent extremism, "Section 1222 Report: Strategy for the Middle East and to Counter Violent Extremism," which we will refer to as the "1222 report." This obscure report, mandated by the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 111-92, 2015), describes a regional end state for the Middle East:

> The United States' objectives in the Middle East are . . . that terrorist groups no longer threaten the United States, our allies, and our interests; that our allies and partners enjoy stability, prosperity, and security; that governments in the region have the strength and legitimacy to provide both security and a positive future for their people; that open lines of communication allow critical trade and natural resources to reach the global economy . . . that governments respect the human rights of their people and address societal violence and discrimination; that women and men are able to live free from violence and participate fully in the political and economic development of their countries; that economies are open and realize their full potential. (Carter and Kerry, 2016, p. 1)

The report then goes on to describe a rationale for the military campaign and a loose variation of an ends, ways, and means approach to accomplishing its ends. The explanation in this report is deeper and clearer than those on any of the government websites describing the counter-IS strategy:

> [O]ne overarching objective is to degrade and ultimately defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) [IS] . . . ISIL's control of territory enables it to sustain its fight. Addressing ISIL's self-proclaimed "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria is essential to prevent attacks on the U.S. homeland, and on the home territories of our Coalition partners . . . . Our first objective in the campaign against ISIL must be to defeat ISIL at its core . . . . The destruction of ISIL in Iraq and Syria will help create the conditions necessary to promote more durable stability in both nations. Ensuring stability will require a whole of government approach, in which the U.S. will work closely with local governments as well as in close coordination

with our coalition partners. Encouraging increased legitimacy of the national and local governments by encouraging them to be accountable to their citizens and respect citizens' basic human rights are the core of durable stability. (Carter and Kerry, 2016, pp. 1–3)

The military campaign to defeat IS in both Iraq and Syria will thus set the conditions for the lasting local, then regional stability desired across the Middle East. This helps articulate the strategy but still leaves many questions unanswered. As an end, it seeks to defeat IS and then to establish stability, in that order, but describes an approach that seeks to accomplish both in parallel, in accordance with the 2009 U.S. government *Guide to Counterinsurgency* (U.S. Government, 2009). This explanation describes efforts to establish government legitimacy as supporting, rather than central, efforts yet seeks to achieve political end states that hinge on government legitimacy. The 1222 report suffers from the same lack of end-state clarity as the official websites: It uses *defeat* and *destroy* interchangeably, without describing either end in detail. It also proposes a global counterterror effort that seems more suited to neutralization than destruction. In any event, the report is not policy guidance, and its role in affecting or reflecting strategic design is unclear.

Even with the incomplete but helpful explanations in the 1222 report and with further detail from key leaders in a wide array of publicly available interviews and speeches, it is difficult to fit the various pieces of the mid-2016 counter-IS strategy together to identify clear end states or to situate a context-appropriate military campaign within a clear regional and global strategy. This is due in part to the complexity of the problem, the inadequacy of the conventional strategic planning model to address irregular challenges, and the fact that this strategy was written not with forethought but in response to a rapidly emerging threat. Sometimes the second and third iterations of strategies to counter irregular threats, written after the dust of initial confrontation has settled, are better than the first. The U.S. National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (NSC, 2005)—written two years after the initial invasion of Iraq—offers a relevant example, and also the outline of a more practical approach to ends, ways, and means for irregular war.

The 2005 National Strategy for Victory in Iraq: A Reasonable Template

The United States led a coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003 to displace the government of Saddam Hussein. By the end of 2003, various insurgent groups were challenging the coalition presence and the new Iraqi government; by 2005, Iraq was deep in the throes of a multifaceted insurgency. It was during this period that AQI rose to prominence and set the stage for the eventual success of IS. In an effort to realign its approach to deal with the insurgency, the NSC delivered the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (NSC, 2005). There is much to criticize in the 2005 strategy document: It distracted in some places by trumpeting progress at the expense of proposing future action; it claimed to be measurable when it was becoming clear to many that progress in irregular war is not suited to measurement; and it repeated some official statements that, by 2005, had alienated a sizable portion of the U.S. electorate.[12] For example, then–Senate majority leader Harry M. Reid stated that the strategy "recycled [President Bush's] tired rhetoric of 'stay the course'" (Branigin, 2005). Yet while it is partly flawed and perhaps rightly subject to criticism on many fronts, the document also presented a clear and logical national

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[12] For an examination of measurement in irregular war, see Connable, 2012.

strategy that, in turn, reflects lessons from the literature on strategic design and counterinsurgency. It also sets measured end states and ways to help guide military strategy.

The National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (hereafter referred to as "the 2005 strategy") established an end state that bears remarkable similarities to the regional end state in the 1222 report: "We will help the Iraqi people build a new Iraq with a constitutional, representative government that respects civil rights and has security forces sufficient to maintain domestic order and keep Iraq from becoming a safe haven for terrorists" (NSC, 2005, p. 1). Just as the mid-2016 counter-IS strategy was pursued along "lines of effort," the 2005 strategy sought to pursue its end state along three complementary "tracks"—political, security, and economic— each with three stages of effort, then eight "strategic pillars," with at least five "lines of action" per pillar. The 2005 strategy explained why Iraq is a vital U.S. interest, explains why the United States could not fail in Iraq, described the threat, and took firm steps to set expectations for a long-term campaign.

In addition to providing a reasonable, if imperfect, national strategy, the NSC offered two additional lessons for the development of a better strategy to counter IS. First, in NSC, 2015, it describes a national—or in practical terms, regional—end state in political rather than military terms. Insurgents are mentioned only to establish the basis for action and as a target in a line of effort, not as part of the strategic end state. While one might disagree that the United States should seek to democratize Iraq, the articulation of this political end to guide military action matches DoD's expectations and nearly all expert opinion on strategic design: National leaders should design end states centered on achieving political goals and lasting peace, not on the particulars of military activity or operational objectives. While the 2005 strategy discusses "lines of effort" and "pillars," the most important part of the strategy—the end state— elevates and removes the regional strategy from operational context. This is an important step to ensure that the President's strategy is not continually undone by changing battlefield conditions. Here, the *Counterinsurgency Guide*, targeted at all U.S. government agencies, explains the best strategic approach to COIN and the purpose of end states:

> Success in COIN can be difficult to define, but improved governance will usually bring about marginalization of the insurgents to the point at which they are destroyed, co-opted or reduced to irrelevance in numbers and capability. U.S. intervention may cease when success is assured but before it is actually achieved. Ultimately, the desired end state is a government that is seen as legitimate, controlling social, political, economic and security institutions that meet the population's needs, including adequate mechanisms to address the grievances that may have fueled support of the insurgency. (U.S. Government, 2009, p. 4)

By contrast, the mid-2016 counter-IS strategy places the physical defeat and destruction of the enemy at the fore, while seeking improvement in governance as a supporting effort. The national counter-IS strategy is also vulnerable to even slight changes in conditions because it is written in operational rather than political terms. For example, if IS splits, subdivides, or changes its name, many of the national-level authorities and directives designed to defeat or destroy IS might have to be reconsidered or even rewritten. More important, such a simple change might bring the entire strategy into question, since it is focused on defeating or destroying a group rather than on achieving a greater environmental, or socioeconomic condition.[13]

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[13] The Centre on Religion and Geopolitics, 2015, elaborates on this point, suggesting that, at least in Syria, the narrow focus on IS has created a strategic myopia that, in turn, is undermining chances for long-term stability and peace.

Second, the 2005 strategy describes a graduated, conditions-based approach to achieving the desired end state. In three simple bullets, the strategy presents a partly inadequate, partly flawed, but logical pathway to strategic success. The logic of this approach suggests an alteration to the western end state paradigm. These are the three strategic phases of the 2005 Iraq strategy, broken down by "short," "medium," and "longer" term (NSC, 2005, p. 1):

- **Short term**: Iraq is making steady progress in fighting terrorists, meeting political milestones, building democratic institutions, and standing up security forces.
- **Medium term**: Iraq is in the lead defeating terrorists and providing its own security, with a fully constitutional government in place, and on its way to achieving its economic potential.
- **Longer term**: Iraq is peaceful, united, stable, and secure, well integrated into the international community, and a full partner in the global war on terrorism.

There is much to critique in the way these objectives are written. Use of present participles, such as *making* and *meeting*, undermines efforts to generate finite military strategic criteria for each phase. Such terms as *steady progress* and *economic potential* are so imprecise that they may seem unhelpful. But despite these apparent drawbacks, the phased, conditions-based model is useful. It helps anchor what seemed in 2005, and seems to many in 2016, as a very (or overly) ambitious long-range end state with a series of more digestible and reasonable intermediate steps. Each of these steps also helps guide the military campaign by providing a loose pathway toward the end state. While the language in these 2005 phases may be too vague, there is also value in avoiding too much precision or direction: The military needs guidance, but it also needs leeway to adapt its campaign over time as conditions and the enemy change.

Most important, this phased approach serves as an example for how national strategy can and should leverage the concept of *intermediate objectives* from campaign design when the end state appears distant, the challenge complex, the enemy diffuse, and public support for the strategy might waver.

Summarizing the Modified Approach to Counter IS

There is general consensus in the community of Western national security experts that American strategy in the Middle East has consistently been inadequate. This consensus carries over to assessments of the 2014–2016 counter-IS strategy.[14] Sufficient blame has been cast, and the shortfalls are widely acknowledged. The next U.S. administration can chart a better course by fully reassessing and rewriting the counter-IS strategy.

The following chapter analyzes options for a phased strategic approach designed to help set clear objectives and to manage political expectation. It offers a selection of three broad strategic approaches with associated regional and situational strategies. Then, leveraging the SME elicitation and workshops, it provides a more detailed breakdown of short- and medium-term objectives and envisioned states for all three grand strategic options: continuous CT, practical stability, and legitimated stability.

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[14] These statements derive from RAND's literature review.

Analyzing Options for Defeating IS in Iraq and Syria

This chapter presents three strategic options for defeating IS in Iraq and Syria: (1) continuous CT, (2) practical stability, and (3) legitimated stability. This list is certainly not exhaustive; possible permutations are effectively limitless. Instead, these three options represent a derivation of collective SME input. Each of these three options is then presented in terms of a simple, linear logic chain, moving from strategy, to short- and medium-term objectives, then to the envisioned state. Next, each section shows how a ways and means approach can be used to achieve short- and medium-term objectives in Iraq and Syria while moving toward an end state in both countries.

All these options and the analysis of the ways and means approaches are derived from the SME elicitation and workshops, with input from the literature review and brainstorming sessions we conducted. The emphasis here is on broad binning, rather than on refined plans and cost estimates: The purpose of this chapter is to assist with the selection of a strategy. The strategies offered here are meant as a starting point for debate over a nearly clean-slate counter-IS strategy, rather than as fixed paths. Chapter Five presents our recommended approach to addressing IS in both Iraq and Syria.

Selecting a Strategic Approach and Appropriate Counter-IS Strategic Design

The first step is to select a broad strategic approach appropriate to policymaker viewpoint. Selection should reflect both a general outlook on the threats of terrorism and regional instability, and a reasonable understanding of the root causes that sustain IS in Iraq and Syria. Chapter Three presented an argument that the primary root cause in both Iraq and Syria is Sunni Arab disenfranchisement with their respective governments. While each Sunni Arab chooses to support or join IS based on a range of idiosyncratic issues, including fear of Iranian domination, sectarian resentment, personal anger at security forces, etc., we contend that the failure of the GoI and the GoS to provide legitimate governance to its Sunni Arab populations lies at the root of the problem. Therefore, if both governments could reconcile with their Sunni Arab populations and provide legitimate governance, IS would find it increasingly difficult to operate and then survive in both countries. Selecting a strategic approach depends in great part on whether, and then how, root causes can be addressed.

Table 4.1 provides three descriptions associated with each of the three SME-derived strategic outlooks. Each is written from the aggregated perspectives of the SMEs who presented similar options during the elicitation processes, as interpreted through the modified strategic planning model recommended in the previous section. Separating these three approaches

along distinct lines is, to some degree, an artifice: In practice, the United States has applied a dynamic mix of all three of these approaches and will likely continue to do so under the next U.S. administration. This report does not seek to address or apply any school of international relations or political science theory. Readers will see elements of realism, liberalism, and constructivism in the three options, but the parallels here are not as clear as the ones Barry R. Posen and Andrew L. Ross have offered.[1] The purpose here is not to replicate the reality of a complex, transregional grand strategic design or to extend scientific debate over international theory, but simply to help policymakers choose a situational strategy to address IS that fits their most prominent worldview.

How should policymakers choose one of these three broad strategic approaches to defeat IS? There is no set of empirical, portable selection criteria for strategic design. Each policymaker will determine an approach based on an unbounded range of criteria, including resource availability, competing priorities, personal preference, staff advice, and political considerations. Each of these criteria will be weighted and filtered differently for each President and cabinet staff. In some cases, the momentum of events and the limits of American power will preclude seeking a preferred option. At this broad, overarching stage, the policymaker will select and then modify an approach based on an idiosyncratic set of selection criteria.

The following section builds from the selection model in Table 4.1, breaking down each broad strategic approach into a regional and situational strategy with inclusive short-term objectives, medium-term objectives, and end states.

Table 4.1
Selecting a Grand Strategy

Worldview	Strategic Approach
Terrorism is a fixed reality and the dominant threat in the global security environment. It would be better to have global peace and stability, but reality demands a continuous focus on reducing existing threats, preventing the emergence of new threats, and stopping attacks against Americans before they can occur. This will require partnerships but not the kinds of lasting entanglements that might lead to future quagmires. Root causes are endemic, enduring, and can never be successfully addressed; costs of doing so are excessive and success so unlikely that continuous CT is more efficient.	Continuous CT
The United States seeks global stability because global stability is good for U.S. national security and economic growth. Terrorism is a constant fixture of the national security environment and must be countered, prevented, and reduced. A stable state controls its territory, countering, preventing, and reducing terrorism without presenting a threat to U.S. interests. Therefore, the United States seeks to recreate stable nation-states everywhere, even if the states are, unfortunately, controlled by autocrats or oligarchs. Root causes can be suppressed by powerful nation-state governments and may be addressed piecemeal over time. Stability might eventually solve some root causes even with very limited direct U.S. assistance.	Practical Stability
The United States benefits when the world is more peaceful and cooperative than violent and unstable and when economic, political, and social disenfranchisement are minimized. Violent groups are defeated primarily through indirect methods, such as legitimization, democratization, economic aid, and regional coalition building. Military force is used sparingly and only in support of diplomatic and economic efforts, rather than as the primary tool for achieving strategic objectives. Serious effort should be made to address root causes as part of a process to find lasting solutions to regional problems, such as IS.	Legitimated Stability

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[1]   Posen and Ross describe four categories of grand strategy, each with incumbent analytical anchors, concepts of national interest, and approaches for execution. This is an interesting and useful way to conceptualize American grand strategy, but their findings do not align sufficiently with RAND's SME elicitation exercises to offer a basis for recommended changes or for further analysis of the counter-IS problem. See Posen and Ross, 1996/97, p. 4.

Analyzing Each of the Three Strategic Options

Each of the following three subsections includes a table that provides deeper insights into the possible ways and means for achieving the intermediate objectives and moving strategy ever closer to the envisioned state. Each describes the short- and medium-term objectives presented in the previous chapter. Analysis centers on the risks and possible rewards associated with each approach, describing military governance and humanitarian approaches and possible impacts on the strategic condition. Another section in the table provides assessments of requirements and their relevance to U.S. readiness, partner requirements, and political viability.

Option 1: Continuous CT

In this strategic outlook, terrorism is a fixed reality and the dominant threat in the global security environment. It would be good to have global peace and stability, but reality demands a continuous focus on reducing existing threats, forcibly preventing the emergence of new threats, and stopping attacks against Americans before they can occur. While all government agencies will continue to engage in activities that further stability and improve regional partnerships, all efforts will be *focused* on building and sustaining a fluctuating network of short-term security relationships that give the U.S. military and Intelligence Community access to foreign bases and airspace so they can conduct counterterror operations. This will require partnerships but not the kinds of lasting entanglements that might lead to future quagmires. Continuous CT is a modified but natural extension of containment theory.

Within this strategic outlook, the United States envisions a Middle East region that cannot export terrorism beyond regional boundaries and in which U.S. officials and civilians can operate with minimal, nearly low-level criminal threat from terrorists, such as those who belong to or work with IS. Because the United States seeks only temporary accommodation and not political outcomes, the forms and behaviors of Middle Eastern nation-states are not primarily relevant to the regional strategy. This allows the kind of flexibility needed for continuous, regional CT. This approach is predicated on the ideas that the United States cannot fix the problems of the Middle East and that, at best, it can only address the symptoms of root causes that may take decades or centuries to resolve.

Within this regional strategy, the situational strategy against IS in Iraq and Syria envisions a state in which IS poses at most a local, rural threat to Iraqi and Syrian security elements. Since root causes cannot reasonably be addressed, this will require continuous CT efforts designed to systematically reduce IS to the point that it is equivalent to a local terrorist organization. The primary ways and means required are U.S. or U.S.-partnered high-value individual (HVI) targeting operations and aerial bombing. This will require a permanent negotiated or forced presence in Iraq and the permanent ability to intervene in Syria as long as IS is present. In this envisioned state, IS will have no overt control over terrain and no significant presence in any urban area. IS will, at most, have the ability to attack local security forces or indigenous civilians located in remote rural areas. Incidents of urban bombing and assassination would be so rare that they would be all but irrelevant in terms of regional and global security. This envisioned state recognizes that IS might exist in perpetuity but will likely morph and divide over time. Therefore, the situational strategy will be entitled, "Terrorist Threat Reduction in Iraq and Syria" rather than "Countering IS." The short-term objective for this strategy is to reduce IS to the point that it no longer controls any urban terrain in Iraq or Syria. The medium-term

objective for this strategy is to reduce IS to the point that it cannot conduct attacks outside of Iraq or Syria. Table 4.2 represents this approach linearly.

Ways to achieve the short- and medium-term objectives of this strategic option are primarily tactical, centering on effective intelligence, aerial attack, and military special operations. The U.S. military would have a central role in the design of the situational campaign, while the DoS would focus its efforts on modifying and then maintaining a network of functional regional relationships to ensure military access to targets. An array of diplomatic, economic, and informational ways would be applied to maintain forward basing, overflight rights, and coalition assistance to direct combat operations. Means employed would include short-term treaties, heavy forward-deployed human and signals intelligence collection assets, U.S. and coalition fixed- and rotary-wing attack aircraft, special operations advisors to regional special operations forces (SOF), and special operations HVI targeting teams. This approach would closely resemble the current approach under CJTF-OIR and the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, but with enhanced resources and steeply curtailed restrictions on the use of force.

In Iraq, the U.S.-led coalition would significantly increase close air support to Iraqi ground forces; less emphasis would be placed on "by, with, and through the government" in exchange for faster and more effective reduction of IS territorial control. Forward air controllers and direct action units would be deployed with advancing Iraqi SOF, such as CTS. Military assistance would be shifted almost entirely to support CTS, Iraqi SOF, and the most effective Kurdish forces engaged with IS, at the expense of the long-term development of the Iraqi Army and Federal Police units, which are less effective at offensive operations and, ostensibly, more useful for postconflict stability. U.S. officials would provide direct payments and equipment to Iraqi tribal leaders and former regime military officers to assemble large, well-armed Sunni counter-IS forces. These would be used to pressure IS in economy-of-force activities until CTS or direct U.S. and coalition forces can be brought to bear.

Restrictions on working with or through Shi'a militias would be lifted, and the United States would actively seek Iranian and Shi'a militia support to help destroy and then suppress IS. In some cases, this might include providing direct close air support to Iranian or Shi'a militia ground forces to achieve tactical gains. In all likelihood, U.S. support to Shi'a militias would deepen Sunni distrust and resentment, but in continuous CT, popular support is less important than immediate tactical results. As IS withdraws, the United States would establish a number of special operations and aviation forward operating bases across Iraq for use in continuing suppression missions. So-called "boots on the ground" restrictions would be lifted; commanders would have extensive leeway in deploying combat forces as needed.

In Syria, direct action against IS would increase significantly, with heavier SOF elements and possibly some general-purpose force units conducting aggressive raids throughout IS-controlled territory. Effort to counter threat finances would also increase dramatically, with

Table 4.2
Continuous CT Approach

Grand Strategy	Regional Strategy	Targeted Strategy	Objectives		
			Near Term	Medium Term	End
Continuous CT, no long-term entanglements, stability optional	Temporary alliances, contained violence	Alliances, constant access, HVI targeting, bombing	Recapture of all urban terrain	IS can no longer conduct external attacks	IS and successor groups contained and reduced to local threat

more aggressive destruction of IS-controlled oil fields, transportation assets, banks, and other revenue-generating facilities. Targets would be prioritized according to the potential to damage to IS financing, with far less emphasis on post-IS reconstruction or economic development than under the current strategy. For example, this strategy would seek to completely destroy oil processing facilities currently under IS control. These efforts would require continuing basing and overflight rights through neighboring states. Diplomatic efforts will focus on maintaining and building bases and operational leeway with neighboring states.

Table 4.3 provides an assessment of the potential impacts and requirements of the continuous CT approach. This analysis is both ours and derived from SME input.

Option 2: Practical Stability

In this strategic outlook, the United States seeks global stability because global stability is good for U.S. national security and economic growth. Terrorism is a constant fixture of the national

Table 4.3
Assessment of Continuous CT Option

	Short Term (1–3 Years)	Medium Term (3–10 Years)
Impact on IS	IS shifts completely to guerrilla warfare and terrorism while seeking to shift financial assets and equipment to other parts of the caliphate. IS begins to splinter. Violence decreases in Iraq but increases in Syria as competition between splinter groups grows.	Facing constant pressure in both Iraq and Syria, IS central leadership relocates to another part of the caliphate. Guerrilla and terrorist elements remain active in both countries, and IS retains a plan to return, but the security situation prevents significant operations. International terror is affected, but a constant global CT effort is now required.
Governance	Governance in Iraq becomes more militarized and autocratic, and Shi'a militias assume greater authority and responsibility. Sunni areas are suppressed as Iraqi forces leverage U.S. combat power to gain control. Reduction of IS in Syria leads to a governance vacuum in the center, south, and east and increasing Kurdish control of the north.	Iraq becomes a de facto autocratic state, with most vestiges of democracy subsumed by a militarized central government. Continuous CT activities become the focal point for the government, which is able to maintain local stability through violence. However, Sunni disenfranchisement grows; splits in the Shi'a polity increase; Kurds remain divided; and the possibility of state fracture increases over time.
Humanitarian situation	Sunni areas of Iraq are all but destroyed, and returns of internally displaced persons (IDPs) slow as CT operations continue unabated after the Mosul operation. In Syria, the humanitarian crisis worsens as it spreads to Raqqa. Reconstruction halts.	Refugee flows increase from Iraq, matching those from Syria by the end of this period. Lack of good governance generates predictable results. Warlords begin to assume local control in Syria outside GoS areas. GoS control increases.
Coalition and external actors	Coalition partners provide increased military support and aggressive CT support in both Iraq and Syria. Iran steps back from direct operations in Iraq. Russia threatens retaliation for operations that might reduce GoS control in Syria; tensions escalate. However, the coalition holds in the short term.	Coalition fatigue increases significantly; throughout this period, members of the coalition drop out or gradually reduce their contributions to CT operations. Iran leverages continuing instability to cement its presence in eastern Iraq and western Syria. Russia operates in parallel; war is unlikely.
Cost	Moderate: Ramping up military activity but reducing humanitarian, governance activities	Moderate: Requires continuous presence in Iraq and in areas around Syria and military and intelligence activities
Effects on U.S. military	Heavy effect on air forces (need for repairs; degradation of air readiness in other theaters; heavy SOF rotations). Heavy CT focus in Iraq will pull intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets and SOF from other areas.	Significant investment in ISR, CT, air assets; troop morale may suffer; shift U.S. military toward unmanned aircraft to shrink CT footprint while still achieving objectives

security environment and must be countered, prevented, and reduced. A stable state controls its territory and counters, prevents, and reduces terrorism without presenting a threat to U.S. interests. Therefore—mimicking parts of various Cold War approaches—this strategy seeks to recreate stable nation-states in the Middle East, even if they are unfortunately controlled by autocrats or oligarchs. The major difference between this approach and continuous CT is that practical stability seeks to end IS by establishing strong central governance, while continuous CT is designed to operate with or without governance. Continuous CT is the approach taken in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region against Al Qaida.

A stable Middle East is one in which all territory is controlled by stable nation-states that do not pose a threat to U.S. interests. Ideally, these states would support U.S. military and economic activities, but support is a secondary objective to basic stability. Ideally, these states would be democratic, because (at least according to proponents of democratic peace theory) genuine democracies tend not to attack other democracies.[2] Building genuinely democratic states in the Middle East might help address root causes of terror, which would reduce ensuing counterterror risks and costs for the United States. However, encouraging democracy is also secondary to achieving practical stability. Previous efforts to achieve democratic reform in the Middle East have failed, and, arguably, have reduced stability by instigating revolts against oppressive regimes. Therefore, reform will be encouraged only where it clearly does not conflict with stability.

Stability is therefore paramount in Iraq and Syria. In the situational end state, IS remains in both countries as a local, mostly rural threat and may morph or divide over time; the tactical state for practical stability matches that for the continuous CT strategy. Reduction in IS capability is achieved primarily through physical violence directed against IS targets and through physical and psychological control of the population. State security elements control the means of force and apply them against IS with support from the United States, as needed. Short-term objectives are the imposition of strong state control in Iraq with the concurrent recovery of all urban terrain; a negotiated settlement that leads to a reconstituted, anti-IS government in Syria; and the recovery of Raqqa. Medium-term objectives are near-absolute government control of all urban terrain in both Iraq and Syria and reduction of IS and its successor elements to local, mostly rural terror threats. See Table 4.4.

This strategy emphasizes diplomatic, economic, and intelligence activities designed to identify and then foster stable nation-states. Ways to achieve the short- and medium-term objectives will include the identification of effective leaders in Iraq, Syria, and the surround-

Table 4.4
Practical Stability Approach

Grand Strategy	Regional Strategy	Targeted Strategy	Objectives		
			Near Term	Medium Term	End
Practical, with stability at almost any cost; nation-state control reduces violence	Strong alliances designed to stabilize	Negotiate to achieve government control	Iraq controls all urban terrain; Syria controls all urban terrain	Near-total government control; IS contained	IS and successor groups contained and reduced to local threat

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[2]   This theory has been supported by empirical analysis of coded case studies, but it is also contested. See, for example, Szayna, et al., 2001, App. C, and Pugh, 2005.

ing states. These leaders do not have to have popular followings; finding such leaders in Iraq and Syria has thus far proven fruitless. Instead, the prerequisite for selection is strong support from effective military groups and power brokers. Selection of effective leaders will be followed by aggressive diplomatic, economic, and intelligence efforts to ensure these leaders are elected or brought to power and that they stay in power. Direct military activity will be more critical in the short term but far less critical over time as the United States directly arms and supports increasingly large and effective national military, paramilitary, and police forces; this will require a significant increase in direct U.S. military support in the form of training, arms, munitions, intelligence, and supporting unilateral and coalition strikes. Economic support will be provided to help regional nation-states reinstitute rentier state relationships with their populations.[3] Some effort might be made to help raise the global price of oil, which would ease strains on regional state budgets; this might also have a positive long-term effect on global warming, which would help justify the additional expenses in a time of fiscal austerity.

In Iraq, the United States will support any change in government that leads to a reduction in IS control, a decrease in violence, and a return to stability. Preferably, this will occur within the bounds of the existing Iraqi constitution, since nonconstitutional government change would probably be destabilizing. Again, while democracy is preferred, this might unfortunately require a return to de facto autocracy. It might also require a negotiated settlement with Iran to divide Iraq into more manageable zones of control. In the short term, U.S. diplomatic efforts will center on stabilizing the Iraqi state. This will require significant economic and military investment at the outset to regain U.S. influence in the Iraqi political sphere. Aerial bombings will be accelerated to destroy IS capacity; HVI targeting will be expanded; and U.S. and coalition troops will be deployed and then positioned forward as necessary to reduce IS and expel the group from all urban areas. The United States will temporarily increase its presence at Al Asad Air Base and other military complexes but then reduce its presence as the Iraqi military and police take firm control of the countryside. Withdrawal will be strictly based on conditions: A permanent presence might be required to maintain stability.

In Syria, stabilization will require a negotiated settlement with both the GoS and Russia. While this will significantly increase Sunni disaffection and probably increase government abuse of the Sunni population (if that is possible), stability is more important in this strategic perspective than popular support. The terms of the Syria agreement may be favorable to the government and its backers and/or to negotiations with other, powerful parties that control ground. U.S.-led ground combat operations to remove IS from Raqqa, Deir Az-Zur, and other population centers would be considered once postconflict deals were in place.[4] However, the U.S. military would make clear from the outset that it does not intend to remain in Syria once IS is ejected from urban areas and reduced to a threat manageable by local forces; in this strategic option, the complex political situation in Syria is not considered amenable to a permanent U.S. presence. Since the envisioned state is stability, counter-IS operations could be extended to attack other extremist groups in Syria that might pose a threat to stability. Authorization for the use of force in Syria would be extended and only loosely restricted, primarily to prevent

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[3] In very general terms, a rentier state provides rents to its population in the form of money, subsidies, and employment in exchange for stability. Oil income serves as the basis for most rentierism in the Middle East. See, for example, Beblawi, 1987.

[4] There are many alternative transliterations for Deir Az-Zur, including various mixes of Deir Azzur, Deyr al-Zur, Deyr ez-Zur, Dir al-Zour, et al.

unnecessary civilian casualties. Force would include aerial bombing; HVI targeting; advising; and, as needed, direct ground combat.

Table 4.5 provides an assessment of the potential impacts and requirements of the practical stability approach. This analysis is both ours and derived from SME input.

Option 3: Legitimated Stability

In this option, the United States benefits when the world is more peaceful and cooperative; less violent and unstable; and economic, political, and social disenfranchisement are minimized. While efforts to help build good governance are expensive and time consuming, the costs to the United States in the long run decrease greatly as good governance and enfranchisement help reduce terrorism and other violence. This is not a hyperextenuated Wilsonian idealist view

Table 4.5
Assessment of Practical Stability Option

	Short Term (1–3 Years)	Medium Term (3–10 Years)
Impact on IS	IS is reduced to a guerrilla and terrorist organization in both Iraq and Syria by the end of this period. It is less effective in Iraq than it is in Syria because of the increasing strength of ISF. It regains credibility in Syria by shifting to an anti-GoS focus, claiming a "defenders of the faithful" role for Syrian Sunnis. Terrorism increases in Syria.	Facing constant pressure in both Iraq and Syria, IS central leadership relocates to another part of the caliphate. Guerrilla and terrorist elements remain active in both countries, and IS retains a plan to return, but the security situation prevents significant operations. International terror is affected, but a constant global CT effort is now required.
Governance	Within three years, a strong Iraqi leader similar to Nuri al-Maliki returns to power and begins to subsume elements of the Iraqi constitution; by the end of this period, Iraq is a de facto dictatorship. In Syria, the government gains significant ground with Russian and Iranian support. Southern Syria is under military control, while eastern Syria is in chaos.	Iraq is a struggling, Shi'a-dominated dictatorship facing an ongoing Sunni revolt that has no apparent end. Iraqi and Kurdish forces are in nearly open combat along the disputed territories line. Only continuing American military aid and Iranian military presence keep the state together. Shi'a militias are as powerful as increasingly large and capable ISF.
Humanitarian situation	Sunni areas of Iraq are all but destroyed, and IDP return is slowed as counterguerrilla operations continue unabated after the Mosul operation. In Syria, the humanitarian crisis worsens as it spreads to Raqqa. Reconstruction is conducted in Shi'a areas in Iraq.	Limited reconstruction goes on throughout Iraq, but not in the most dangerous Sunni areas. Kirkuk becomes a humanitarian disaster as Iraqi and Kurdish forces battle for control. Warlords begin to assume local control in Syria outside GoS areas. GoS control increases and civilians are subjugated throughout non-Alawi areas.
Coalition and external actors	Coalition partners increase military aid but decrease direct involvement as the GoI increases central control and the humanitarian crisis deepens. The negotiated settlement in Syria leads to further coalition disinterest as many member states seek reasons to leave.	The counter-IS coalition dissolves during this period. It will no longer be needed once IS has been reduced and is no longer capable of conducting international terror attacks. Political challenges associated with supporting autocrats would also make the coalition untenable over time. Iran is strengthened in the Middle East.
Cost	High: Significant up-front investment in military activity and developing security forces, propping up the Iraqi government, and paying militias.	Low: Investment in Iraq and Syria decline significantly as governments take control (costs may skyrocket if Iraq collapses).
Effects on U.S. military	Air forces are heavily affected (repair, degradation of air readiness in other theaters; heavy SOF rotations); advisor and equipment requirements are large in Iraq; and direct combat occurs in Syria	Investment in manpower is limited and is centered on ISR and advisors; most investment is through foreign military sales.

of the world but one that recognizes that perfect peace and stability are unrealistic objectives and that terrorism can arise even without social or economic disenfranchisement. But this view seeks to reduce the threats to America by constantly pursuing conditions that are more amenable to enduring security emerging from legitimate governance. The main difference between practical and legitimated stability is that the former requires constant pressure and control from the central state, while the latter is achieved by creating conditions in which a sufficient majority of citizens willingly self-regulate to achieve lasting communal security. Violent groups are defeated primarily through indirect methods, such as legitimization, democratization, economic aid, and regional coalition building.[5] Military force is used sparingly and only in support of diplomatic and economic efforts, rather than as the primary tool to achieve strategic objectives. A combination of direct and indirect measures are used to implement this strategy, as appropriate to regional and specific situational challenges.

Regional strategy seeks to reduce the conditions that allow such groups as IS to emerge and sustain themselves over time. The end state closely mirrors the one presented in the 1222 report: The Middle East consists of nation-states that are stable and secure, that maintain a monopoly on the use of force, and that place genuine value on human rights and the protection of minorities. The emphasis is on achieving legitimacy through good governance, service delivery, protection of minorities, and inclusiveness. This regional strategy also recognizes that this end state is likely to remain distant in perpetuity. The purpose of maintaining such a grandiose strategy is twofold: (1) to provide a guidepost for interagency programs and activities and (2) to ensure that military actions are secondary, not central, to the desired political outcome.

The situational strategy for legitimated stability centers on the reconciliation between the Sunni population and the Shi'a-led government in Iraq and on the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Syria in a way that results in the long-term protection of civilians and nongovernment combatants. This approach seeks to reduce the conditions that allowed IS to develop and thrive. Diplomatic, economic, and informational activities have primacy in both countries, although military activity will continue to help set the security conditions that will allow good governance to take root. This is a long-term strategy that acknowledges the continuing ethnosectarian and economic challenges in Iraq, the threat of Iranian influence, and the weak state of Iraqi governance and security force capabilities; long-term U.S. presence will be required. Syria strategy is predicated on establishing safe zones for moderate rebels, pressing Russia to the bargaining table, and removing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his top cronies from power. Short-term objectives are to achieve genuine reconciliation in Iraq, facilitating the removal of IS from Mosul and all Iraq's populated areas. In Syria, a brokered cease-fire allows the development of political negotiation. Medium-term objectives are to complete transition to a unified Iraqi government, with military support reduced to advising without air strikes. In Syria, legitimate governance is established either across Syria or in parts of Syria to ensure the protection of non–Arab-Alawi ethnosectarian groups. See Table 4.6.

Negotiation, cease-fires, reconciliation, refugee repatriation, and reconstruction are the primary ways in this strategic option. Military ways are continued aerial bombing, HVI targeting, and advising, but the primary military ways to achieve the short- and medium-term

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[5]   Legitimacy theory underpins this approach, just as it underpins current U.S. government doctrine and strategy on countering insurgency and civil violence. For varying opinions and interpretations of legitimacy, see, for example, Lipset, 1959; Hashim, 2003; Brinkerhoff, Wetterberg, and Dunn, 2012; Schmidt, 2004; Krepinevich, 2005; Perritt, 2004; Rothstein, 2009; Dryzek, 2001; and Gilley, 2006.

Table 4.6
Legitimated Stability Approach

Grand Strategy	Regional Strategy	Targeted Strategy	Objectives		
			Near Term	Medium Term	End
Legitimated stability through a primarily indirect approach to reduce violence by promoting good governance	Focus on developing good governance, with military support	Reconciliation in Iraq leads to a reduction in conditions amenable to IS	Reconciliation achieved, and Iraq retakes Mosul with U.S. support and Syria cease fire	Features a unified Iraqi government, urban control, U.S. providing advising only, legitimate governance in Syria	Legitimate governments prevent recurrence of IS; conditions do not exist

objectives will be intensive advising, intelligence generation, and material contribution to Iraqi and any available moderate Syrian ground forces (as discussed later). Military activities in this option closely resemble those in the current U.S. strategy but serve a supporting rather than central role. To emphasize the primacy of diplomatic and economic ways and means in this option, the entire interagency and coalition effort will be unified under a single civilian leader operating out of DoS. The military chain of command for specific operational approval would remain within current legal bounds, but the DoS lead would lead planning and direct operational-level activities.

In Iraq, the United States would focus in the short term on reconciliation between Sunni Iraqis and the Shi'a-led government, with senior U.S. diplomats leading a persistent, high-profile, and well-resourced mission. This effort would incorporate a wide array of economic incentives for both sides. Shi'a leaders currently have little appetite for direct U.S. involvement in reconciliation, so the United States will have to work hard to change this perception with renewed commitment to Iraqi security and to the Iraqi economy. Some guarantees of Shi'a security will have to be made, perhaps including a defense of the Baghdad ring in the event of IS's return.

If successful, this short-term activity would help achieve a medium-term tactical objective of generating willing Sunni opposition to IS and other extremist groups, which would, in turn, help reduce violence, facilitate state control of urban areas, and increase the size and capabilities of the Iraqi security forces. Parallel U.S. diplomatic efforts would focus on helping reduce internal Shi'a tensions and finding ways to ensure KRG remained part of a unitary Iraqi state. In this strategic option, a legitimate and unified Iraq poses the greatest threat to IS and offers the best chance for legitimated stability.

Syria offers less hope for holistic, legitimated stability in both the short and medium terms. Change will require direct U.S. intervention. Unlike in practical stability, legitimated stability does not allow negotiation to pursue lasting peace with the governments of Bashar al-Assad, Russia, or Iran. This option recognizes that al-Assad and his close associates are not capable of delivering legitimate governance to the Syrian people and that the extreme violence of the Syrian war has made reconciliation with al-Assad all but impossible. Giving GoS favorable terms is likely to perpetuate and exacerbate, rather than end, the violence. Therefore, this option seeks to protect Sunni, Kurdish, and other non-Alawi Syrians; create safe spaces for the return of refugees; and establish alternative governance in non-Alawi areas. Military force, including ground forces, may be used to expel GoS military forces from southern Syria and to expel IS from urban areas. All military activities will focus on the reduction of the IS threat

and the creation of safe zones for Syrian civilians (see Chapter Five). In the medium term, the United States and the coalition will invest in repatriation and reconstruction activities within these safe zones, focusing on the eventual development of legitimate local and regional governance. These efforts will be leverage to press Russia to negotiate and help remove Bashar al-Assad from power, while retaining Russian and many Iranian equities in Syria.

Table 4.7 provides an assessment of the potential impacts and requirements of the legitimated stability approach. This analysis is both ours and derived from SME input.

Table 4.7
Assessment of Legitimated Stability Option

	Short Term (1–3 Years)	Medium Term (3–10 Years)
Impact on IS	IS maintains its capability for approximately one year and is subsequently forced out of most populated areas. It loses popular support in both Iraq and Syria and is forced out of major population centers. It may hold on to Raqqa for one to two years, at most, but even this hold will become tenuous as the rest of Syria settles.	Absent popular support in either Iraq or Syria, IS shifts its major operations overseas. It retains low-level capabilities in both Iraq and Syria but begins to splinter. Infighting splits the group, weakens it, and makes it vulnerable to CT operations. By the end of this period, IS no longer poses a significant local or international threat from Iraq or Syria. Lack of a haven in crippling.
Governance	Negotiation, reconciliation, repatriation, and reconstruction are slow, difficult, and hampered by the lack of valid interlocutors. Factionalism is the biggest challenge during this phase. Increased diplomatic activity in Iraq increases U.S. credibility there, partly displacing Iranian presence. Removal of Bashar al-Assad in Syria comes toward the end of this period.	Iraqi government stabilizes; over time, most Sunni are able to reconcile and rejoin the ISF and other parts of the government. Kurds and Shi'a are still dissatisfied but live within the system. Bashar al-Assad and his cronies are removed, and a more moderate government takes power. Most of Syria is governed locally, although GoS is beginning to regain control in the east and south.
Humanitarian situation	Significant progress is made on IDP return in Sunni areas of Iraq, although reconstruction is slow and underfunded. As security stabilizes, more aid is available in Iraq. In Syria, stabilization of the south allows creation of a "safe zone" for partial Syrian refugee return.	By the end of this period, Sunni cities in Iraq have been rebuilt, and most IDPs and refugees have returned. Nearly one-half of all Syrian refugees have returned and are helping with slow and uneven reconstruction efforts; abuses continue in poorly governed areas. Estimates show that up to one-third of Syrian refugees will never return to Syria.
Coalition and external actors	Coalition support shifts from military activity to the contribution of military equipment and the support of Track 2 negotiations, economic aid, and direct reconstructions. Russian and Iranian influence ebbs, and Russia shifts objectives to solidifying GoS gains in western and northern Syria.	The counter-IS coalition shifts to become a regional CT coalition that centers on addressing root causes of terrorism with the support of intelligence and military activities. Iran gradually withdraws military forces from Iraq, and Russia withdraws to the western coast of Syria.
Cost	High: Adding significant economic and reconstruction investment in the short term will increase costs as military costs remain consistent.	Low: Costs decrease over time as military requirements ebb and as the governments of Iraq and Syria gain legitimacy. Primary costs in this phase are for reconstruction and intelligence.
Effects on U.S. military	The effects on air forces are moderate (repair, degradation of air readiness in other theaters; heavy SOF rotations); advisors increase.	Significant reduction in military requirements, with the exception of ISR. Activity centers on advising and military sales.

Summary

Other approaches or combinations of these approaches might be envisioned. For example, it would be possible to combine continuous CT with practical stability. However, that would obviate the potential benefit of a noncommittal world view essential to the continuous CT strategy. It would also raise the costs of success by shifting the focus from the supported state to the United States, thereby obviating the cost savings that might be achieved by using anocratic or autocratic proxy forces to suppress IS. Some elements of continuous CT are present in legitimated stability but are not central; any shift to focus on CT would undermine the centrality of legitimacy in this grand strategic approach. While other approaches are conceivable, this report addresses only the three suggested by the expert elicitation.

The next chapter presents and describes our recommended approach to legitimated stability in Iraq and Syria. This approach is predicated on the idea that both continuing CT and practical stability are more likely to attenuate and even exacerbate international terrorism and regional instability. It is time for the United States to settle into a viable, yet thoughtful and resource-conscious, long game in the Middle East.

A Comprehensive Strategy to Defeat IS in Iraq and Syria

The strategy offered in this chapter assumes it is desirable to defeat IS within a broader, long-term strategic plan for the Middle East. This approach rejects the idea that IS, or its likely splinter groups, or the violence and instability it represents, should or can be contained. It represents a detailed version of legitimated stability, the third option from Chapter Four. Implementation of this plan will require a careful recalculation of regional strategy and a concerted effort to set public expectations for the kind of commitment in time, resources, and political will that this strategy requires. The conclusion of this report addresses the rationale behind this strategy in further detail and recommends a new approach to expectation management for complex irregular warfare campaigns.

Preliminaries

Caveat: This Is a Starting Point for Detailed Strategic Planning

We do not suggest that this proposed strategy is a panacea or that it be read as a fixed roadmap for action. The intent of this chapter is to provide a timely example of a comprehensive, long-term strategy for defeating IS and stabilizing Iraq and Syria. This plan is intended as a starting point first for the bottom-up review and then for a more intensive debate involving U.S. and coalition military, government, and political officials.

By the time this report is published, many of the conditions described in Chapters One through Four may have changed. It is possible that IS will have been ejected from the western Euphrates River Valley or even from Mosul or Raqqa. Or perhaps there will be a change in either the Syrian or Iraqi governments that will alter the political dynamics that underlie the following recommendations. Unexpected, dramatic events are, unfortunately, rather common in war. For example, the Russian military intervention in Syria in late 2015 was unexpected and dramatically changed both conditions in Syria and U.S. options. However, the fundamental approach and many of the associated recommendations we present here—at the very least the desire to pursue a political accord with military support, rather than a tactical military victory with political support—will remain in place.

Inevitably, readers with deep knowledge of Iraq, Syria, IS, and the Middle East will find much to disagree with or challenge in this narrative. Based on our SME elicitation exercises, these points of contention are assumed. They are also encouraged, with the hope that these disagreements and challenges will stimulate a broader debate over long-term strategy in the Middle East.

Designing the Strategy

This proposed strategy is derived from the information, debates, expert input, and analysis described in Chapters One through Four. These chapters described the rise of IS, the sociopolitical conditions underlying its rise, and current efforts to defeat and destroy IS. This strategy is further informed by more than three years of RAND analysis of Sunni Arab sentiment (2013–2016), by one of the author's experiences on the Atlantic Council Task Force on the Future of Iraq, and by research for a forthcoming RAND report for the U.S. Army (Nader et al., forthcoming). This strategy, however, is ultimately the product of the subjective expert insight of the authors.

Why Legitimated Stability?

The authors selected this option—a derivation of legitimated stability, or stability that emerges from legitimate governance—over the other two options listed in Chapter Four (continuous CT and practical stability) for four overarching reasons. First, this approach best aligns with U.S. military and government policies on and understandings of insurgency, counterinsurgency, civil violence, and irregular warfare. Through several iterations of contemporary U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine—2006, 2009, 2013, 2014—there has been no change to the fundamental assumption that, "understanding grievances is key to addressing root causes of insurgency and creating durable stability" (JP 3-24, 2013, p. iii).[1] Until these joint and interagency assumptions about the causes of and solutions to social violence are changed, any U.S. government plan to defeat an insurgency and establish stability should seek to do so by addressing root causes.[2]

A population-centric approach also agrees with a critical mass of literature on irregular warfare and analyses of insurgency and other civil violence cases.[3] While there is no unanimity on the nature of insurgency and the value of population-centric approaches to solving national-level civil violence, there is sufficient empirical case study analysis to support a population-centric approach.[4] One of the authors of the present study (Ben Connable) coauthored an analysis of 89 insurgency and counterinsurgency cases with Martin Libicki, entitled *How Insurgencies End* (Connable and Libicki, 2010). That report found that insurgencies generally do not end until root causes are addressed. There are exceptions to this finding, but they are few and not necessarily relevant to this case.[5] Other RAND research reinforces this finding (Paul and Clarke, 2011).

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[1] Also see FM 3-24/MCWP 3-35.5, 2006; FM 3-24.2, 2009; U.S. Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, 2009; JP 3-24, 2009; FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, 2014.

[2] Doctrine is not intended to be applied strictly in every case. It is reasonable to suggest that specific cases, and perhaps even Iraq and Syria, call for modification to this approach. But the fundamentals of the approach should not be rejected until they have been considered and applied as intended: advanced patiently by conditions rather than time. For example, the time-phased withdrawals in Afghanistan and Iraq—both of which had to be reversed at great cost—should have been longer, more patient, and based on conditions. It should also be noted that the 2006 and 2009 versions of the U.S. counterinsurgency manuals were written specifically for and in recognition of the Iraq case.

[3] Here we add "and other civil violence cases" in recognition of the fact that coding civil violence is difficult. Different analysts might code a single case as insurgency, and also as civil war, instability, revolution, or something else.

[4] Analysts who might choose to be associated with a dissenting opinion include Douglas Porch of the Naval Postgraduate School and RAND colleague Gian Gentile. See Porch, 2013; Gentile, 2013. Also see Ucko, 2011.

[5] For example, the government of Sri Lanka used an enemy-centric approach to crush the Tamil Tigers insurgency in 2009; as of 2016, the insurgency has not recurred. However, it may recur in the future or evolve into a new threat (Connable and Libicki, 2010).

This recommendation also builds from three collective years of research that the lead author of this report conducted for various DoD sponsors, focusing on understanding Sunni Arab Iraqi grievances in the wake of the Nuri al-Maliki administration. Many Sunni openly claim their disenfranchisement from the GoI, and many also have requested a more active U.S. effort to bridge the gap between the Sunni Arabs and their government. It is clear from this research that the conditions that allowed IS to emerge will remain if reconciliation is not achieved. What follows is a series of quotes from Sunni Arab Iraqi tribal, business, and former military leaders:[6]

> Nobody represents my interests in Anbar. Not the government, not the tribes, nobody.

> We need an external, impartial power to step in to stop the fighting and to create reconciliation in Iraq.

> Most Anbaris want to go with the Americans. Other options are IS or Russia or Iran. Otherwise you're in a tent on a hill living a life of hell.

> There are a lot of fighters with IS who could be brought away in the name of nationalism.

> The U.S. entered into Iraq . . . . their obligation is to fix the problem in Iraq. Not every Anbari is an insurgent. For the future we cannot see anything good. It all looks black to us.

On September 17, 2014, the lead author of this report testified to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on the situation in Iraq. This testimony, published in *Defeating the Islamic State* (Connable, 2014a), built from the author's ongoing research and interviews with Sunni Iraqi Arabs. It stated that there would be no hope for a second awakening movement—the rise of Sunni Arab Iraqis from 2006–2008 that helped defeat AQI—as long as root causes remained unaddressed. Ongoing research in late 2014 showed that

> Absent reconciliation we can expect lasting instability in Iraq. We may physically defeat IS, but the ideas that cause young Iraqi men to support groups like IS and Al Qaida will live on. The group name will change . . . , but the violence will continue to destabilize the region, give space for international terror groups, and deprive millions of Iraqi of even a modicum of normal life . . . . Leveraging reconciliation—and using military force to support reconciliation rather than using reconciliation to support military force—seems to be the least costly and possibly the only way to defeat IS in Iraq and stabilize the country. (Connable, 2014a, pp. 8–9)[7]

Nothing that has occurred since late 2014 alters this assessment. In fact, the evidence recorded here reinforces it and suggests this approach for both Iraq and Syria.

Finally, the authors selected this approach because the other two options are more likely to extenuate and exacerbate instability in the Middle East, even if they are somehow able to contain or defeat IS in the short term. The continuous CT option that some of our SMEs

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[6]   These quotes are drawn from a series of anonymous semistructured interviews with Sunni Iraqi Arab tribal, business, and former military leaders from Al-Anbar Province, Iraq, from late 2013 through early 2016. Interviews were conducted in Amman, Jordan.

[7]   Also see Connable, 2014b; Connable, 2016a; and Connable, 2016b.

suggested (coincidentally, or in a few cases purposefully) conflated insurgency and terrorism with the threat of the Soviet Union and communism, harkening back to NSC Resolution 68 (Executive Secretary on United States Objectives and Programs for National Security, 1950). Containment perceives an insoluble problem—in this case, chaos, civil violence, and terrorism emanating from Iraq and Syria—and hopes to isolate it from the United States and its allies and to prevent its spread with targeted killing.[8] But insurgency and terrorism are not communism, and instant global communication makes the spread of ideas anathema to Western democracy far more efficient than was possible in the 20th century. IS has already spread violence to the United States and to its allies in the form of directed and incited terror attacks, including the murder of 14 American citizens in San Bernardino, California, in 2015. IS now exists as a global enterprise, with affiliates and sympathizers in all regions of the world.

There is overwhelming evidence that IS cannot be effectively contained (its many international affiliates being the most obvious refutations to the containment argument) and that the United States should not seek to contain a large-scale, hybrid insurgent-terrorist group in a geographic space so crucial to broader Middle East stability. It also appears unlikely that the United States has the political will, endurance, or even the military capability to indefinitely contain any large-scale insurgent-terror group, such as IS. The most pressing example of American irresoluteness, or perhaps relative incapacity in counterterrorism, is the survival and reemergence of Al Qaida: Even as IS has stripped away many of its supporters, Al Qaida has grown stronger in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and it has powerful affiliates in Yemen, Somalia, Syria, and North Africa (Walsh, 2016; Schmitt and Sanger, 2015; Humud, 2016).

Even assuming terrorism and communism could be conflated, this approach ignores what should be a central lesson from the Cold War. Arguably, the greatest bulwark against the spread of communism was the growth of strong, stable democracies in Western Europe. While there are cases in which "nation-building" has failed, there is also proven value in pursuing the long, difficult process to establish legitimate governance to ward off instability and to preserve American national security interests.

The practical stability option—which some of our SMEs alluded to or articulated in starkly practical terms—seeks to trade America's soft power, in the form of democracy, human rights, and economic growth, for temporary stability. Boris Johnson, who is now the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary and therefore a central player in coalition strategy debates, argued this position in December 2015:

> [W]e cannot afford to be picky about our allies . . . . Am I backing the Assad regime, and the Russians, in their joint enterprise . . . ? You bet I am . . . . This is the time to set aside our Cold War mindset. (B. Johnson, 2016)[9]

This proposes a Faustian bargain for the United States and its Western European allies. First, immediately after reaching a cease-fire agreement with the United States in September 2016, President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President al-Assad proved their capriciousness by accelerating the bombing of civilian targets in Aleppo. This included the reported barrel

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[8]   President Obama has referenced containment in his public discourse on IS, and several pundits have firmly recommended containment as a useful strategy (LoBianco, 2015; Cantelmo, 2014).

[9]   Johnson did include brief mention of linking cooperation to a timetable for al-Assad's withdrawal but did not explain how the coalition would simultaneously support al-Assad and Russia and force al-Assad from power.

bombing of a civilian hospital.[10] Second, while it would be a logical fallacy to claim that rec-reating and supporting Middle Eastern dictatorships will *necessarily* lead to a recurrence of the 2011 Arab Spring revolts, it seems far more likely than not that it would: Dictatorship breeds disenfranchisement, which in turn contributes to insurgency and terrorism. Similar practicali-ties did much to help set the conditions for the present disaster. Third, the transparency of global media in 2016 would make it all but impossible for a U.S. administration to undertake such a blatantly recidivist approach to regional stability. In all likelihood, the United States will continue to work with many nondemocratic regimes to preserve its national security interests (including many regimes in the Middle East), but—putting aside all considerations of histori-cal American cultural values and emphasis on human rights—it would be hard pressed to help *establish* brutal dictatorships or oligarchies under the glare of the social media spotlight. For the United States and its European allies, this is neither a culturally appropriate nor a practical approach to defeating IS.

These two unpalatable options reflect an amalgamation of SME inputs; they are intended to help clarify the pros and cons of various broad approaches. There are certainly combinatory options of continuous CT and practical stability that should be considered. For example, the United States could pursue a far more aggressive CT approach while putting equal effort into building government legitimacy. Present policy appears to combine limited aspects of both continuous CT and practical stability. Whatever policy the next President selects will most likely include aspects of all three broad approaches. To this end, the proposals recommended in the next sections pursue political objectives while leveraging military action. The differ-ence here is not Manichean—it would be almost impossible to deal with IS absent the use of force—but is instead a matter of conceptual, practical, and overt emphasis on political over military effort. This recommended approach places a strong bet on America's soft power, back-ing a push to political accommodation with economic and military leverage. It seeks the same worthy objectives that secretaries Carter and Kerry articulated in the 1222 report in 2016:

> that governments in the region have the strength and legitimacy to provide both security and a positive future for their people . . that governments respect the human rights of their people and address societal violence and discrimination; that women and men are able to live free from violence and participate fully in the political and economic development of their countries; that economies are open and realize their full potential. (Carter and Kerry, 2016, p. 1)

Military force helps set the stage for these sociopolitical objectives, and seeks to guarantee con-tinuous forward progress toward stability.

Approach: Long-Term Legitimization and Stabilization with Phased Objectives
The following two sections, one on Iraq and one on Syria, offer a brief strategic rationale; a proposed national strategic end state; and a conditions-based, phased approach to defeating IS by establishing legitimate governance in each country. Both strategies address political, eco-nomic, and military lines of effort and offer a brief analysis of regional issues likely to affect, or be affected by, these actions. The overarching approach to both Iraq and Syria is long-term, phased by condition rather than by time. This strategy assumes that the United States will have

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[10] See, for example, Perry and Davison, 2016, and "Syria Conflict: Aleppo Hospital . . . ," 2016.

to maintain a long-term presence in the Middle East and that this is to American advantage: Ill-timed withdrawals are ineffective and generally lead to a loss of influence, a requirement for further intervention, or both. Chapter Six further analyzes the rationale for a long-term strategy to defeat IS and stabilize Iraq and Syria.

Proposed Strategy: Defeating IS in Iraq

The end state for Iraq is predicated on the fact that IS has a large, sustainable presence there; that it is endogenous to Iraq and is not an outside influence as in Libya, Egypt, or Nigeria; and that ongoing Sunni Arab disenfranchisement in Iraq will ensure a ripe environment for IS survival, revival, and perhaps mutation over time. This envisioned end state is targeted not at the defeat of a single group—a strategy more suitable to places where IS is an exogenous phenomenon—but at setting the conditions in Iraq that will address all aspects of Sunni Arab violence against the state and against international targets.

While current end-state objectives for IS are problematic and while a comprehensive end state for IS might be elusive, the U.S. government has articulated clear and remarkably consistent end states for Iraq. The first of these appeared in the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (NSC, 2005). It proposed a clear end state objective for the sovereign state of Iraq:

> We will help the Iraqi people build a new Iraq with a constitutional, representative government that respects civil rights and has security forces sufficient to maintain domestic order and keep Iraq from becoming a safe haven for terrorists. (NSC, 2005, p. 1)

This 2005 end state for Iraq bears remarkable similarity to the 1222 report, which proposes an end state for the Middle East that describes individual sovereign, allied states as stable, democratic, economically prosperous, and capable of preventing international terrorism (Carter and Kerry, 2016, p. 1).[11] This consistent 2005–2016 end state vision, applied to Iraq circa 2016–2017, would require the establishment of legitimate governance, which would demand root causes be addressed, which would in turn help ensure the diminution of local and international terrorism from the now-disenfranchised Sunni Arab population. Since a unified Iraq would be far more capable of defeating IS and providing legitimacy than a fractured state, sustained state unification would be a prerequisite.[12]

We would thus articulate the **end state for Iraq** as follows:

> *Iraq is a unified state capable of defending its borders from foreign invasion. The government maintains a monopoly on the capacity to use force; all members of paramilitary and militia*

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[11] Carter and Kerry, 2016, p. 1, also describes the objectives:

> The United States' objectives in the Middle East are: that all countries of the region meet their international commitments on non-proliferation; that terrorist groups no longer threaten the United States, our allies, and our interests; that our allies and partners enjoy stability, prosperity, and security; that governments in the region have the strength and legitimacy to provide both security and a positive future for their people; that open lines of communication allow critical trade and natural resources to reach the global economy . . . that governments respect the human rights of their people and address societal violence and discrimination; that women and men are able to live free from violence and participate fully in the political and economic development of their countries; that economies are open and realize their full potential.

[12] Debate over the ethnosectarian division of Iraq is ongoing. Thus far, arguments to support such a division are insufficient. See, for example, Connable, 2016b.

organizations are incorporated into uniformed government services. Citizens from all ethnic, sectarian, geographic, and gender groups participate in the governance process through elections and free speech and are protected from oppression, discrimination, or other harms that might be applied or sanctioned by the government. Iraq's economy is sufficient to sustain a national budget, infrastructure improvement, and commerce with international support comparable to that for stable states of the same size. Terrorist activities inside Iraq are limited to the point that they can be addressed by law enforcement activities. No international terror group maintains sanctuary in Iraq, and no international terror acts are planned or executed from Iraq.

This end state establishes ambitious goals, and one of the greatest failings of previous U.S. policies in the Middle East is that they have, arguably, set unrealistic expectations for rapid achievement of total stability in such places as Lebanon, Libya, and Iraq (Bacevich, 2016, pp. 1–6). To mitigate legitimate concerns that these goals might be unrealistic in the short term, this strategy for Iraq seeks to pursue them in attenuated stages. The following subsections will present a conditions-phased campaign with intermediate objectives that will seek to build—gradually, and only as phased conditions are met—toward the envisioned end state. The campaign will be centered on three pillars: (1) Sunni Arab-GoI reconciliation, (2) GoI reform, and (3) retaking Iraq through military means.

Some issues, including the specific resolution of disputed territories between Kirkuk and Mosul and Kurdish status in the unified Iraqi state, will require more time-sensitive, up-to-date analysis than can be provided in this report. However, the overall long-term approach suggested here will provide a way for the United States to help resolve these seemingly intractable issues. To defeat IS and prevent its return, the United States will have to help mitigate or resolve all the major issues currently destabilizing Iraq. This means that the United States will have to remain heavily engaged in Iraq for many years, perhaps decades, just as it has remained engaged in Korea after the mid-20th century Korean War and in Kosovo more than two decades after U.S.-led coalition intervention there. Therefore, this end state for Iraq represents a long-term commitment to stability. There are no quick fixes for Iraq.

U.S. and Allied Steps: Political and Governance

To achieve a stable, legitimate Iraq, the United States and its allies would shift from a primarily tactical, military campaign to a primarily diplomatic and economic campaign, yet with strong military action in support of these efforts. This approach seeks to change the conditions in Iraq that allow IS to thrive, rather than to attack IS to set the stage for follow-on political developments.[13] The new strategy pursues stability in Iraq primarily *through* efforts to reconcile Sunni Arabs with the GoI, and to establish the government's legitimacy with the entire population. This approach will require more direct influence from the United States and its allies in the reconciliation process and considerable economic incentives.

Phase 1

Reconciliation

U.S. diplomats will take charge of the Sunni Arab–GoI reconciliation process, establishing U.S. and coalition control of what is now a foundering GoI effort. U.S. policy will make clear that the success of reconciliation is central to the overall plan to defeat IS and stabilize

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[13] While the current strategy encompasses significant efforts to establish good governance in Iraq, these efforts are secondary to the physical defeat and destruction of ISIS.

Iraq: If the Sunni Arabs reconcile with the GoI, IS will have no basis for existence or reemergence. Current analyses of Sunni Arab Iraqi leadership indicate that it will take time—perhaps years—for a legitimate leader to emerge from the Sunni Arab polity.[14] Therefore, reconciliation will begin with a comprehensive assessment of Sunni grievances, then an assessment of GoI capacity to address these grievances. U.S. diplomatic activities will center on aligning grievances with GoI political capacity.

GoI Reform

U.S. diplomats will conduct a comprehensive review of the ongoing GoI reform efforts. This process will build toward an eventual, Iraqi-led constitutional convention, which will allow all parties—Sunni, Shi'a, Kurd, and other minorities—to have another opportunity to ensure that their roles and livelihoods are protected. This process will be overseen by the U.S.-led coalition. Intensive efforts will be made to transition the language of reform away from ethnosectarian divisions toward geographic federalism. U.S. and coalition diplomats will facilitate GoI consideration of increased geographic federal powers, and perhaps a geographic realignment of provincial and regional boundaries. This will be done with the intent of reducing the ethnosectarian discord that underlies much of IS's popular support.

Phase 2

All governance and political efforts will progress to the point of having full primacy over military efforts for both the U.S.-led coalition and the GoI.

Reconciliation

The goal is to implement a comprehensive GoI reconciliation plan. This will, at first, be a one-sided plan that will directly address collective Sunni Arab grievances, such as prisoner release and fair judicial practices. U.S. diplomats and military personnel can and should aid in the implementation of this plan. Simultaneous to GoI implementation of the plan, the United States will continue to work with Sunni Arabs and other groups to help coalesce Sunni Arab leadership, with the eventual goal of identifying legitimate interlocutors for negotiations with the GoI.

GoI Reform

The goal is to implement a reform package that addresses major concerns with GoI and to set the stage for constitutional reform if it is still deemed necessary and useful; this will require careful assessment during this phase. The United States can and should help the GoI plan for constitutional reform, but the process should be Iraqi led. Here, it is important to closely align reconciliation efforts to ensure that emerging Sunni interlocutors participate in the conceptual development of a constitutional convention. The reform pillar in this phase will culminate with the Iraqi constitutional convention, an event that will also address standing laws. This convention will focus on reconsideration of human rights; de-Ba'athification; judicial reform; removal or significant diminution of ethnosectarian language in Iraqi law; and, if possible, the elimination of enforced ethnosectarian divisions in Iraqi government.

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[14] This assessment is based on three years of ongoing research into Sunni Arab Iraqi leadership. See, for example, Connable, 2016a.

Phase 3

Prerequisites for moving into this phase are the successful passage of a Sunni Arab reconciliation package, the successful implementation of a GoI reform package, and a successful constitutional convention. Success will be determined by the U.S.-led coalition organization that has unified command for counter-IS operation—or preferably for stabilization activities—in Iraq. This phase will begin with a complete reassessment of progress and objectives; it is rare for long-term plans and objectives to remain relevant and wholly intact over the course of years. This reassessment should be announced to the public well in advance—one year or more—to ensure that expectations for change are set. Actions designed to move Iraq closer to the original or to a modified end state will follow the reassessment.

U.S. and Allied Steps: Security

Military action against IS is the third pillar in the counter-IS strategy. Aggressive military action will continue but will be accelerated to establish nationwide security as quickly as possible. As necessary, this acceleration of military action will set aside the current "by, with, and through the government" approach to supporting the Iraqi military. Military action will be focused on regaining control of all population centers in Iraq. This strategy assumes that the United States will retain an enduring military presence in Iraq, possibly for decades. The level of commitment will depend on the evolving security situation but will require establishing at least one permanent base. Al Asad Air Base is a likely candidate for long-term basing because it is located in a remote desert area but is central to the population that would be most likely to support, or suffer from, an IS revival. This base can be established only with Iraqi concurrence, which will require significant diplomatic effort on the part of the U.S. country team in Baghdad. An urgent aspect of the military pillar will be the incorporation of Shi'a militiamen into the ISF, or at least the successful dissolution or reduction of Shi'a militias, with the intent of ensuring that, as our end state puts it, "*the government maintains a monopoly on the capacity to use force; all members of paramilitary and militia organizations are incorporated into uniformed government services.*"

Phase 1

This phase will be characterized by rapid acceleration of military activity, including increased aerial bombing, increased rotary-wing aviation attacks, front-line advising, and the commitment of sufficient intelligence and SOF to pressure IS leadership and cause it to either quit populated areas or withdraw entirely to Syria or another location. The primary objective of this phase is to regain control of Iraq's population centers and lines of communication, even if this progress comes at the expense of ISF development. Speed is essential in this phase: If it is executed too slowly, this approach runs the risk of reestablishing the dependencies on U.S. military power generated from 2003 through 2011. Increased direct action can hurry success but carries risks. Military commanders will be given the authority to commit limited ground forces, as needed, to secure critical terrain or to take advantage of any emerging situation that offers a chance to deal a significant tactical or operational blow to IS. However, U.S. forces will not hold ground. Once IS is removed from Iraq's population centers, the military campaign (the third pillar) will progress to phase 2.

During phase 1, the United States will pressure Iran, the GoI, and Shi'a militia leaders to reduce their presence in Sunni areas and along the disputed territories line. While they may not respond positively, increased U.S. presence and pressure in support of counter-IS

operations—particularly, direct assistance in the most difficult campaigns for urban terrain—will create a de facto shift in authority away from Shi'a militias in Sunni areas. Less need for the support of Shi'a militias will allow the GoI to encourage militias to return to Shi'a areas.

Phase 2

In this phase, direct U.S. military action—barring CT raids—ends, and the ISF reassumes primacy. U.S. military will also alter its training of Iraqi military and police forces to concentrate on the population-centric aspects of counterinsurgency, which will be essential to stabilizing Sunni Arab areas once IS is expelled. This can be accomplished by training different types of forces for different activities, an approach currently taken with the Federal Police but on a smaller scale. As IS territorial control is reduced, military advising will shift to focus on such population-centric activities as engagement, cooperative security, local reconstruction and development, and local grievance resolution. Advisors will be selected for their COIN bona fides, and more civil affairs than combat advisors will be deployed. During phase 2, the U.S.-led coalition will provide direct funding to Iraqi COIN efforts, but money for reconstruction and infrastructure development will be applied through Iraqi military and government activities. Counterterror activities will be continuous throughout phase 2, and the United States will solidify its position at one or more selected military bases inside Iraq.

By the end of phase 2, a plan must be in place to reduce Shi'a militias to the point that they no longer have the capacity to challenge the hegemony of the Iraqi state at the national or local level. Ideally, this plan would be backed by Shi'a religious leaders in Najaf and Karbala. GoI and U.S. incentives, including job programs and a national program to recognize the bravery of Shi'a, Sunni, and Kurdish militia fighters, will be used to help ease the transition from militias to either the ISF or civilian employment.

Phase 3

This phase marks transition to an enduring U.S. counterterror and advising presence in Iraq. U.S. forces will be minimized but sufficient to prevent a recurrence of destabilization or a reemergence of IS or other international terror groups. Maintaining the necessary force levels and composition will require ongoing assessment and extensive intelligence collection and analysis efforts both inside Iraq and across the Middle East. Enduring presence will require a long-term status-of-forces agreement. The U.S. government should set a schedule for periodic and formal review of the U.S. presence in Iraq to determine whether the situation there, and in the greater Middle East, continues to warrant the investment in personnel, equipment, and funds. Any residual militia capability—Shi'a, Sunni, or Kurd—will have to be addressed in this phase. This may include the incorporation of Kurdish paramilitary units into the ISF.

U.S. and Allied Steps: Economic and Humanitarian

Both economic and humanitarian efforts will be targeted to support reconciliation and GoI reform, as well as the development of the ISF. Investment is a tool that can and should be leveraged to enhance and further all strategic efforts; there is no separate economic or humanitarian pillar within the counter-IS strategy. As with the governance and security approaches, more direct economic and humanitarian action will be taken in the early phases to ensure rapid progress and achievement of stability; human security concerns must be addressed before the reconciliation and reform efforts will bear fruit. The second purpose of direct U.S. investment—rather than by, with, and through the government—is to mitigate the effects on the

already unstable GoI budget and to lessen programmatic vulnerability to fluctuations in international oil prices.

Economic efforts will focus on reconstruction of damaged and destroyed areas, and expenditures will be clearly identified as coming from the United States; it is important that the United States publicly reestablish itself as a force for positive development in Iraq. Later, these efforts will transition to Iraqi lead and will be targeted in ways that will reduce emphasis on ethnosectarian identity.

Phase 1

Economic efforts in phase 1 will be targeted at both reconciliation and reform, with an emphasis on speedy reconstruction of damaged and destroyed urban centers, such as Ramadi, Fallujah, and Bayji. Initial emphasis will be in the Sunni areas; these are the most susceptible to either IS resurgence or the rise of new or splinter Sunni Arab insurgent organizations. Direct U.S. investment will be made through an overarching "reconstruction for reconciliation" package: Investment will be openly associated with efforts to move both the GoI and the Sunni Arabs closer. Iraqi political leaders will be given some credit for supporting the reconstruction projects and will be rewarded with increased control over funding as they leverage reconstruction to further reconciliation. The U.S. Agency for International Development and DoS will play important roles in prioritizing investment and minimizing corruption. However, realistic expectations must be set for public review of investment. As the United States learned in Iraq (2003–2011) and in Afghanistan (2001–2016), no matter how much money is invested in conflict zones, there will be inevitable failures to match funds with outcomes or to complete projects to U.S. standards.

Humanitarian actions during phase 1 will increase the already generous investments the United States and the coalition are making across Iraq. U.S. military assets will be leveraged to a far greater degree to provide direct aid to Iraqi IDPs, with the understanding that it will be impossible to control all aid delivered into chaotic regions of Iraq. These military humanitarian assistance activities will be conducted quietly so as not to distract from efforts to build Iraqi government legitimacy. The United States will leverage these increased efforts to improve its public image in Iraq, emphasizing the positive role the United States can play in mitigating the suffering of refugees. Toward the end of phase 1, these efforts will be merged with economic reconstruction efforts to encourage the return of IDPs to Iraqi cities. Humanitarian aid will be delivered to urban areas consistently until the United States assesses that the GoI can extend sufficient services into Sunni Arab, Yazidi, Shi'a, and Turkomen areas damaged or destroyed during the battle with IS.

Phase 2

Investment will shift from being U.S. led and directed to being Iraqi controlled, but significant resources will still be required to ensure constant progress toward reconciliation; reform; and, eventually, a new and more inclusive constitution. Iraqi political and military leaders will take control of the targeting and expenditure of U.S. funds but with constant U.S. oversight and review. During phase 2, the United States will spread investment from Sunni areas to all Iraq, channeling investments through provincial governments rather than through the central government. Investing geographically will help shift the focus from sectarian to national and federal development.

Phase 2 will begin with an assessment of GoI reform. Results from this assessment will determine how, but not how much, U.S. money is spent. Previous lessons from Iraq suggest that quid pro quo investment and expectations for return on investment should be limited.[15] Iraqi civilians should not be punished for government corruption or the failure of the GoI to execute a proper budget. Instead, money will be shifted to agencies and focal points that are most likely to further the three pillars of the strategy. Focus of effort for economic investment in phase 2 will be direct support to the constitutional convention, which will signal the transition from phase 2 to phase 3.

Humanitarian aid in phase 2 will also transition to Iraqi control, but also with U.S. supervision. In this phase, aid will focus on repatriation of refugees to Iraq and their resettlement across Iraq. Mirroring the economic investment approach, the United States will shift aid distribution from primarily Sunni areas to cover all Iraq. Managers of the aid programs will funnel their efforts through the provincial governments to help foster geographic and federal, rather than ethnosectarian, identity in Iraq.

Phase 3

After the constitutional convention, the United States will execute a sustained economic investment program and a sustained humanitarian assistance program in Iraq. This program will be designed with the expectation that investment in Iraq will likely exceed relative investment programs in other allied countries: Continuing stability will demand ongoing costs. However, continual assessment and program review will be necessary to minimize dependency. At an appropriate point, the United States will shift from direct humanitarian investment to nongovernmental organization (NGO)–led investment.

Regional Dimension

Any strategy to stabilize Iraq to defeat or expel IS will be greatly complicated by the interests and actions of regional states. While the situation inside Iraq is complex, the addition of Saudi Arabian, Iranian, Turkish, and other Gulf Arab interests elevates that complexity to the point that some experts believe the situation to be intractable.[16] Arguably, Iran has the greatest interest in Iraq, stemming from the Iran-Iraq War: Iranian leaders view Iraq as a potentially existential threat and are willing to commit considerable resources to ensure Iraq's government is friendly to Iran's interests (Razoux, 2015). To hedge its bets, Iran continues to invest in nongovernmental or pseudogovernmental Shi'a militia groups, such as the Badr Corps or Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (Alaaldin, 2016). Over time, the failure to disarm or incorporate these militiamen will present a serious threat to Iraq's legitimacy. Saudi Arabia, or individual Saudi citizens, has or have reportedly invested in Sunni insurgent groups to hedge against what they view as encroaching Iranian influence in the Middle East (Cooper, 2007; Boghardt, 2014). Iraq is caught between these two great Middle Eastern powers, in the midst of a geopolitical sectarian struggle not wholly of its own making. At the same time, the Kurdish Iraqis are caught between Turkish and Iranian interests that threaten to deepen the internal divide between the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

There is nothing the United States can do to eliminate the negative impacts of Saudi, Iranian, Turkish, and other regional interference in Iraq. Instead, to stabilize Iraq and defeat IS,

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[15] See, for example, Bowen, 2009.

[16] See, for example, Carpenter, 2014.

the United States will seek to minimize negative influence and maximize positive influence. This seems simplistic, and it may be: The simple increase of U.S. activity and responsibility in Iraq may accomplish both objectives with minimal additional risk. Success of the three-pillared strategy discussed earlier should go a long way toward reducing negative influence. If the Sunni Arabs in Iraq are genuinely reconciled with Iraq's government and perceive the government as legitimate and representative, there will be little opportunity or incentive for Saudis to invest in Sunni groups that might destabilize Iraq. Government reform in Iraq will positively affect all Iraqis, including Shi'a who have protested often and quite aggressively against government corruption and lack of competence. Genuine reform will help reduce Shi'a disillusionment and will facilitate the reduction of Shi'a militias. Over time, Iraqi Shi'a will see less need for Iranian support, and Iranian influence will wane as it did briefly from 2007–2009.

Turkey's and Iran's roles in the KRG, and in any prospective Kurdish decision to declare independence, can be mitigated by making inclusion in a unified Iraq more attractive for the Kurds. As of mid-2016, the Kurds face economic challenges that make independence all but nonviable. However, improving economic conditions might at some point lead them to break away. A stable central Iraqi government that has at least some basic legitimacy in the eyes of Iraqi Kurds is more likely to deter Turkish and Iranian meddling in the north. An economically robust Iraq that is able to disburse equitable oil revenues to the KRG is likely to help resolve the issue of disputed territories, which will in turn help reduce Iran's role in worsening the fault lines between Sunnis, Shi'as, and Kurds in northern Iraq.

As Iraq stabilizes, it will become far more attractive to regional states as a safe investment for both private and capital wealth funds. Iraq has an excellent transportation network, skilled and educated workers, natural resources, and a central geographic location that makes it ideally suited for commerce and industry. Corruption, lingering government inefficiency, and any recurring violence will continue to offset these attractions, but all these will be sustained targets of the enduring, active, three-pillared counter-IS strategy. Success of the strategy will help shift what is (to the United States) mostly negative regional involvement in mid-2016 to more positive and productive involvement in the form of commercial investment and trade.

Defeating IS in Syria

The United States currently has four general options for addressing the IS presence in Syria.[17] The first is to help the moderate opposition win the civil war against the al-Assad regime, which would permit installation of a moderate government that would establish legitimacy and defeat IS. But the moderate opposition appears too weak to achieve this outcome, and Russia's entry into the war seems to make such a military victory even more unlikely. The second option envisions stalemating the war by supporting the opposition in the hopes that this would allow time and space to build a capable force against al-Assad. But this option would seem to attenuate, rather than end, the war, and its outcome is far from certain. Third, the United States could end its opposition to the al-Assad regime, abandon the moderate opposition, and side with Russia and Iran to defeat IS. This approach would all but destroy U.S. credibility in the Middle East (and the world); strengthen two staunch U.S. adversaries; and exacerbate the

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[17] These categories are drawn from RAND SMEs who have engaged with the broader community of experts, the U.S. government, and coalition allies to identify alternative strategic options.

conditions that would permit the rise of what some analysts call "IS 2.0," the next iteration of JTJ-TQJBR-ISI-IS. Fourth, the United States could ignore the civil war and focus on the tactical defeat of IS, leveraging Kurdish; Arab; and, if necessary, American and coalition military forces to expel the group from Raqqa and render it incapable of international terror attacks. But this option would leave a vacuum of governance in eastern Syria and open the door for JFS to accede to the top of the Salafi-Jihadi hierarchy. It would not solve the real problem the counter-IS strategy seeks to redress: Syria serving as a haven for groups perpetrating international terror attacks against the United States and its interests.

As in Iraq, the present strategy seeks the lasting defeat of IS primarily by establishing legitimate governance. IS emerged in Syria because the collapse of government legitimacy provided it opportunities in the forms of poorly governed space, a disenfranchised population, and ready access to arms. IS can be defeated in Syria by establishing government legitimacy and making the environment there inhospitable for IS, its leaders, and its inevitable splinter groups. Military action will continue to be a necessary and essential part of the counter-IS campaign in Syria, both through direct combat against IS and through increased support to alternative armed groups.

Establishing a firm long-term plan for the stabilization of Syria is risky. The situation there is dynamic, and the sheer number of actors involved almost guarantees that some major assumptions will be challenged by the time the strategy can be put into effect. However, the principles of the counter-IS strategy in Syria should remain intact. Any necessary modifications to the pillars or the phases in this section can be made while keeping the approach and end state anchored to the following ideas:

1. This crisis emerged from decades of dictatorship, disenfranchisement, and abuse. It has economic, social, international, geographic, and some religious and ethnic components. It is often painted as an ethnosectarian civil war, but seeking to permanently resolve it along these lines will probably exacerbate, rather than ease, national instability. Solutions should seek to minimize ethnosectarian language to avoid making primordialism a self-fulfilling prophecy.
2. Defeating IS alone will not necessarily lead to the sought-after reduction in international terror and threats to regional security emanating from Syria; solutions should focus on changing the environment to prevent the sustainment or reemergence of all violent armed groups. Defeating IS in Syria should be a byproduct of the strategy, not its focal point.
3. Lasting defeat of IS in Syria will emerge from the development of legitimate governance and the ensuing collapse of popular support for both anti-GoS and Salafi-Jihadi armed groups.
4. Sunni resistance groups will not fully accept a settlement to the conflict that leaves Bashar al-Assad, his family circle, or currently serving senior military leaders in place. Their removal is a prerequisite to bringing the Sunni Arab Syrians back into the government.
5. An enduring settlement will have to acknowledge Russian and Iranian interests in Syria. Russia will have to retain its military bases on the coast, and the new government will have to have a sustainable relationship with Iran. However, this relationship cannot come at the expense of non-Alawi Syrians.

6. The Kurdish desire for an independent homeland in northern Syria appears to be inimical to a lasting, multiparty settlement for stability. If the Kurds decide to expand and solidify their self-proclaimed state of Rojava (or form another independent entity), Turkey might intervene, and the United States might be forced to withdraw support from its most capable armed ally. All efforts should be made to keep the Kurds within a legitimate Syrian state, at least until Syria is fully stabilized.

We would thus articulate the **end state for Syria** as follows:

Syria is a unified state capable of defending its borders from foreign invasion. The government maintains a monopoly on the capacity to use force. All members of violent armed groups have been incorporated into national or governmental regional security forces, reconciled, detained, killed, or dispersed: They do not threaten government legitimacy anywhere in Syria. Citizens from all ethnic, sectarian, geographic, and gender groups participate in the governance process through elections and free speech and are protected from oppression, discrimination, or other harms that might be applied or sanctioned by the government. Syria's economy is sufficient to sustain a national budget, infrastructure improvement, and commerce with international support comparable to that given to stable states of the same size. Terrorist activities inside Syria are limited to the point that they can be addressed by law enforcement activities. No international terror group maintains sanctuary in Syria, and no international terror acts are planned or executed from Syria.

This end state will be achieved by pursuing a negotiated settlement between the United States, Russia, and Iran, based on the stated grievances and resolution requirements established by Sunni and Kurdish opposition groups.[18] Follow-on phases of this strategy will incorporate members of armed groups into the military or regional governmental paramilitary forces, a constitutional convention, and reconstruction. Constant military pressure will be applied against IS throughout each phase until it is removed from Syria's population centers and reduced to the point it is ineffective.

The proposed strategy for Iraq was broken into both phases and pillars to help organize the progression of the campaign. This is feasible and recommended in Iraq because the problem there is, while terrifically challenging, more straightforward than in Syria. Complexities in Syria do not suggest such a structured approach. Instead, each phase is offered in a single narrative.

U.S. and Allied Steps: Political and Governance

Political objectives first revolve around obtaining the negotiated settlement, then shift to settlement implementation, the constitutional convention, and rebuilding national unity. Governance objectives will focus on establishing federal territories (if needed), extending services, and reestablishment of public order and trust. Objectives of the settlement will be to safely and peacefully remove Bashar al-Assad and his associates from power, while retaining sufficient layers of bureaucracy to keep the government intact, and to ensure the retention of some Russian and Iranian equities. This approach is in keeping with the stated U.S. policy of regime change in Syria and acknowledges that any lasting settlement that leaves Syria relatively intact

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[18] These are referred to in this chapter, but they would have to be updated and reassessed to support effective negotiations. See, for example, "Syria Opposition . . . ," 2014, and Black, 2016.

requires al-Assad's removal.[19] Since the Sunni Arab opposition is badly splintered and apparently incapable of supplying a single set of valid interlocutors for negotiations and since the al-Assad regime and the opposition cannot interact productively (at least as of mid-2016), both parties will be excluded from the negotiations.[20] This will be an imposed settlement.

Phase 1

Successful negotiations will not be possible until both Russia and Iran believe they have something to gain through genuine engagement and something to lose if they do not engage. Political movement toward negotiation will be predicated on the phase 1 security efforts to establish an air defense zone in southern Syria, under which the United States will accelerate its efforts to develop moderate opposition forces, and on the threat of inserting U.S. ground forces in southern, northern, and eastern Syria to eliminate IS and seize control of Syrian territory. Simultaneously, *if necessary*, phase 1 economic policy will threaten to impose harsher sanctions on the GoS and Russia if they continue to facilitate the al-Assad regime's war crimes. The U.S. will propose a clear settlement that retains Russian equities in Syria—including its military bases—and that maintains Iranian access to Syrian transportation networks and facilities. In exchange, Iran and Russia will facilitate the peaceful removal of the al-Assad network and allow the entrance of the United Nations (UN).

This settlement will establish an interim government under the auspices of the UN, which will oversee the first phase of a reintegration program for armed groups, such as the moderate opposition and disaffected members of Salafi-Jihadi organizations. The United States, Iran, and Russia will collaborate to write a UN Security Council Resolution that meets their collective needs, with the United States ceding political, military, and economic ground as needed. For example, under this agreement, no U.S. military forces will enter Syrian territory. However, U.S. and counter-IS coalition negotiators, observers, and humanitarian aid partners will enter Damascus and outlying areas to ensure the settlement is respected.

Governance efforts in phase 1 will focus on developing initial plans for a centralized but federated Syrian state in control of its current internationally recognized borders and protected by its own armed forces. Federal policy in Syria should be geographic, rather than ethnosectarian, to avoid reinforcing divisions exacerbated by the war. Governance development in phases 1 through 3 will be closely tied to security and economic activities, focusing on a U.S.-led UN umbrella reconstruction effort that will eventually lead to the resumption of consistent service delivery in areas outside Damascus. In this early phase, the UN will facilitate NGO operations in southern and northern Syria that will help facilitate phase 2 and 3 repatriation of refugees and IDPs.

Phase 2

This phase will constitute the initial implementation of the negotiated settlement. Political activities in this phase will focus on bringing individual armed groups to officially join the process and enter into the reintegration program; on bringing the UN into Syria; and, most important, on the removal of Bashar al-Assad and his inner circle. This will have to be a Russian-led effort. The Russian government may decide to accept al-Assad, his family, and

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[19] Since early 2015 the United States has deemphasized regime change, although it still appears to be U.S. policy (Tisdall, 2015; DoS, 2014).

[20] See, for example, Zraick, 2016.

senior members of the government (to be identified by the United States with Russian and Iranian agreement) to live in Russia or to facilitate their movement to Iran. In either case, the United States will forgo human rights accusations against al-Assad and other leaders to bring about an end to hostilities. This abdication will not, however, be part of the written settlement; Syrian leaders may pursue *in absentia* trials at a later date, including through the International Criminal Court. During this phase, the UN will help establish the interim government. Russia, Iran, and the United States will all have close hands in facilitating this effort. There will have to be some weight on Alawi leadership at the outset, with careful vetting to ensure individuals were not directly associated with war crimes. At the same time, the UN body given responsibility for Syria would begin to facilitate movement toward the constitutional convention.

Phase 2 governance will begin reconstitution of nonmilitary governance capabilities, with direct support from NGOs acting on behalf of the counter-IS coalition reconstruction project. Initial emphasis will be on Arab Sunni areas to the south and Kurdish areas to the north, then moving closer to former IS-held territories as the military situation improves. The negotiated agreement will allow Russia and Iran to conduct reconstruction activities in western Syria, with accompanying international NGO access. Repatriation activities will begin in southern Syria, with the objective of repatriation in the Damascus-Aleppo corridor in phase 3.

Phase 3

This culminating phase will see the transition from the UN-supervised interim government to an elected government. Phase 3 will begin with the constitutional convention and end with the achievement of full Syrian sovereignty over a federated state. Political activities during this period will center on facilitating the convention, supervising elections, and safeguarding human rights with direct observation. Governance activities in phase 3 will focus on completing reintegration, repatriation, and the restoration of services.

U.S. and Allied Steps: Security

Security activity will have three objectives, to be achieved both in parallel and in sequence: establishment of battlefield parity, or leverage, to facilitated negotiations; incorporation of armed groups into the Syrian armed forces; and defeat of IS and other Salafi-Jihadi or violent extremist groups. The last objective is the most relevant to the present strategy but will be achieved as a byproduct of successful reconciliation and reintegration.

Phase 1

U.S.-led coalition military action against IS will be immediately accelerated and will include increased use of rotary-wing aircraft and special operations. Military activity will focus on changing the battlefield dynamics in preparation for negotiations. In mid-2016, Russia, Iran, LH, and IS are the dominant actors in Syria. By creating an air defense zone in southern Syria, the United States will carve out space for the further development of moderate opposition. There are risks associated with this approach. First and foremost, both Russia and the GoS will almost certainly oppose this effort and may test the limits of the zone with aircraft penetrations. These should be met first with warnings, then with force. There is a chance this could push the United States and Russia close to armed conflict. However, while Russia often threatens war, it is neither invincible nor impervious to political or military pressure. Russian political leaders make cost-benefit calculations regarding the use of armed force; there is no evidence to suggest endemic irrationality among Russian policymakers. Careful diplomatic

work will be necessary to ensure Russia does not overreact to the air defense zone, but the risk of more-aggressive action in Syria can be rewarded with a rapid reduction in violence and lasting stability.

The U.S.-led coalition will significantly increase its support to Syrian Arab moderate opposition groups in the south. Efforts will be made to recruit candidates from refugee populations, incentivizing candidates with the promise of government jobs, land grants, and reconstruction bonuses for those who join, fight, and eventually assume a government position in the military or civil service. Situating the incentive in the postconflict period should help reduce half-hearted recruitment and corruption by midlevel militia leaders. U.S. military forces will provide direct air defense support to the opposition forces and direct fire support in the form of rotary-wing aircraft within the air defense zone. This plan will center on stabilizing the territory within the air defense zones and on building the opposition forces there. Ideally, negotiations would proceed before it would be necessary to advance out of or expand the zones, but the threat of advancement against the GoS must be legitimate.

Phase 2

This phase will begin once the negotiated settlement has been achieved. Russian, GoS, and Iranian forces will remain in place during the early parts of this phase, both to prevent the expansion of JaN and IS and to allow trust building measures as the political process matures. UN security monitors will enter the battlefield to ensure that military activities are targeted against extremist groups while protecting civilians and moderate opposition forces. This break in combat between Russian, GoS, Iranian, LH, and the moderate opposition will be predicated on the opposition groups' formally accepting the terms of the settlement. Groups that do not accept the settlement will not receive the protections the settlement affords and will not participate in the reconstitution of the GoS and regional security forces. Over time, this should ensure nonparticipating groups are marginalized and increase defections and desertions to the point that they are rendered ineffective and irrelevant to the long-term settlement.

In the later stages of this phase, the GoS will begin to absorb members of the moderate opposition. Individuals may change sides to join the Syrian armed services at any time, but opposition groups will initially be kept intact while they are subsumed within the GoS hierarchy. This will help with confidence building, and will facilitate a rapid shift of momentum against both IS and such other groups as Jibhat Fatah al-Sham. Opposition elements will turn to fight extremist groups with direct support from the collective airpower of the settlement signatories. Toward the end of this phase, these groups will be fully inducted into the Syrian military services and incorporated either collectively or as individuals into Syrian military or paramilitary units. In some cases, units may be reconstituted as governmental regional security forces.

In the north, Kurdish and Kurdish-Arab militias will be integrated either into the national military or into regional military elements that will be subject to central government control and supervision. Failure to comply with centralization or governmental regionalization will result in the immediate cessation of military aid, even at the expense of temporary IS or JFS battlefield gains. Ideally, Turkey will be a signatory to the Syria agreement and will accept the incorporation of YPG and other groups into the Syrian armed services in exchange for reduced Kurdish independence in the north.

Phase 3

This phase begins when all groups have been integrated into the GoS armed services. From this point, all efforts will be made to finalize gains against IS and other armed groups, establish border security, and professionalize the force. All military members who serve with honor—including Alawi, Sunni, and minority Syrians who fought under al-Assad—will be given land grants and reconstruction grants (or loans) to foster repatriation and redevelopment. Russia will withdraw its forces to the west, allowing reasonable security zones around its bases. Iran may leave some advisors in Syria. LH will withdraw from Syria entirely. No U.S. forces will enter Syria, but some members of the UN presence may be American.

U.S. and Allied Steps: Economic and Humanitarian

Economic activity will focus first on pressuring Russia and Iran to negotiate terms of settlement in Syria and then on reconstruction and repatriation. Reconstruction will require considerable U.S. and other western support, possibly in the form of a new Marshall Plan. A range of Syria observers have suggested this approach. At the very least, the United States and its allies will have to significantly increase humanitarian support in Syria to facilitate repatriation of refugees and IDPs and to help foster stability.

Phase 1

First, the United States must determine whether the threat of economic sanctions is necessary to coerce Russia and Iran to negotiate. Ideally, this would be unnecessary. But the United States and its allies must be prepared to leverage sanctions against both countries to help bring the Syria conflict to its end. This is a stated imperative of the present U.S. administration, and it must be assumed that stabilizing Syria and reducing or eliminating the threat of IS will also be an essential part of the next U.S. administration's national security policy. Therefore, the serious threat of economic sanctions and the possible repercussions of this threat are justified by the risk of continuing war in Syria and the continuing existence of IS in its present form. Phase 1 sanctions will ideally lead to negotiations, which, if successful, will trigger a shift to phase 2.

Humanitarian activities in phase 1 will focus on supporting the populations in the safe areas in southern and northern Syria, with emphasis on the south to facilitate the development of moderate Sunni Arab opposition. During this phase, the United States will facilitate the development of a large-scale humanitarian and reconstruction base of operations in northern Jordan. This base, which must include an airfield, direct connection to major roadways and the Jordanian port of Aqaba, and facilities for aid workers, will become the center for humanitarian and economic operations in phases 2 and 3.

Phase 2

Once the negotiations have concluded, the United States can shift focus from economic sanctions to economic development. This effort, whether or not it fits within a larger reconstruction plan for the region, will be U.S. led with support from coalition partners. Reconstruction funds should be invested through the GoS to help establish government legitimacy, but the United States must retain the ability to make direct investment if the GoS is slow to develop capacity to handle and apply funds. Regional governments could also serve as conduits for aid and reconstruction funding as the central government rebuilds its countrywide capacity. In this phase, humanitarian aid activities will expand to all parts of the country that are acces-

sible to NGOs. In mid-2016, there are already considerable NGO aid efforts throughout Syria. These existing programs would be supported, and others would be added. A shift to phase 3 will occur when the GoS has reestablished its capacity for countrywide economic activity and aid distribution.

Phase 3

During this phase, the new government will begin to establish treaties and economic agreements with regional and global actors. The United States and Western nations should move to establish lasting economic relationships with Syria and to foster relationships between Syria and Iraq with incentives and aid packages. However, the United States must tread lightly here, keeping in mind the delicate balance that was achieved during the negotiations with Russia and Iran. While the United States has equity in Syria, both Russia and Iran will desire to retain a strong, long-term presence there. Humanitarian and reconstruction aid will probably require enduring efforts in Syria. Rebuilding the country and repatriating refugees may take a decade or more. The United States will have to exert continuous effort to avoid donor fatigue and will have to adjust its objectives and approaches periodically to avoid political exhaustion within the United States and within its alliances.

Regional Dimension

The preceding material addressed the roles of Russia, Iran, LH, Turkey, and the U.S.-led coalition. Other important actors include Jordan, Iraq, and the Gulf States.[21] Jordan will be a key player across all three aspects of this strategy and through all three phases. Jordan can facilitate negotiations, and will be asked to support an even heavier burden of military and NGO activity than it does in mid-2016; its efforts are already considerable. In the long term, Jordan's increased participation will pay off with the repatriation of Syrian refugees and the reduction in violence along Jordan's northern border. A defeat of IS might help significantly reduce the threat of extremist ideology, but Jordan will have to be cautious because Jordanians deserting from IS may return home to foment violence.[22]

Iraq will be struggling toward stability at the same time as Syria, so it probably will have little involvement in Syria's internal affairs during the first two phases of operation. However, in phase 3, it will be important for Iraq to recharacterize its relations with Syria. In mid-2016, the Iranian-leaning government in Iraq has fairly close relations with the Iranian-supported regime in Syria. As both countries stabilize in phase 3 and as ethnosectarian identity politics begin to give way to more regional and national debates, it may be necessary for Iraq to establish new treaties and border agreements with Syria. The United States should facilitate negotiations over a new border security agreement that might include external observers through phase 3.

Gulf State relations with Syria are difficult because of the strong Iranian presence and because of Syria's participation in Iran's axis of resistance. The negotiated settlement will offer the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, an opportunity to rebuild relations with Syria and reduce some of the current barriers to regional security coop-

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[21] Israel is also critically important to Syria's future, but as of mid-2016, the government of Israel has decided to remain above the fray. The United States should encourage a continuation of this policy to avoid further violence.

[22] In some cases, IS leadership may send members back to their home states to spread violence as an alternative to holding territory in Syria or to coerce Jordanians to reduce support for coalition activities.

eration. This can be done primarily through participation in the reconstruction and humanitarian aid process. While some analysts have suggested that an Arab security force might help stabilize Syria, that is unlikely: Gulf State military forces are unsuited to this work and have insufficient numbers. It is also not at all clear that the Syrian people would welcome them more enthusiastically than they have other external forces. Instead, this is a chance to reduce military tensions, reduce cross-border military activity, and reestablish regional stability that should benefit all nations from Morocco to Iran and from Turkey to Yemen.

Summary

This approach is designed to elevate a practice common to military campaigns—phases and objectives—to the level of political-military strategy. It generally follows but seeks to improve on the phased approach proposed in the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (NSC, 2005), sustaining the conditions-based phasing model. It also builds on the end state described in the 2005 strategy, and mimicked in the 2016 1222 report for Iraq (Carter and Kerry, 2016), and establishes similar objectives for Syria. This is not to suggest that Iraq and Syria are identical problems; they clearly are not. Instead, this approach seeks to establish similar long-term ends: stability that occurs because the people are generally satisfied with their government and unwilling to support or countenance groups, such as IS, within their borders.

Conclusion

As of mid-2016, the U.S.-led coalition to degrade, defeat, and destroy IS has made significant military progress in Iraq and Syria: The group has lost much of its territory, and its finances and manpower are stressed. But none of the expert opinion articles we reviewed or the experts we engaged believed that the current counter-IS strategy would, in fact, defeat or destroy IS. Current strategic objectives, such as "defeat" and "destroy," are overly bold and precise yet also, counterintuitively, devoid of clear meaning. Most important, the United States is leading what appears to be a military-centric, tactical campaign when the root causes that sustain IS are socioeconomic. This campaign seeks to address socioeconomic problems *in addition to* defeating IS, rather than as the way to defeat IS.[1] If it is true that IS thrives primarily on Sunni Arab disenfranchisement in Iraq and Syria, any strategy that fails to address this disenfranchisement is unlikely to defeat or destroy IS. Instead, a strategy centering on tactical military actions is likely to cause IS to revert from conventional operations to guerrilla warfare and terrorism, which will allow it to survive in the long term within poorly governed spaces, such as western Iraq and eastern Syria. This transition appears to be occurring as of late 2016.[2]

Even if the U.S.-led coalition could physically destroy nearly all of IS, including its leaders, staff, foot soldiers, and global emirates, the failure to address underlying conditions will allow splinter groups from IS to emerge and other extremist groups, such as JFS, to surge. In Iraq, space will be created for the reemergence of the Sunni nationalist insurgent groups that continue to distrust and oppose the GoI. A strategy focused on defeating or destroying IS is not a strategy to achieve peace—ostensibly the ultimate goal of any strategy—but is instead a military campaign with limited objectives that will, at best, suppress a continual phoenixlike reemergence of violent extremist groups. Under current military interpretations of strategy, and according to expert understanding of strategic design, the current strategy to degrade, defeat, and destroy IS is indeed *astrategic*. Significant change is needed to divert the United States from the recurring series of ineffective Middle East strategies that has lasted for ten presidential administrations.

While change is needed, these conclusions leave the next U.S. administration with the same difficult choice President Barack Obama faced: It must address the threats IS and other extremist groups pose but must balance costs and risks against the desirable but difficult objective of addressing root causes. It can choose to suppress and contain IS indefinitely, hoping that the threat does not spread further. Or it can choose to trade the desire for enduring government legitimacy and the protection of human rights for practical stability, hoping to return

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[1] This is made clear in the language of the 1222 report (Carter and Kerry, 2016).

[2] See, for example, Warrick and Mekhennet, 2016.

to the undemocratic but relatively secure conditions that existed before the Arab Spring. Or it can choose the indirect approach, seeking to address root causes to eliminate the conditions that would allow IS to survive and to prevent other groups to take its place in an endless cycle of violence. Alternatively, it might seek to combine these approaches in a way not envisioned in this report. Whichever approach it does choose, the administration and the NSC must assume that continuing extremism in the Middle East, centering in Iraq and Syria, cannot be contained: This is now an entrenched, networked global threat.

An Argument for a Long-Term Strategy to Address Root Causes

Neither the president nor the NSC is under obligation to follow military doctrine, such as JP 3-24, 2013; government documents, such as the *U.S. Counterinsurgency Guide* (U.S. Government, 2009); or the collective literature on irregular warfare. All these argue that violence in irregular war will continue, morph, or recur until root causes are addressed.[3] However, policymakers should note that, in previous cases, the failure to commit the resources over time necessary to address root causes has led to strategic failure and the predicted continuation, morphing, and recurrence of violence. Recent large-scale U.S. stabilization efforts, including those in both Afghanistan and Iraq, have sought to bridge the gap between the necessary conditions-based approach to long-term success and the political imperatives of time-based withdrawal. This irreconcilable compromise led to failure, and then to the widespread but inaccurate belief that long-term stabilization is impossible.

Afghanistan and Iraq offer the two best examples of this ineffective half-measure approach. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization International Security Assistance Force argued that "[t]ransition is a conditions-based process, not a calendar driven event," but withdrawal from Afghanistan was driven by timelines imposed by the U.S. government (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2011; Rosenberg and Shear, 2016). This dualistic approach failed, as political timelines hastened what should have been a gradual and more careful transition. Arguably, this overly hasty withdrawal led to—or at the very least contributed to—eroding security conditions in Afghanistan and an unplanned recommitment to what appears to be an open-ended troop presence (Jones, 2016; Rosenberg and Shear, 2016; Krishnamoorthy, 2016). In Iraq, a time-driven withdrawal arguably contributed to the ensuing instability there and, later, another hasty recommitment of U.S. troops and military power (Brennan et al., 2013; Brennan, 2014). Blame for these failures has been spread across both the Bush and Obama administrations; pointing fingers at this point is a meaningless and wasteful exercise.

Instead of apportioning blame for past failures, it is time to craft a more effective regional strategy that will lead to the most lasting and comprehensive defeat of IS possible. The United States and its allies need to dedicate the necessary amount of time, resources, and political energy to address these problems in depth. Otherwise—as we suggest in our analysis of continuous CT and practical stability—violence and instability will continue. This conclusion is supported by previous RAND research, which found that addressing root causes is the best way to obtain a lasting success against an insurgent group (Connable and Libicki, 2010; Paul and Clarke, 2011). This conclusion is acknowledged in the SME remarks by those who supported the versions of continuous CT and practical stability designed for this report: Both

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[3]   See Connable and Libicki, 2010, for an assessment of COIN literature.

options will require extensive resource investments while accepting the near certainty of continuing violence and instability and the continuation of IS or its splinter groups over time.[4] If IS is indeed a serious threat to U.S. national security, these approaches should be unacceptable to policymakers and to the U.S. public. Legitimated stability is the logical, if difficult, choice for success in defeating IS.

This will be an admittedly hard sell in the current political climate and in the aftermath of perceived failures in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq.[5] Perhaps the best way to support an argument for a long-term approach to address root causes is to cite previous cases. The United States has a long history of maintaining a strong military presence in foreign countries, often with positive results. While the United States rushed to the exits after about a decade in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq, it maintains a large troop presence in the Republic of Korea more than 60 years after the end of the Korean War; this has gone a long way to prevent renewed hostilities. The United States has bases in Japan and Germany more than 70 years after the end of World War II; this presence stemmed renewed militarism and helped resolve the Cold War. The United States retains a presence in Kosovo more than 20 years after the end of the Balkans War, helping forestall a renewal of hostilities there. In many places where the United States maintained a strong, lasting presence after hostilities, the host countries became more democratic, more stable, and more supportive of U.S. foreign policy over time.[6]

The Middle East is complicated—arguably more so than Europe or Asia—but it is not impenetrable. Like Japan, Germany, and Korea, Iraq and Syria can benefit from a thoughtful and dedicated long-term strategy for legitimated stability. This will require a commitment of resources but not necessarily the deluge of forces, funds, and political capital that the United States poured into Germany and Japan after World War II or into Iraq between 2003 and 2011. The recommended option for defeating IS in Chapter Five describes a moderate commitment, with no U.S. general-purpose ground forces in Syria and few in Iraq. It does not propose nation building, a term now so freighted with the baggage of the post-9/11 era that it has become pejorative. Instead, it argues for a lasting but moderate commitment to political reconciliation, economic growth, and low-level counterterrorism. The key to success in defeating IS in Iraq and Syria is the focus on addressing root causes within the context of a long-term strategy. Focus will shift from defeating and destroying a single hybrid extremist group to reconciliation and stabilization. Force will be used within a broader political effort, not to drive a short-term, military-centric strategy. Over time, this indirect approach to irregular war is likely to reduce, rather than sustain or increase, the onerous necessity for U.S. military commitment in the Middle East. Over time, IS will fade, and its successors will be weak, ineffective, and ultimately irrelevant to U.S. national security.

Actions Above the Options: What Can Be Done Within Any Strategic Design

No matter which strategy is chosen, there are actions the next U.S. administration can take to improve conditions in Iraq and Syria, to make operations more efficient and effective, and to

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[4]   It is also reiterated by our RAND colleagues Colin Clark and Chad Serena (Clark and Serena, 2016).

[5]   For a discussion of the perception of failure in Vietnam, see Connable, 2012.

[6]   For an analysis of U.S. postconflict stability operations, see Dobbins et al., 2003.

help reduce root causes without necessarily committing to long-term democratization in either country.

Unify Command and Control

Currently, the counter-IS strategy falls under two separate chains of command. There appears to be a distinct gap between the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL and CJTF-OIR: They have separate accountability and lines of command. Disparity in objectives and language and the existence of two separate campaign leaders give the impression—fairly or unfairly—of disunity.[7] This in turn reinforces expert analyses that suggest the strategy to counter-IS lacks a cohesive vision. The next U.S. administration should seek to unify the joint and interagency organization to improve efficiency and strategic effectiveness. Leadership of the unified organization can be selected to match the strategic option. For example, the U.S. Special Operations Command might lead a continuous CT effort; DoD might lead practical stability to help concentrate military advising and sales; and DoS might lead legitimated stability to centralize diplomatic and economic efforts.

Reset and Carefully Manage Expectations

Unrealistic objectives reduce a President's ability to maintain public support and undermine military campaign planning. Future articulations of counter-IS strategy should clearly explain the challenges and timelines associated with objectives. An important part of setting realistic expectations is setting the expectation for change. All long-term strategies are necessarily dynamic. However, this expectation for dynamism must be balanced with some effort to show a logical path to success. Strategic phasing, with clearer short- and medium-term objectives will help policymakers to find this balance.

Consider Reframing the Problem, U.S. Regional Objectives, and U.S. Activities

As of this writing, the United States has organized its highest-priority military and political efforts in the Middle East to defeat and destroy a single, named insurgent-terrorist organization. At the same time, the nation seeks to address Al Qaida and other terrorist groups; to help foster legitimate governance in the region; to solve the Israeli-Palestinian crisis; to defend allied states, such as Jordan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia; to prevent increased Iranian hegemony; and to stabilize such countries as Yemen and Somalia. If the United States succeeds in defeating or destroying IS, or if the group splinters and is no longer targetable as a single entity, it seems that the entire basis for Operation Inherent Resolve and the Global Task Force to Counter ISIL would become moot. It would be more practical and effective to organize military and political activities around a broader effort to bring lasting stability to the Middle East.

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[7] There were reports of friction between the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL and USCENTCOM, highlighting the separation between the two organizations and their respective views of the strategy. For example, see DeYoung, 2015.

Abbreviations

AQI	Al Qaida in Iraq
CJTF	Combined Joint Task Force
COIN	counterinsurgency
CT	counterterror
CTS	Counter Terrorism Service
DAISH or Daesh	Doulet al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
DoS	U.S. Department of State
GoI	government of Iraq
GoS	government of Syria
HVI	high-value individual
IDP	internally displaced person
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
IS	Islamic State
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISI	Islamic State of Iraq
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
JaN	Jabhat al-Nusra
JFS	Jabhat Fatah al-Sham
JIC	Joint Intelligence Committee
JP	Joint Publication

JTJ	Jama'at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad
KRG	Kurdish Regional Government
LH	Lebanese Hezbollah
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NSC	National Security Council
OIR	Operation Inherent Resolve
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SME	subject-matter expert
SOF	special operations forces
TQJBR	Tanzim Qa'idat al-Jihad fi al-Bilad al-Rafidayn
UN	United Nations
USCENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
YPG	People's Protection Units

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