The Islamic State's Global Insurgency and its Counterstrategy Implications

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Abstract

At the dawn of its caliphate, the Islamic State's global pretensions were limited to being the premier destination for foreign "travellers," but we now understand that the caliphate was more than a destination: it was to be the foundation for a more rigorous transmission of global jihad. The collapse of its political project affords us an opportunity to reassess the Islamic State movement. Today its underground insurgency is the flagship of a political enterprise consisting of formal and aspiring affiliates dotting the Middle East, Africa and Asia while coordinating and inspiring terror operations abroad. We present a conceptual framework through which to understand how the Islamic State's network of insurgent affiliates operates, based on an analysis of its attack data and primary sources. When we assess the bureaucratic fluidity of its structure in both time and place, combined with a wide ranging spectrum of relationships with affiliates and networks far and wide, the adhocratic nature of the Islamic State enterprise emerges and demands attention as we try to understand the role its structure and management influences its resilience as a global movement.

Introduction

When the Islamic State's long-time spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani announced the establishment of a caliphate with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader six years ago, there was a valuable debate about the true character of the group and its objectives.[1] At the dawn of its caliphate, the Islamic State's global pretensions were limited to being the premier destination for foreign "travellers," but we now understand that the caliphate was more than a destination: it was to be the foundation for a more rigorous transmission of global jihad.[2] The killing of Abu Bakr, the collapse of its political project, and loss of all territorial control in the last year affords us an opportunity to reassess the Islamic State movement. This time the task will be more difficult than understanding an insurgency that successfully consolidated power over parts of majority Sunni areas of Iraq and Syria; today its underground insurgency is also the flagship of a political enterprise consisting of formal and aspiring affiliates dotting the Middle East, Africa and Asia while coordinating and inspiring terror operations abroad.[3] We argue that the Islamic State is evolving as a *global adhocratic insurgency* that champions and exports both its brand and a core set of ideological (*aqeeda*) and strategic principles (*manhaj*) that have remained largely constant throughout its history, and which it exports across its transnational enterprise.[4]

The concept of a global insurgency is not new for those familiar with the Cold War and has been used more recently to describe al-Qaeda, the Islamic State's former parent.[5] But it is clear that al-Qaeda had such a conservative and restrained view of promoting wide-spread, territorial governance projects prior to its split with Islamic State that it could be more easily confused with a violent political movement or terror network than managing a global insurgency. Meanwhile, the Islamic State has outshone al-Qaeda since 2014 in popularity among prospective local jihadists around the globe while putting the "i" back into global insurgency with its leadership and advocacy of armed revolution with the goal of creating a caliphate.

Adhocracy, on the other hand, is a different take on a group whose structure and bureaucracy during its administration of millions of people living under the caliphate will be studied for some time as a preeminent example of rebel governance. But the group looks nothing like this now structurally, morphing back into a familiar clandestine existence — its second major transformation in just half a dozen years. The most recent leader of the Islamic State's Delegated Committee — the board of directors if you will — actually described the group as largely decentralised and complained to captors that the central leadership's influence was often blunted by the whims of subordinate commanders.[6] Assessing this organisational fluidity and the wide-ranging spectrum of relationships with affiliates and networks far and wide, we can see how the adhocratic nature of the Islamic State enterprise influences its resilience as a global movement.

Our intent here is to present a picture of the contemporary Islamic State movement, and the organisational and strategic transitions shaped by its territorial defeats, and use this analysis to present some principles for how current and future coalitions of willing states can confront the contemporary Islamic State. Accordingly, this paper lays out a framework through which to consider the contemporary Islamic State phenomenon that fuses historical, organisational, and strategic perspectives.

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1 Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside and Charlie Winter, "The Caliphate Rises," in Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside and Charlie Winter, eds., The ISIS Reader: Milestone Texts of the Islamic State Movement, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 161-176.

2 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Seamus Hughes and Bennett Clifford, "The Travelers: American Jihadists in Syria and Iraq," Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, February 2018. Available at: https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/TravelersAmericanJihadistsinSyriaandIraq.pdf.

3 After a restructure in 2018, the Islamic State's global provinces include: West Africa Province, Central Africa Province, Algeria Province, Libya Province, Sinai Province, Somalia Province, Syria Province, Iraq Province, Turkey Province, Yemen Province, Khurasan Province, Pakistan Province, India Province, Caucasus Province, East Asia Province, Najd Province, Hijaz Province, Bahrain Province.

4 Henry Mintzberg, "The Innovative Organization," in Mintzberg on Management, (New York: Free Press, 1989), pp. 196-220.

5 David J. Kilcullen, "Countering global insurgency," Journal of Strategic Studies, Vol. 28, No. 4 (January 2007), pp. 597-617. Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390500300956.

6 Husham al-Hashimi, "Interview: ISIS's Abdul Nasser Qardash," Center for Global Policy, 4 June 2020. Available at: https://cgpolicy.org/articles/interview-isiss-abdul-nasser-qardash/.

Drawing on the Islamic State's own attack data and primary source materials to examine how this movement operates its global insurgency, it explores a series of key strategic implications for confronting the global threat. As liberal states increasingly posture to address the threat posed by authoritarians, it will be crucial to contain the jihadist movement, suffocating it from opportunities created by these emerging geopolitical rivalries. At the heart of this counterstrategy must be a transnational effort that centralises 'influence operations', practically supports military and intelligence operations in partner nations, and prioritises the training of local multi-sector specialists to lead civilian government, military, and civil society activities.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 1 presents a conceptual framework through which to understand how the Islamic State's network of insurgent affiliates operates both as a whole and when broken down into its constituent parts. Section 2, building on this framework, uses Islamic State attack data collected between December 2018 and May 2020 to evaluate its operational capabilities and reach, tracking key conflict dynamics through its defeat in Baghuz in March 2019 and well into 2020. Section 3 reflects on the implications of these data by comparing the Islamic State's current roster of priorities with those of its earlier iterations, namely the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The last part considers Sections 1-3 as a whole and, based on them, presents a four-pillar strategy for meaningfully and permanently undermining the Islamic State insurgency as it exists today.

Conceptualising the Islamic State's global insurgency

In our recent book, *The ISIS Reader*, we trace the Islamic State movement's evolution through four distinct historical periods: its founding under Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (1990s-2006); the establishment of its first state and rebuilding after its destabilisation on the back of the Awakening/Surge (2006-2011); its transnational spread and the establishment of its caliphate (2011-2016); and the collapse of its state and transition to global insurgency (2016-present).[7] During each of these transitions, analysts and practitioners alike struggled to understand and explain the 'new' phenomenon.[8] The Islamic State of 2020 has proven particularly tricky to grasp — with an operational presence in at least twenty countries, it poses a qualitatively different menace in each of them — and the tendency to use the movement's history since 2014 as a point of reference may prove more deceptive than elucidating. After all, for most of its history the Islamic State movement has operated as an insurgency and so it would be deeply misleading to disproportionately focus on those fleeting moments (circa 2006-07 and 2014-17) when it looked and attempted to act like a state. At the same time, it is faulty to simply compare today's activity to the past, because the Islamic State has changed in important ways. Expanding our analytical aperture to capture the full spectrum of the movement's evolution offers a fuller lens through which to analyse the group's contemporary campaigns and the scale with which it has shifted its strategy and adapted its organisational structure.

The Islamic State movement circa 2020 finds itself in an unprecedented situation, with new leaders, an adapting structure, and a unique level of global influence. In the space of five years, the Islamic State declared its caliphate only to lose all its territory and its first caliph. The open control of territory had allowed the group to establish a centralised, hierarchical, and deeply bureaucratic organisation, and its recent defeat has forced it to morph into something very different, even from its own familiar background of local insurgency. This is largely thanks to the Islamic State's transnational enterprise which presents risks and opportunities for it that are new in the scope of its history. The pragmatism and agility displayed by these organisational transformations is a reflection of the Islamic State's adhocratic traits, which allow it to create,

7 In the ISIS Reader: Milestone texts of the Islamic State movement, we analyse the group's history from its inception in the 1990s to al-Baghdadi's death in 2019 through these four historical periods. For more see Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, The ISIS Reader, 2020.
8 For example, see Eric Schmitt, "In battle to defang ISIS, U.S. targets its psychology," The New York Times, 28 December 2014. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/29/us/politics/in-battle-to-defang-isis-us-targets-its-psychology-.html.

reimagine, and manage a complex array of different relationships within its organisational structure and with its formal and aspiring affiliates around the world.

The Islamic State Adhocracy

Over the decades-long history of the Islamic State, a number of researchers have examined the group's organisational structures and processes focusing on different stages of its evolution[9] or particular parts of the organisation.[10] Based on primary source analyses, these studies made invaluable contributions to our understanding of rebel governance.[11] Much of this past and current work on the Islamic State's administration in both clandestine and open governing styles has created the perception of a robust and all-encompassing bureaucracy. Our current research on the structure reveals some revision of these perceptions is required, and this is strengthened by the group's adept organisational and strategic transition away from a proto-state and back to clandestine insurgency, while simultaneously advancing its global agenda. We argue that the Islamic State as an organisation is best understood as an adhocracy.[12]

An 'adhocracy'[13] is a type of organisation that tends to emerge in environments characterised by dynamism and change in which "a structure of interacting project teams" come together to achieve an overarching purpose and/or express a shared identity.[14] To navigate the complexity that characterises its environment, adhocracies tend towards a decentralisation of decision-making power, especially regarding tactical and operational decisions, even though a core of specialists at the heart of the organisation may drive strategic direction and promote collaboration towards that overarching purpose/identity. As Mintzberg asserts: "The organization that has need for sophisticated innovation must usually cede to this pull [towards collaboration], welding staff and line, and sometimes operating personnel as well, into multidisciplinary teams of experts that achieve coordination within and between themselves through mutual adjustment."[15] Adhocracies are designed to be innovative, flexible and adaptive to change, especially as strategic conditions shift. Indeed, adhocracies may organisationally transition towards different structures under certain conditions (e.g. more formal, hierarchical, and bureaucratic) only to later evolve in other ways as circumstances change again.

Coordination is vital within an adhocracy to keep the components of the organisation on task. Consequently, managers and liaison units play a central role in synchronising efforts to ensure that potentially disparate parts of the organisation are appropriately contributing to the group's overarching purpose and identity. As Mintzberg asserts, "...the managers of adhocracy must be masters of human relations, able to use persuasion, negotiation, coalition, reputation, and rapport to fuse the individualistic experts into smoothly functioning teams."[16] Throughout its history the Islamic State has

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9 For example, Brian Fishman, "Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons learned from inside Al Qa'ida in Iraq," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Dysfunction-and-Decline.pdf; Muhammad Al-'Ubaydi, Nelly Lahoud, Daniel Milton and Bryan Price, "The group that calls itself a state: Understanding the evolution and challenges of the Islamic State," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, December 2014, Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2014/12/CTC-The-Group-That-Calls-Itself-A-State-December20141.pdf; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence," Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 9, No. 4 (August 2015), pp. 117-129. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26297420.pdf.

10 For example, analyses of Islamic State's media apparatus. See Craig Whiteside, "Lighting the Path: the evolution of the Islamic State media enterprise (2003-2016)," The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT), (November 2016). Available at: https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ICCT-Whiteside-Lighting-the-Path-the-Evolution-of-the-Islamic-State-Media-Enterprise-2003-2016-Nov2016.pdf; Daniel Milton, "Pulling back the curtain," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, August 2018. Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2018/08/Pulling-Back-the-Curtain.pdf.

11 One notable study that includes the Islamic State's early incarnation: Jacob N. Shapiro, The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

12 The purpose of this analysis is to briefly identify the key attributes of an adhocracy and how it broadly relates to the Islamic State. Future publications will offer a more in-depth historical and organisational analysis of the Islamic State as an adhocracy.

13 For more, see Mintzberg, "The Innovative Organization," 1989.

14 Henry Mintzberg, "Organization Design: Fashion or Fit?" Harvard Business Review, January 1981. Available at: https://hbr.org/1981/01/organization-design-fashion-or-fit.

15 Ibid.

16 Mintzberg, "The Innovative Organization," 1989, p. 207.

recognised the importance of leadership as a cohering mechanism.[17] As uniquely modern organisations, adhocracies also tend to rely heavily on modern communications to not only coordinate across potentially disparate parts of the enterprise but to project a façade of being a more coherent and structured organisation to its competitors and supporters. As the Islamic State rose in prominence, social media became crucial for communicating its propaganda and expanding its support base. It is clear that modern communication is vital for not only maintaining its online efforts but communicating with affiliates and enabling rapid reporting of activities from around the world. While adhocracies are common in a range of fields, especially in highly competitive industries dominated by start-ups, Mintzberg specifically identifies "guerrilla warfare"[18] as a field in which this type of organisation tends to flourish.[19]

This basic outline of the key organisational traits, strengths and weaknesses of an adhocracy offers a useful lens through which to consider the Islamic State, especially now that it has evolved back into an insurgency at its core with a transnational network on its peripheries. Despite the loss of *tamkin* in Syria and Iraq, that core serves as the central nervous system for global efforts to achieve *tamkin* in isolated and scattered pockets of the *ummah*. What coheres the Islamic State's transnational enterprise are its affiliates commitment to and application of the group's *manhaj* and pledge (*bayat*) to the caliph.[20] These affiliates help to project and champion the Islamic State's 'brand', provide strategic and operational depth which helps to stretch the focus of its adversaries, and increases the pool of material for its propaganda efforts and recruits for mobilisation. Moreover, throughout its history, the Islamic State has demonstrated an ability to organisationally transition in response to changing strategic conditions while exhibiting a tactical, operational and

strategic innovativeness in its politico-military and propaganda activities around a persistent core set of guiding principles.

Adhocracies tend to be characterised by organisational strengths that include being innovative, flexible, and attuned to deal with change as strategic conditions shift across time and space. However, adhocracies are also susceptible to certain weaknesses. For instance, they are heavily reliant on communication via the deployment of specialist personnel (such as managers and liaison units) and/or the use of communication technologies to keep the organisation's activities synchronised. If communication breaks down, then adhocracies are susceptible to tactical, operational and strategic incoherence that can lead to organisational fraying.[21] Given the environment and circumstances within which adhocracies tend to operate, they are also susceptible to internal competition for operational effectiveness or ideological purity that can result in extremism within the ranks, especially on its fringes. Adhocracies can sometimes too hastily or belatedly attempt to organisationally transition which renders them susceptible to operational and strategic missteps, and even organisational breakdown.[22]

The weaknesses inherent to adhocracies also shed light on many of the historical problems that the Islamic State movement has experienced. During different times in its history, the Islamic State has struggled to cohere operationally as pressure has been applied to its communication networks.[23] Despite its willingness to organisationally transition to take advantage of opportunities to fulfil its mission to establish an Islamic State, these periods of fleeting conventional success have been followed by comprehensive material defeats, resulting in the loss of personnel, material, leaders, and territorial control. While much of this can be explained by the overwhelming strength of its adversaries,

17 Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, "Advice to The Leaders of the Islamic State," in Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, eds., The ISIS Reader, 2020 pp. 93-106.

18 Mintzberg, "The Innovative Organization," 1989, p. 207.

19 Al-Qaeda is another example of an adhocracy.

20 Aaron Zelin, "The Islamic State's Bayat Campaign," Jihadology, 3 November 2019. Available at: https://jihadology.net/2019/11/03/the-islamic-states-bayat-campaign/.

21 Also see Mintzberg, "Organization Design: Fashion or Fit?" 1981.

22 Mintzberg, "The Innovative Organization," 1989, pp. 219-220.

23 Fishman, "Dysfunction & Decline," 2009.

it is also the product of a movement that has struggled to organisationally transition its structures and processes to sustaining a more formal bureaucratic enterprise. Moreover, during its most recent period of transition back into an insurgency circa 2017, then caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi struggled to manage ideological extremism within the Islamic State's own shura council.[24] During the last retreat of the organisation in 2007, it lost control of its associate groups and much of its manpower—a resource that required painstaking years to rebuild during what we described in *The ISIS Reader* as its "second resurgence."[25] Overall, what is important to draw from these reflections is the potential utility of understanding the Islamic State as an adhocracy to shape future analysis and strategic-policy thinking. To this organisational lens it is necessary to add a strategic perspective.

Evaluating the Islamic State insurgency

The Islamic State's transnational enterprise has emerged due to a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces. On the one hand, the Islamic State seeks to expand globally (top-down forces) while, on the other hand, local groups pursue the Islamic State's recognition and support largely motivated by local factors (bottom-up forces). It is the complex interaction of local actors seeking to attract the Islamic State and the Islamic State trying to manage its global expansion and project it as a sign of its efficacy and credibility that will be crucial for predicting its strategic fortunes. While the Islamic State has argued since establishing its caliphate in June 2014 that all Muslims are jurisprudentially obliged to pledge allegiance to its caliph and join the group, it has established criteria which local groups need to satisfy to be formally accepted as an affiliate. According to the Islamic State's own documents, speeches, and its practice over time,[26] this has involved a pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State's caliph,[27] approval (if not the direct appointment) of the group's leader, efforts to consolidate other local groups under a single banner, and the adoption of the Islamic State's *aqeeda* (creed) and *manhaj* (methodology) to guide its ideological, military, governance, and propaganda activities. For the purposes of this report, it is the latter which is most important because it is through the exportation of its strategic guidelines that the Islamic State is able to project the image of a coherent transnational insurgency. Moreover, the multi-phased method proposed by the group – which consists of *hijrah* (migration), *jama'ah* (organisation), destabilising the *taghut*, *tamkin* (consolidation), and finally, establishment of the caliphate (*khilafah*)[28] – provides its local affiliates with a framework to guide and synchronise their activities. To understand the Islamic State's global war, it is useful to first consider the attack data before analysing the doctrine and strategic principles that help to drive it.

In recent months analysts have published excellent assessments of Islamic State operations in Iraq, Syria, Sinai, Yemen, Africa (Greater Sahel, West Africa, Central Africa, Somalia), Central/South Asia (Khorasan, Hind), and East Asia.[29] We conducted a similar, but globalised, assessment that is based on Islamic

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24 Cole Bunzel, "The Islamic State's Ideology: History of a Rift," Program on Extremism, George Washington University, (June 2020). Available at: https://isisfiles.gwu.edu/downloads/kp78gg36g?locale=en.

25 Anonymous, "Analysis of the State of ISI," Document NMEC-2007-612449, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point Archives. Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/analysis-of-the-state-of-isi-original-language-2/; Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, The ISIS Reader, 2020, p. 9.

26 What follows is based primary source analyses of primary sources including Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "This is the Promise of Allah," al-Hayat Media, 2014; Unknown author, "Remaining & Expanding," Dabiq, Issue 5 (2014), pp. 22-33; Unknown author, "Wilayat Khurasan and the bay'at from Qawqaz," Dabiq Issue 7 (2015), pp. 33-37; Unknown author, "A fatwa for Khurasan," Dabiq, Issue 10 (2015), pp.18-24; Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "O Our People Respond to the Caller of Allah," al-Hayat Media, 23 June 2015; Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "So they kill and are killed", al-Hayat Media, 12 March 2015; Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "Say, 'Die in your Rage'", al-Hayat Media, 26 January 2015; al-Furqan Media, "The structure of the caliphate", al-Furqan Media, 2016 (video).

27 Daniel Milton and Muhammad Al-Ubaydi, "Pledging Bay'a: A benefit or burden to the Islamic State?" CTC Sentinel, Vol. 8, No. 3 (March 2015). Available at: https://www.ctc.usma.edu/pledging-baya-a-benefit-or-burden-to-the-islamic-state/.

28 Unnamed author, "From Hijrah to Khilafah", Dabiq, Issue 1 (2014), p. 39. Available at: https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2014/07/islamic-state-22dc481biq-magazine-122.pdf.

29 Michael Knights and Alex Almeida, "Remaining and expanding: The recovery of Islamic State operations in Iraq 2019-2020," CTC Sentinel, Vol. 13, No. 5 (May 2020). Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/remaining-and-expanding-the-recovery-of-islamic-state-operations-in-iraq-in-2019-2020/; Allison McManus, "ISIS in the Sinai: A Persistent Threat for Egypt," Center for Global Policy, 23

State self-claims prepared and distributed by the group in its weekly newsletter, *al-Naba'*. Specifically, both sets of data — the incident and impact counts — originally appeared in the "Harvest of Soldiers" infographic series, which, prepared by the Central Media *Diwan* of the Islamic State, has been running on a weekly basis since July 2018. To capture a sense of the full spectrum of its insurgent activities today, we focus on just five of its eighteen provinces — Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, West Africa (which includes the Sahel), and East Asia (which includes the Philippines and Indonesia) — tracking, via the weekly data provided in these infographics, their progress over the course of 2019 and the first half of 2020. We made a decision to limit our focus to just these five provinces and just this particular period of time because our intention here is to provide a strategic level evaluation of the Islamic State insurgency eighteen months on from its 'defeat' in early 2019, not a ground-level tactical analysis of the entirety of its day-to-day activities.

Given the provenance of these data, it is important to consider them critically. They were, after all, disseminated by the Islamic State with a distinct strategic intent — to demonstrate the reach of its global affiliates and amplify their kinetic capabilities. That being said, it would be short-sighted to dismiss them simply because they are "propaganda." As the United States-led coalition has itself conceded, the Islamic State's attack reporting is largely accurate as an indicative measure, even if it obfuscates at times and exaggerates at others.[30] Hence, provided the data is treated solely as an appreciation of activity trends and not a definitive list of specific operations, its utility as analytical markers is clear. Indeed,

in them, the Islamic State gives us a unique opportunity to make a like-for-like comparison between the reported activities of its global network of affiliates, inadvertently providing a window into their perceived health and strategic priorities. Even if this comparison is only indicative, its value to those seeking to understand and subsequently undermine the evolving threat of this movement is substantial.

Global assessment

Figure I presents the Islamic State-reported attacks from December 2018 through May 2020. While data are available for all its international affiliates and supporters, for clarity's sake only those pertaining to Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, West Africa and the Sahel, and the Philippines and Indonesia have been included in this assessment. This allows us to consider the full extent of the movement's insurgency at present—from its conventional-style tactics in Nigeria to its now-exclusively terrorist operations in Afghanistan.

Before considering the data on a disaggregated regional basis, it is worth first remarking on a series of peaks that relate to specific decisions made by the Islamic State over the last year and a half, each of which is demarcated in Figure I by a red arrow. On each of these occasions, the Islamic State declared the initiation of a global *ghazwah*, meaning "raid" or "battle." Since March 2019, there have been five such raids—one in April 2019 to "avenge Wilayat al-Sham"; another in December 2019 to "avenge the two shaykhs," Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Abul Hasan al-Muhajir; and three raids of "attrition" that were launched in June and August 2019 and May 2020 respectively. While not all peaks in the data can be accounted for

June 2020. Available at: https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-the-sinai-a-persistent-threat-for-egypt/; Elisabeth Kendall, "ISIS in Yemen: Caught in a Regional Power Game," Center for Global Policy, 21 July 21, 2020. Available at: https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-yemen-caught-in-a-regional-power-game/; Wassim Nasr, Wassim. (2020). "ISIS in Africa: The end of the "Sahel Exception.","" Center for Global Policy, 2020. Available at: https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/; Amira Jadoon and, Andrew Mines, "An Examination of State-led Operations against Islamic State Khorasan in Afghanistan and Pakistan (2015-2018)," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 23 March 23, 2020. Available at: https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-africa-the-end-of-the-sahel-exception/; Shweta Desai and Amarnath Amarasingam, "ISIS in South Asia: Struggle for Survival Beyond 'Khorasan'," Center for Global Policy, 29 July 29, 2020. Available at: https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-south-asia-struggle-for-survival-beyond-khorasan/; Amira Jadoon, Nakissa Jahanbani and, Charmaine Willis, "Rising in the East: A Regional Overview of the Islamic State's Operations in Southeast Asia," Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, July 2020. Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/rising-in-the-east-a-regional-overview-of-the-islamic-states-operations-in-southeast-asia/.

30 Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, "Lead Inspector General for Operation Inherent Resolve I Quarterly Report to the United States Congress I January 1, 2020 – March 31, 2020," Department of Defence Office of Inspector General, 13 May 2020. Available at: https://www.dodig.mil/In-the-Spotlight/Article/2185254/lead-inspector-general-for-operation-inherent-resolve-i-quarterly-report-to-the/.
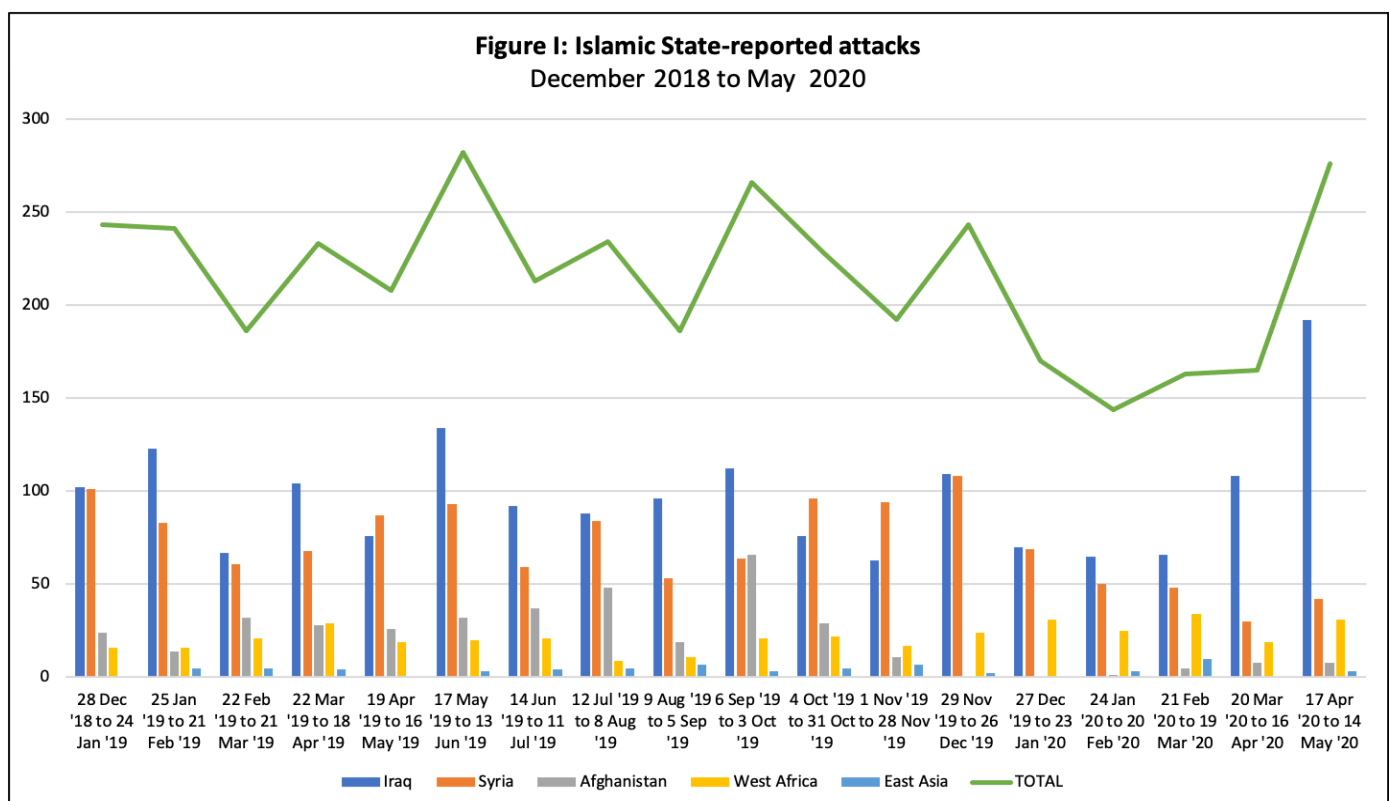
by these centrally organised global raids, there is a clear correlation between when they are declared and five out of the six operational peaks in Islamic State kinetic activity that are visualised in Figure I. This dynamic is clearest in Iraq and Syria but also apparent to a more limited extent in the context of West Africa. Considered as a whole, it hints at levels of coordination that can only be possible due to varying combinations of globally effective channels of communication, potentially direct/indirect planning between the Islamic State's core and transnational units in-theatre, as well as a strategic and operational uniformity that comes with having a shared *manhaj*.

Regional Assessment

This assessment is based on two streams of data and a compound statistic arrived at by combining them. The first stream, which is visualised in Figure II, is derived from the total number of attacks reported by the Islamic State. Because this does not account for the relative complexity of said attacks, the value of these data in evaluating the Islamic State's kinetic capabilities is limited if they are considered in isolation. It can be used to track numbers, but cannot be used to get a sense of scope, complexity or scale. The second data

stream, which is visualised in Figure III, is the total number of kills and casualties reported by the Islamic State. From these two datasets, it is possible to derive a "lethality score"—that is, the total number of attacks reported divided by the total number of kills and casualties reported. This can then be used as a rough proxy for the average scale of the attacks in question.

Figure II shows that, aside from two brief periods in spring and autumn 2019, the Islamic State province in Iraq (IS-I) reported more activity than any other part of the Islamic State's global network. Following a gradual but moderate deceleration towards the end of 2019, the IS-I's activities accelerated precipitously from February 2020 onwards. This meant that, by May 2020, the Islamic State was more active in Iraq than it had been since early 2018. Notably, though, the average lethality of its attacks there remained relatively low (Figure III), having decreased slightly across the first quarter (Q1) of 2020, with a 12-week lethality score of two kills and casualties per attack reported. This reflects the fact that, while the Islamic State's supporters may have been highly active in Iraq, their objectives were, until then at least, limited to relatively low impact signalling violence geared towards denying the emergence of security, signalling local resolve

Figure I: Islamic State-reported attacks
December 2018 to May 2020

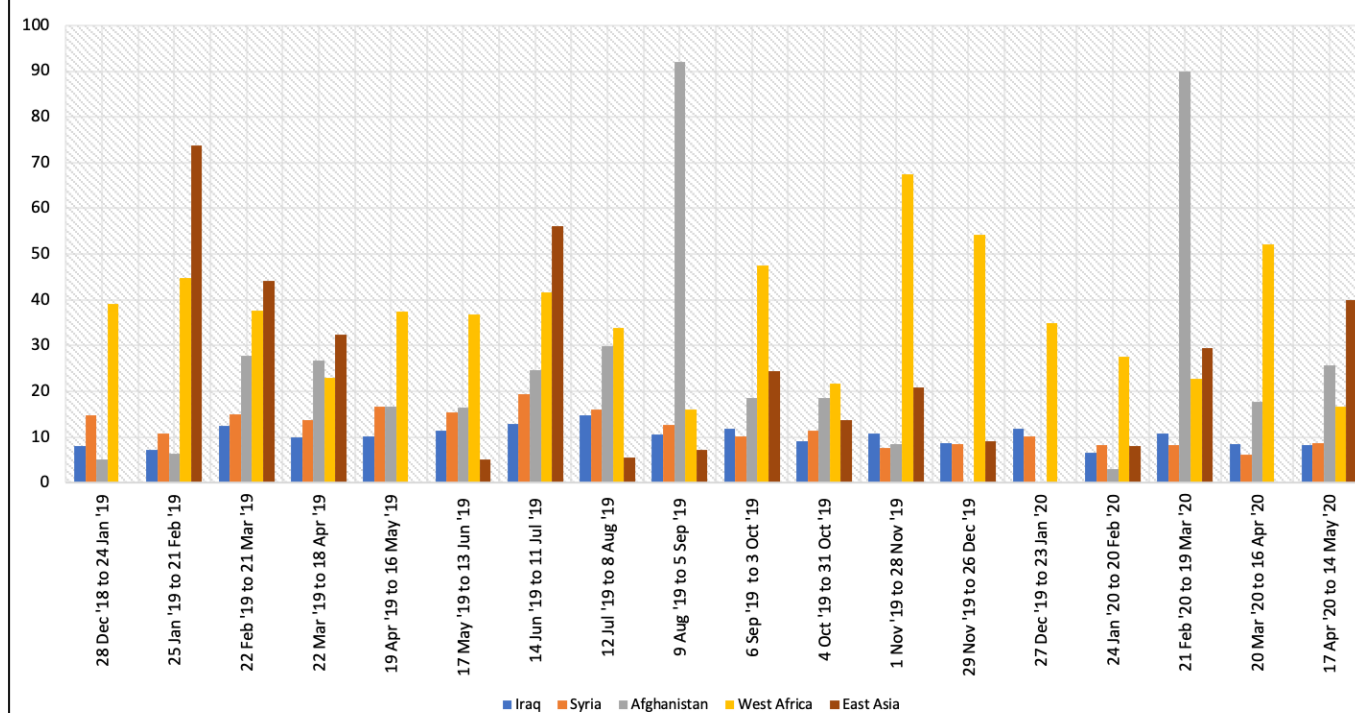Legend: Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, West Africa, East Asia, TOTAL

Figure II: Islamic State-reported attacks
28 December 2018 to 14 May 2020
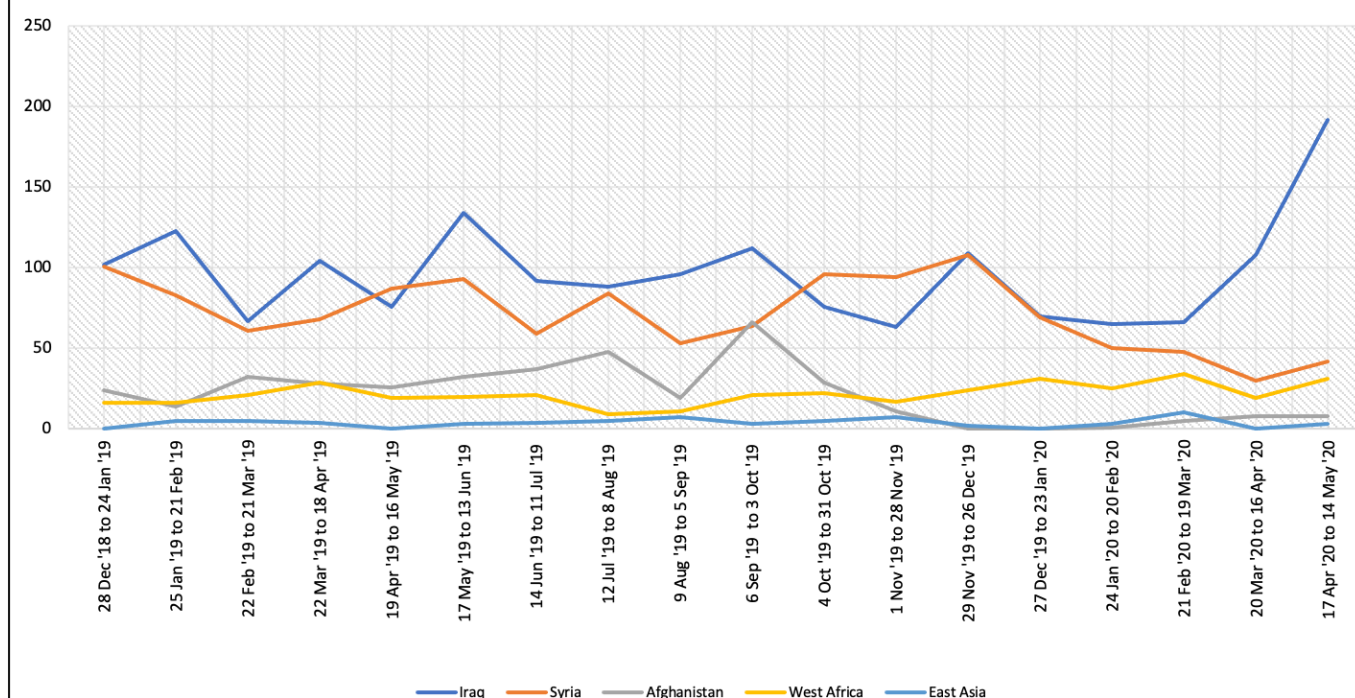
Figure III: Lethality of Islamic State-claimed attacks
28 December 2018 to 14 May 2020

and degrading enemy morale.[31] In that sense, notwithstanding these comparatively high levels of activity, which are worryingly close to those that presaged its resurgence in 2012,[32] IS-I generally appears to be moving from a (re)

building phase into one that is characterised by brazen guerrilla-style attacks on outlying government forces and its supporters.[33]

While the Islamic State's province in Syria (IS-S)

31 Knights and Almeida, "Remaining and Expanding," 2020.
32 Ibid.
33 Mao Tse Tung, On Guerrilla Warfare. Translated by Samuel B. Griffith II. (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Company of America, 1992).

was the second-most active part of its global network, its prospects were starkly different to those of its supporters in Iraq during the same period. Indeed, in the Syrian theatre, its supporters did not appear to experience anything like the period of ascendancy that their Iraqi associates enjoyed in the first half of 2020. Aside from the steep operational uptick that came in response to the Islamic State's announcement of its third global "raid of attrition" in May 2020, Figure II indicates that IS-S's activities steadily declined during the first six months of the year. In terms of its average lethality score, the impact of its operations followed a trajectory similar to that of IS-I, with approximately two kills or casualties being reported for every one attack, which is about half as many as was the case in early May 2019 (Figure III).

This sustained net decline in activity, coupled with the steady decrease in lethality, indicates that IS-S had entered a kinetic status quo, one that saw it engaging in less regular, less impactful attacks than it had done in years. That being said, the fact that it was able to mobilise as markedly as it did during May's "raid of attrition" shows that this new norm is borne of strategic decision as much as anything else.[34] Evidently, the Islamic State's residual presence in Syria is significant, and waiting to be mobilised after additional restructuring in the building phase of insurgency.

The ascendance of the Islamic State in West Africa and the Greater Sahara (IS-WA/GS) is well-known,[35] but, per these data, its kinetic scale is more striking than is commonly imagined, especially when compared with the prospects of IS-I and IS-S. In terms of raw numbers, IS-WA/GS was the next most active component of the global Islamic State insurgency. Indeed, since the summer of 2019, it has become steadily

more active in a continually expanding theatre of operations. While this trend is interesting, it is IS-WA/GS's average lethality score that is most illuminating. Considered over the course of the period in question, its attacks were four times as impactful as those that were deployed in Iraq and Syria, with some eight kills and casualties being reported per incident.

This impact disparity is down to the fact that IS-WA/GS is fighting in a more advanced stage of insurgency than in Iraq or Syria. This is confirmed by local media reporting as well as the video- and photo-propaganda published by West African/Greater Sahel provinces in recent months, which speaks to the increasingly conventional tenor of its activities.[36] Unlike in Iraq and Syria, the mainstay of its operations is not covert tactics like improvised explosives devices and assassinations. Instead, it has been more accustomed to mounting complex offensives against conventional military targets, deploying dozens of militants at a time as well as medium and heavy weapons systems in a manner distinctly reminiscent of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2013/14.[37] IS-WA/GS appears to be operating on a different strategic plane than that on which its associates are fighting—except, perhaps, in Mozambique. Instead of seeking to slowly degrade enemy morale and signal to supporters the organisation's mere survival, it is aggressively attacking urban settlements, seizing territory, and advancing towards conventional-style warfare.[38]

After intense efforts by the government of Afghanistan, its US partners, and even the Taliban to defeat the group in that country by 2019, the Islamic State province in "Khorasan" (Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, parts of Central Asia) was markedly less active than other elements of the global network.[39] That being

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34 See, for example, dynamics identified in Gregory Waters, "Strengthening and expanding: ISIS' central Syria campaign," Center for Global Policy, 19 August 2019. Available at: https://cgpolicy.org/articles/strengthening-and-expanding-isis-central-syria-campaign/.

35 See, for example, Nasr, "ISIS in Africa," 2020; Jacob Zenn, "ISIS in Africa: The Caliphate's Next Frontier," Center for Global Policy, 16 May 2020. Available at: https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-africa-the-caliphates-next-frontier/.

36 See Tomasz Rolbiecki, Pieter van Ostaeyen and Charlie Winter, "The Islamic State's Strategic Trajectory in Africa: Key Takeaways from its Attack Claims," CTC Sentinel, Vol. 13, No. 8 (August 2020). Available at: https://www.ctc.usma.edu/the-islamic-states-strategic-trajectory-in-africa-key-takeaways-from-its-attack-claims/.

37 See, for example, Associated Press, "20 soldiers, 40 civilians killed in attacks in Nigeria's Borno state,". Aljazeera, 14 June 2020. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/14/20-soldiers-40-civilians-killed-in-attacks-nigerias-borno-state.

38 Rolbiecki, "The Islamic State's strategic trajectory in Africa," 2020.

39 Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Mujib Mashal, "ISIS is losing Afghan territory. That means little for its victims," The New York Times, 2 December 2012. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/02/world/asia/ISIS-afghanistan-baghdadi.html.

said, the low frequency of its attacks did not equate to kinetic incapacity, as demonstrated by the high lethality of the operations it deployed from February to May 2020. As Figure II indicates, from November 2019 onwards, there was a significant deceleration in Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K) reporting, with just one attack being claimed between December 2019 and February 2020. This correlated with the Afghan government's announcement that it had been defeated. From February through May 2020, though, there was a very slight increase in activity, with 21 operations being reported in the same 12-week period. Notably, at nine kills and casualties per incident, the average lethality score of the province's activities during this period was much higher than any other element of the global network, something that is down to the specific high-casualty orientation of these operations.[40]

Contextualising the current state of play

It is important to place the preceding data into a broader context and, in doing so, provide a more comprehensive picture of the contemporary Islamic State movement. This section begins by providing an historical context to the contemporary trends by presenting attack data from 2008-14. It then outlines how the Islamic State describes its approach to guerrilla warfare with reference to primary sources produced by the Islamic State before highlighting the importance of political, governance, and propaganda efforts as interconnected and mutually reinforcing components of the Islamic State's overall strategy. Together these components offer a nuanced lens through which to understand the Islamic State movement's evolution and project its future transitions to inform strategic

policy decisions.

Historical context

To put the current attack data in historical context, Figure IV (below) tracks Islamic State self-claims (in blue) from 2008 to early 2014.[41] Current Islamic State activity in all provinces are somewhat relatable to its predecessors in Iraq from 2009 through 2011. These are compared to media reported attacks coded using Global Terrorism Database (GTDB) protocols for events (in red)[42] and attacks causing casualties (in green) among Iraqis as recorded by Iraqi Body Count (IBC).[43] Recent comparisons of current activity in Iraq to the level of 2012 is clearly overstated—today's activity does not match the early "Breaking the Walls Campaign" as depicted in Figure IV, according to Islamic State claims. Activity in that breakout year in Iraq with the United States military completely gone was almost three times as much, on average, that we measured in Figure II.[44] Moreover, the campaign is accelerating at a much slower pace compared to the dramatic increases in 2012-13 that preceded an exponential rise in 2014. Rates of increase are important here, as they build momentum for the group to advance its activities, propaganda, and shadow governance activities into more advanced phases of insurgency.

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40 Consider, for example, IS-KP's attack on a Sikh temple in Kabul in March. Emma Graham-Harrison, "Afghanistan: Dozens killed in attack on Kabul Sikh temple," The Guardian, 25 March 2020. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/25/afghanistan-dozens-killed-in-attack-on-kabul-sikh-temple.

41 Data collected for a project on the rise of the Islamic State, a joint project between researchers at Naval Postgraduate School and the Middlebury Institute for International Studies. The data is derived from Islamic State of Iraq claims during this period in monthly operational reports in the same format, but different distribution system, that the Islamic State uses now.

42 START, "Global Terrorism Database Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables," University of Maryland, (October 2019). Available at: https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf.

43 "Iraqi Body Count," Iraqi Body Count database. Available at: https://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/, accessed 2016.

44 Souad Mekhennet and Joby Warrick quoting Michael Knights in "The appeal of ISIS faces among Europeans who returned home from Syria," The Washington Post, 14 June 2020. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/the-appeal-of-isis-fades-among-europeans-who-returned-home-from-syria/2020/06/14/754b3e0e-acb9-11ea-9063-e69bd6520940_story.html.

Figure IV: Attacks in Iraq from 2008 to early 2014 (ISIS claims versus IBC and GTDB)
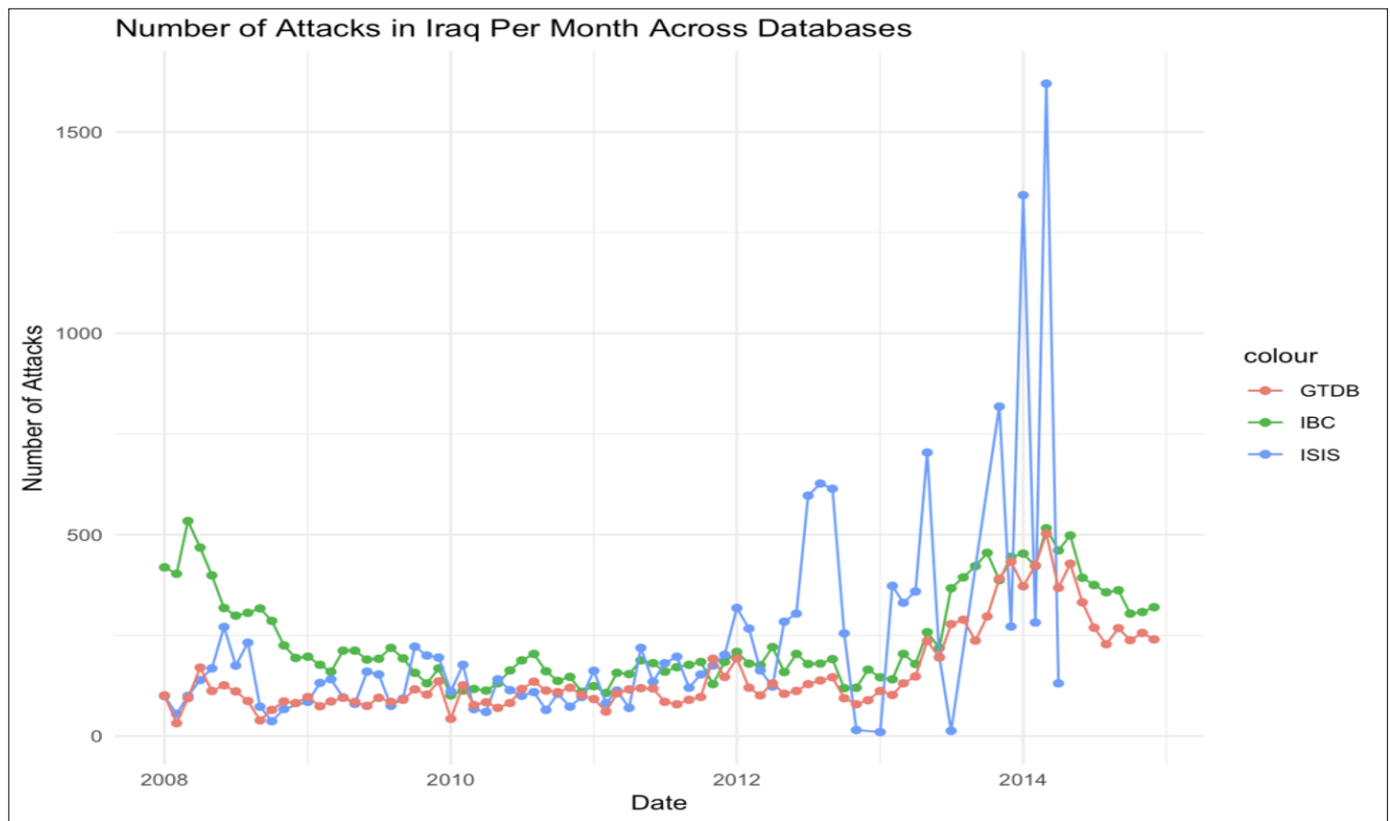
Strategic context

The progress of any guerrilla warfare campaign is hard to assess from attack data alone, because the qualitative aspects of the targets and their importance cannot be evaluated from an aggregate of raw data. To make matters more difficult, the Islamic State has published no authoritative doctrine outlining its overall approach to insurgency warfare; at least not in the form of classics like Mao Tse-Tung's *On Guerrilla Warfare,*[45] Che Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*[46] or even Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin's *A Practical Course for Guerrilla War*.[47] Nevertheless, the Islamic State has been clear about the principles that inform its model of asymmetric warfare, an approach that appears to be highly influenced by these classics, and it infuses these concepts and examples of it in practice throughout its publications, speeches,

doctrine and propaganda materials.[48] Generally, the Islamic State applies a three-stage approach of first building an organisation with clandestine cells, then increasing guerrilla attacks to expand influence and push incumbent forces out of key rural population centres, and finally transitioning to semi-conventional offensives and seizing and controlling population centres to govern according to Shari'a.[49] The group describes its operational phases as *nikaya* (guerrilla style stabs); *sawlat* (hit and run) as part of a larger campaign of *istanzaf* (attrition); and *tamkin* (consolidation/political empowerment).[50] These concepts are central to the Islamic State's *manhaj* (method) and it is in the nuances of how each phase should be conducted and timed that it both distinguishes itself from rivals, such as al-Qaeda, bases its claims of credibility, and influences the activities of its global affiliates.

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45 Mao Tse Tung, On Guerrilla Warfare, 1992.
46 Ernesto Guevara, Guerrilla Warfare, (Hawthorne CA: BN Publishing, 2012).
47 Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, "A Practical Course for Guerrilla Warfare," in Norman Cigar, ed., Al'Qa'ida's Doctrine for Insurgency, (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2009).
48 Craig Whiteside, "New Masters of Revolutionary Warfare: The Islamic State Movement (2002-2016)," Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 10, No. 4 (August 2016). Available at: https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2016/issue-4/403-new-masters-of-revolutionary-warfare-the-islamic-state-movement-2002-2016-by-craig-whiteside.pdf.
49 Ibid.
50 Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, The ISIS Reader, 2020, pp. 124-134; Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again, The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," CTC Sentinel, Vol. 10, No. 11 (December 2017).

The movement founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi defended his early insurgency strategy from critics (including former mentor al-Maqdisi) that claimed it was all about irritation (*nikaya*) and had no real plans to achieve empowerment (*tamkin)*. This is a common critique of an exhaustion strategy that can look like mindless violence if it is not assessed holistically across space and time. Al-Zarqawi urged patience and faith in the overall strategy in an audiotaped speech in 2005 as the group escalated its operations and, the following year, established its first state.[51] Since then, the movement's approach to insurgency has stayed true to this logic, both in the way it looked at the US presence and how it planned on removing rivals from areas it intended to control. However, its language has changed over time. The Islamic State of Iraq's 2009 strategy document — "The Fallujah memorandum" — articulated a "cleansing strategy" of removing "apostate" forces out of key areas to create breathing room for mobility and a higher tempo of operations. It also outlined a careful "targeting strategy" designed to prioritise eliminating highly trained military, intelligence, and political figures in the Iraqi government.[52]

Ten years later, in 2019, a four-part series in the Islamic State's *al-Naba* newsletter described the logic behind its current strategy having lost control of its territories across Iraq and Syria.[53] While the purpose of publishing this primer seemed to be to reassure its supporters that a long and patient strategy would once again achieve *tamkin*, it was also an opportunity to communicate its insurgency doctrine to global supporters and affiliates who face similar asymmetric battles against comparatively more powerful foes. Its authors assessed that in its two central provinces the Islamic State was in the first phase of guerrilla warfare and thus

limited to "fleeting attacks" on government forces in lightly defended areas, once again targeting key security and political leaders with surprise attacks.[54] Since government forces could not defend everywhere, these attacks would eventually force them to strongpoint their own key locations leaving a greater freedom of manoeuvre to the Islamic State's insurgent cells. To grow the force, *ghanima* (spoils of war) from these raids was a priority with weapons and ammunition to supply its new recruits or to sell in the black market, and private property being captured for resale.[55]

More recently, amidst its May 2020 global 'attrition' campaign, *al-Naba* again articulated its insurgency strategy with the idea of exhaustion at its core. The article, titled 'Except for one manoeuvring for battle, or retreating to [another fighting] company',[56] presented the religious justification and the strategic context for these types of attacks as a necessity towards achieving *tamkin*. Applying an exhaustion strategy is designed to transform asymmetric weakness to parity and then asymmetric strength. What is especially important in this article is that the authors argue that there is no need to rush the exhaustion phase given that *tamkin* is an inevitable product of its application for both jurisprudential and strategic reasons. The Iraqi Army in Mosul was not reduced by attrition (as least not in the strict military sense) but rather exhausted from years of *niqaya* and the constant state of alert required to counter snipers, explosions, subversion, and perceived hostility from a local population that informed insurgents on their movements. On those occasions when the Iraqi security forces quit the battlefield (e.g. Mosul 2014) it was due to a sudden realisation that their position had become untenable. This death by a thousand cuts exhausts the enemy physically and psychologically, simultaneously weakening

51 Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "Clarification Of Issues Raised By Sheikh Maqdisi During His Interview With Al-Jazeera Television," audiotape, al-Qaeda Jihad Media Battalion office, 12 July 2005.
52 Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, The ISIS Reader, 2020, pp. 126-129.
53 Islamic State, "Bringing Down the Towns Temporarily as a Method of Operation for the Mujahidin," al-Naba, No. 179, 25 April 2019. Translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. Available at: http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation.
54 Islamic State, "Bringing Down the Towns Temporarily as a Method of Operation for the Mujahidin," al-Naba, No. 181, 9 May 2019. Translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. Available at: http://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/05/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-2.
55 Islamic State, "Bringing Down the Towns Temporarily as a Method of Operation for the Mujahidin," al-Naba, No. 180, 2 May 2019. Translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. http://www.aymennjawad.org/2018/12/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation-1.
56 Islamic State, "Except for one manoeuvring for battle, or retreating to [another fighting] company," al-Naba, No. 236, 28 May 2020. Translated by Sam Heller. Available at: https://abujamajem.wordpress.com/2020/05/31/the-islamic-state-conceptualizes-guerrilla-warfare/.

their will and capability. A cumulative campaign with no concrete timeline or milestones, just an underlying logic of patience and sustained attacks in an increasing symphony of violence, is extraordinarily difficult to understand for those amidst this mayhem. Therefore, it is important to provide local partners with an understanding of the logic of the Islamic State's violence to help inform more sustained and targeted strategies to confront it. Of course, violence is only one line of effort in the Islamic State's approach.[57]

As discussed earlier, this style of irregular warfare is a good fit for an organisation with adhocratic traits. It is open ended, decentralised, resourced largely at the lower level, and scales up to include special operations and semi-conventional forces when the situation allows. Many of these units were put together for specific operations, and then disbanded to continue guerrilla warfare, essentially serving as ad hoc task forces.[58] Some foot soldiers in the Islamic State's *Diwan al-Jund* (Department of Soldiers) began their career in guerrilla cells prior to what they call "the Conquest" (of Mosul), transformed into conventional units during the caliphate period, then dispersed back into desert and mountain enclaves to prepare for the next phase. During the caliphate phase, the *Diwan* consisted of multiple armies differentiated by function and language that worked together in particular fronts in a complex relationship between top leadership and local commanders, that widely varied by location.[59] Soldiers (and to some extent supporters) have always been part of an organisational culture that has shape-shifted to be whatever the leadership needed it to be, based on the strategic environment.

Politics, governance, and propaganda

It is important to add further nuance to this analytical picture because, while violence is undoubtedly an important measure for assessing the Islamic State, a broader strategic aperture is needed. In addition to violence, three other lines of effort are especially important means by which the Islamic State seeks to control a population and outcompete the politico-military efforts of its adversaries. The first involves the implementation of a top-down political strategy which typically involves reaching out to local authorities and their networks. These activities are designed to be complementary to the Islamic State's use of violence which seeks to undermine, coerce, and ultimately eliminate government and other rival authorities. Such violence must be legitimised carefully according to the group's published doctrine and serve a clear political purpose, even if this is instilling fear in the enemy. At the same time, the positive outcomes of the use of violence (e.g. framed as self-defence for Sunnis against militia predation or pre-emptive strikes) need to be tailored for a diverse audience.

Second are bottom-up governance efforts designed to build relationships or coerce compliance from the local population. These can come in a variety of forms including intelligence gathering, conflict resolution and mediation, the enforcement of laws regulating behaviours in the local population and, of course, the collection of taxes.[60] Again, such activities are meant to complement the Islamic State's campaigns of violence and top-down political activities. Put simply, the Islamic State uses violence to hamper the

57 Lukas Milevski, "Revisiting J.C. Wylie's Dichotomy of Strategy: The Effects of Sequential and Cumulative Patterns of Operations," Journal of Strategic Studies, Vol. 35, No. 2 (2012), pp. 223-242.

58 Craig Whiteside, Ian Rice and Daniele Raineri, "Black Ops: Islamic State and Innovation in Irregular Warfare," Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 2019.

59 Craig Whiteside, et al., "The ISIS Files: The Islamic State's Department of Soldiers," George Washington University Program on Extremism, forthcoming 2020.

60 For example, see, Danielle F. Jung, Jacob N. Shapiro, Jon Wallace and Pat Ryan, "Managing a Transnational Insurgency: The Islamic State of Iraq's 'Paper Trail', 2005-2010," Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point, 16 December 2014. Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/managing-a-transnational-insurgency-the-islamic-state-of-iraqs-paper-trail-2005-2010/; Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration," 2015; Eric Robinson, Daniel Eger, Patrick B. Johnston, Sean Mann, Alexander D. Rothenberg and David Stebbins, "When the Islamic State Comes to Town: The Economic Impact of Islamic State Governance in Iraq and Syria," (RAND Corporation, 2017). Available at: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1970.html; Hassan Hassan, "ISIS in Iraq and Syria: Rightsizing the Current 'Comeback'," Center for Global Policy, 12 May 2020. Available at: https://cgpolicy.org/articles/isis-in-iraq-and-syria-rightsizing-the-current-comeback/.

political and governance efforts of its rivals as it then seeks to fill that void (which it exacerbated, if not helped to create) with its own governance initiatives and outreach to potential political allies. To only appreciate the Islamic State's governance efforts during those fleeting periods of success when it controlled territory and formalized its bureaucracy (i.e. 2006-07 and 2014-16), completely misses potentially years of largely covert grassroots engagements that established the foundations for those times of more conventional success.

The Islamic State's targeting of Sunni tribal *Sahwa* (Awakening movement) due to their collaboration with Coalition forces prior to 2011 and violation of religious mandates to fight against the occupation is a good example of how the Islamic State synchronises its strategies of violence, politics and governance.[61] By targeting the *Sahwa*, the Islamic State created the political and psychosocial conditions in which tribes perceived it to be in their self-interests to partner with the Islamic State through 2013-15.[62] The Islamic State's efforts to eliminate the *Sahwa* not only nullified a physical threat but a rival Sunni governance mechanism which it looked to replace with their own shadow government. Of course, at the heart of its multi-year anti-*Sahwa* efforts was a propaganda campaign designed to reshape how its potential supporter base (i.e. Sunni Muslims) perceived both historical and future Awakening efforts. This influence effort was experimental at first, testing failed narrative after failed narrative on counter-*Sahwa* targeting until it found one that resonated with the audience and was acceptable to the leadership — a technique successful propagandists have frequently used.[63]

Throughout its multi-decade history, propaganda has played a central role in the Islamic State's approach to war, politics and governance.[64] There has been a tendency to see the propaganda produced by violent extremists as inherently deceptive in its strategic and operational purposes. Yet messaging is an important means by which groups like the Islamic State persuade its audiences and so accuracy in messaging is important for projecting credibility. Analysing the propaganda output from the Islamic State's official sources can provide important insights into where the group perceives itself to be strategically in different locations but also how it is planning to evolve into the future. This is especially important when the Islamic State movement seeks to demonstrate the credibility and the divine sanctity of its *manhaj*. One important way that the Islamic State seeks to project its credibility over time is to deploy messages that are designed to prepare its supporters for strategic transitions in its military, political and governance campaigns. For example, in al-Adnani's final speech in 2016, he warned of the group's decline and reminded supporters that commitment to the Islamic State's cause was far more important than material losses.[65] Indeed, throughout its history, the Islamic State has been remarkably frank both within its ranks and with its broader supporter base underscoring the importance of propaganda analysis as a means to track and project its operational and strategic transitions.

Propaganda may also be a means for the Islamic State to create a common language of purpose (or at least project that perception) across its transnational branches. This may be especially important for facilitating operational and strategic consistency across its global enterprise. For example, the Islamic State

61 Craig Whiteside, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy: The Slogans and Strategy behind the Islamic State's Campaign to Defeat the Sunni Awakening (2006- 2017)," ICCT, (September 2018). Available at: https://icct.nl/publication/nine-bullets-for-the-traitors-one-for-the-enemy-the-slogans-and-strategy-behind-the-islamic-states-campaign-to-defeat-the-sunni-awakening-2006-2017/.

62 Fishman, "Dysfunction & Decline," 2009; Craig Whiteside and Anas Elallame, "Accidental Ethnographers: the Islamic State's Tribal Engagement Experiment," Small Wars & Insurgencies, Vol. 31, No. 2 (February 2020). Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09592318.2020.1713529?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=fswi20.

63 Whiteside, "Nine Bullets for the Traitors, One for the Enemy," 2018.

64 Charlie Winter, "'Redefining 'Propaganda': The Media Strategy of the Islamic State," The RUSI Journal, Vol. 165, No. 1 (March 2020). Available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03071847.2020.1734321; Haroro J. Ingram, "The strategic logic of Islamic State's full-spectrum propaganda," in Stephane J. Baele, Katharine A. Boyd and Travis G. Coan, eds., ISIS Propaganda, (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2020). Available at: https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190932459.001.0001/oso-9780190932459-chapter-2.

65 Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside and Charlie Winter, "Defining success and failure," in Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, The ISIS Reader, 2020, pp. 215-225.

uses terms like 'attrition', 'harvesting' and 'breaking the walls' as means to not only project commitment in the application of its *manhaj* and consistency in its use of branding to facilitate that perception but also to synchronise activities across its transnational enterprise. This also helps to transfer some of the legacy of success from its campaign to win a caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2014 to the long campaigns ahead in Africa, Asia and other parts of the Middle East. Consider, for example, the global *ghazwat al-istinzaf* ('battles of attrition') campaigns that are periodically deployed by the Islamic State. Usually, these manifest in a steep operational intensification for its cells in Syria and Iraq, with a less pronounced acceleration for those based outside of its core territories. Crucially, during these campaigns, which usually last about ten days, all Islamic State attacks — wherever they are, whoever they target, and however impactful they manage to be — are given the same linguistic tagline, "and during the battle of attrition." This slight tweak to the regular attack reporting format has the effect of presenting the full range of the Islamic State's affiliates around the world as a strategically coherent, tactically coordinated whole, even if the organisational reality within the Islamic State's transnational enterprise is very different.

Somewhat paradoxically, the Islamic State media office is the most centralised aspect of the movement, with its leaders maintaining tight control over all Islamic State messaging — including outlying provinces that are in all other aspects loosely managed by the Delegated Committee.[66] Within the media department, however, the group has tightly integrated security, Shari'a, and administrative aspects of the larger organisation to jointly operate a clandestine unit with virtual offices around the world securing, moving, vetting, and disseminating information. This is very different from its imitation of a traditional organisational chart for its internal media structure back in 2007.[67] This adhocratic solution to camouflaging its high-profile and still productive media department is further enhanced by the existence of an online ecosystem filled by volunteers that takes its direction from the central management.[68]

A framework for confrontation

Throughout its history the Islamic State movement has benefitted from underestimations and misunderstandings by its adversaries, especially during those periods of decline when targeted and sustained pressure would have blunted its ability to recuperate. The contemporary Islamic State finds itself, yet again, as an insurgency in Iraq and Syria but with provinces across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia now offering the movement strategic depth, stretching the focus of its adversaries, and providing almost endless fodder of operations and narratives for its much-vaunted central media units. Within the Islamic State's orbit, it claims that its creed of perpetual war can only be realised by applying the phased politico-military strategy captured in its *manhaj* in an effort that is jurisprudentially justified as an obligation in its *aqeeda*. All the while, the adhocratic traits that characterise its organisation give it the flexibility to adapt as strategic conditions change. Comprehensively degrading the transnational threat posed by the Islamic State's global adhocratic insurgency requires a sustainable posture that will need to

66 Whiteside, "Lighting the Path," 2016.
67 Islamic State of Iraq, "Two charts displaying the Administrative Structure of the Media Center for the Western Region," Reference Number: NMEC 2007-633658 (Harmony Document, captured in 2007), Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point archives. Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/harmony-program/two-charts-displaying-the-administrative-structure-of-the-media-center-for-the-western-region-original-language/. Despite this conventionality, the fact that the central media office in 2007 subordinated its al-Furqan Media (its strategic communications platform then and now) under the future caliph al-Mawla–the Shari'i in Mosul and several layers below the central management of the group in 2007–demonstrates an early example of the adhocratic trait that we discuss in this paper. See Daniel Milton, "The al-Mawla TIRs: An Analytical Discussion with Cole Bunzel, Haroro Ingram, Gina Ligon, and Craig Whiteside," CTC Sentinel, Vol. 13, No. 9 (September 2020). Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/the-al-mawla-tirs-an-analytical-discussion-with-cole-bunzel-haroro-ingram-gina-ligon-and-whiteside/.
68 Bennett Clifford and Helen Powell, "Encrypted Extremism, Inside the English-Speaking Islamic State Ecosystem on Telegram," Program on Extremism, The George Washington University, June 2019; Chelsea Daymon and Meili Criezis, "Pandemic Narratives: Pro-Islamic State Media and the Coronavirus," CTC Sentinel, Vol. 13, No. 6 (June 2020); Charlie Winter and Jade Parker, "Virtual Caliphate Rebooted: The Islamic State's Evolving Online Strategy," Lawfare, 7 January 2018. Available at: https://www.lawfareblog.com/virtual-caliphate-rebooted-islamic-states-evolving-online-strategy.

be proportional, methodical, and strategically calibrated to undermine the Islamic State's strengths and exploit its weaknesses. Based on the preceding analysis, we propose a four-pillar strategic framework.

Pillar 1: An archipelagic counter-strategy

The application of a strategy to affect a global insurgency is difficult to grasp, as insurgencies have almost exclusively worked in national contexts and, even then, typically isolated to certain pockets of activity. Too often, the idea of combating this global threat has been used polemically to conjure the imaginary threat of the spread of "radical Islam." This conflates the many complex political threads of Islamists and extremists, who often fight each other, into a monolith that does not exist. But the Islamic State, like its rival al-Qaeda, is a very specific threat that has conducted a dramatic expansion since the declaration of its caliphate. Like insurgencies within a state, the group seeks to build on its narrative as the legitimate leaders of a global effort to create safe spots for the implementation of its unique (and extreme) version of Islamic governance in places around the globe that are receptive to its ideology and where its *manhaj* can be applied in the field. Mackinlay envisioned almost two decades ago that a more interconnected world would make this kind of archipelagic insurgency possible.[69] These islands of *tamkin* would not be physically connected but exist in a common construct defined and championed by the Islamic State itself via the exploitation of its global adhocratic enterprise. By adopting the movement's *aqeeda* and *manhaj*, its affiliates will leverage the Islamic State brand and, assuming its activities reflect the group's *manhaj*, will enjoy global notoriety when its propagandists project its local struggle as a global and cosmic one.

The Islamic State will look different in different locations, and partner assistance to countries combatting the group will need to reflect this. For some partners, the jihadist threat is existential (e.g. Iraq) while for others it is secondary to more pressing threats (e.g. the Philippines). The Islamic State is a global threat, but it will be defeated community by community, street by street, and house by house.[70] While military and intelligence support will be important for some partner nations facing a direct military threat, what is needed in every country with an Islamic State affiliate is the training of local units across different sectors (civilian government, military, and civil society) specialised in Islamic State strategies who operate at the grassroots community level and take their applied knowledge and adapt it to local nuances. Overall, these efforts will need to be guided by an all-encompassing logic that seeks to:

- degrade the Islamic State's primary exports to global affiliates
- exploit weaknesses inherent to adhocratic organisations
- salt the earth to prevent legacy-based resurgences

It is important to briefly outline the rationale and implications for each of these pillars.

Pillar 2: Degrade the Islamic State's primary exports

The Islamic State's *aqeeda* and *manhaj* are arguably the primary exports to its transnational network. After all, it is the adoption of these guiding principles by its local affiliates, along with their pledge to the caliph, that qualifies them to be officially associated with the Islamic State brand and their application of it in the field that attracts the attention of the Islamic State's central media units. The appeal of the Islamic State's strategic approach has been exponentially boosted by its demonstration through 2014-2016 that its *manhaj* can be successful, perhaps *especially* so compared to al-Qaeda.[71] At the heart of the Islamic State's approach are the following core principles:

- the discriminant deployment of violence

69 John Mackinlay, The Insurgent Archipelago: From Mao to Bin Laden (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).
70 This follows Kilcullen's logic of disaggregation in his previous writings on al-Qaeda's global insurgency, see Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," 2007.
71 Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, The ISIS Reader, 2020, p. 37.

is a powerful tool not only for tactical and operational ends but to shape its strategic environment;

- the imperative of building governance capacity not only to control the population but demonstrate both the efficacy of its agenda and its divine sanctity;

- implementing a political strategy that builds on (exploits) local ethno-tribal structures as a means to ingratiate with the population and, overtime, transform perceptions of the group; and,

- a respect for the power of propaganda to broadcast its political goals, support narratives, and amplify its battlefield progress when winning, and generate hope and faith when it is losing.[72]

These core principles are transmitted to Islamic State's provinces for adoption (and adaption) into local strategies.[73] Consequently, there will be a broad commonality of strategies and operational trends across the Islamic State's transnational enterprise. While its affiliates may seek to import and adopt the Islamic State's strengths, they are also importing and adopting its vulnerabilities. To give local actors the best chance at devising a sustainable, proactive and nuanced approach to confronting the Islamic State's affiliates, it will be essential to provide training to government, military, and civil society sectors in the Islamic State's strategies especially its *aqeeda* and *manhaj*. By exposing select local specialists to the Islamic State's campaign approaches, this strategic literacy training helps to reduce the sense of confusion and surprise that can delay the development and implementation of effective strategies. Furthermore, an understanding of Islamic State strategies can help locals to devise not only locally nuanced defensive counter-strategies but proactive efforts designed to put local pro-Islamic State actors on the backfoot.[74]

Following the overarching logic of the archipelagic approach, the more that each Islamic State affiliate is being weakened by local government, military, and civil society actors, the more these efforts will help to cumulatively degrade the Islamic State's brand. The Islamic State's brand is built on projecting credibility and trust to its members and supporters. Undermining the credibility of the Islamic State will, in turn, erode trust across its ranks. A simple, yet highly effective, way to degrade the credibility of the Islamic State's brand is to use action and messaging that is designed to expose and highlight the gap between what the Islamic State says and what it actually does. After all, a say-do gap is a credibility gap and it is a messaging approach that can potentially be leveraged by a range of different messengers in a variety of thematic ways. For example, while civil society actors might focus on the say-do gaps of local pro-Islamic State actors, religious scholars can focus on jurisprudential discrepancies in Islamic State ideology, and western strategic communications can highlight say-do gaps across the Islamic State's transnational enterprise. Of course, Islamic State's credibility gaps are best accentuated by ensuring that those working to counter the Islamic State are narrowing their own say-do gaps by effectively synchronising their actions and messaging.

The US Government's release of replacement caliph Amir Muhammad al-Mawla's tactical interrogation reports from his 2008 detention in Iraq is a timely and good example of attacking the credibility of Islamic State leaders.[75] Leadership transitions are critical milestones for organisational survival, which is why leader targeting is a frequently used counter-terrorism tool. A year on from the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the group's global ambitions have survived. There was a great chance that affiliates would use the collapse of the caliphate and the death of the caliph to decide

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72 For more on these principles, see this interview: Joel Wing, "The Enduring Principles and Strategies Of The Islamic State: Interview With Authors Of The ISIS Reader: Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside and Charlie Winter," Musings On Iraq, 24 June 2020. Available at: http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2020/06/the-enduring-principles-and-strategies.html.

73 One example of this two-way relationship are the development of the provinces in West Africa and East Asia, see Jacob Zenn, "The Islamic State's Provinces on the Peripheries: Juxtaposing the Pledges from Boko Haram in Nigeria and Abu Sayyaf and Maute Group in the Philippines," Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2019).

74 The authors have extensive experience providing this type of in-field support in various locations.

75 Daniel Milton and Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, "Stepping out from the Shadows: The Interrogation of the Islamic State's Future Caliph," CTC Sentinel, Vol. 13, No. 9 (September 2020). Available at: https://ctc.usma.edu/stepping-out-from-the-shadows-the-interrogation-of-the-islamic-states-future-caliph/.

to go their own way, and yet almost no one did. The organisation had prepared for this possibility, and one of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's last public speeches was designed to present the caliph position as the legitimate director of the global enterprise.[76]

Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurashi was presented with little identification other than his kunya (with a link to the Prophet's tribe and clan) and the briefest of biographies indicating he was a veteran of the war against the Americans (prior to 2011) and was religiously trained. The deliberate opaqueness serves a purpose, to ensure that ties to the organisation are not personal but a recognition of the power of the Shura council to pick the best leader for the global movement — that is, it is geared towards reinforcing the movement's legitimacy of the institution not the cult of personality.[77] The fact that Islamic State West Africa province leadership chose to publish a short book outlining why their original pledge to the Islamic State should continue despite the collapse of the caliphate explains both the logic of staying in a global alliance while reinforcing the perception of legitimacy of the caliph position, and how the Islamic State has handled its leadership succession.[78]

Despite successfully navigating these difficult shoals, there is still some danger for the group with its unknown leader who has yet to give a public appearance. First, he has been publicly identified by the United States as Muhammad abd al-Rahman al-Mawla, which gives the Islamic State's enemies the opportunity to shape what little is known about the leader. Previous attempts to identify leaders of the Islamic State were ham-fisted and backfired, and this should be avoided unless the information that is available can be verified with a high degree of confidence. There exists a vocal group of dissenters that could be amplified, and they are known to be critics of the new leader, assuming his identity is correct. Al-Mawla's

personal background as a self-proclaimed Arab from a mixed Turkmen/Arab area of Northern Iraq makes his claim of Quraysh lineage more complex than those of others (like Abu Bakr's claim through the more prominent al-Badri), and these kind of cracks can be picked at.[79] Al-Mawla's remaining prison records could be released, and any other information that makes it more likely that he will be recognised, found, or discredited.[80] While American government information operations targeting the new caliph will not directly undermine the Islamic State's legitimacy, certainly jihadi rivals are watching and will likely use this in other ways to achieve the same end.

Pillar 3: Exploit weaknesses inherent to adhocracies

As highlighted earlier, adhocratic organisations tend to be susceptible to several vulnerabilities. Three are especially significant. First, adhocracies rely heavily on communications to maintain their strategic and organisational coherence. For the Islamic State, this involves the use of communication technologies but also liaison personnel.[81] It is also worth noting that while much of this communication is necessarily covert, the messaging from the Islamic State's central media units is also a means by which it communicates with its affiliates and broader supporter base. This highlights the importance of maintaining pressure across all the Islamic State's communications – online and offline, covert and overt – as a means to exploit a vulnerability that will exacerbate its other weaknesses.

Adhocracies are also susceptible to internal competition and ideological extremism on its fringes. The Islamic State has been susceptible to fracturing within its ranks especially concerning the appropriate application of its *manhaj* and differing interpretations of the appropriate jurisprudential interpretation of

76 "The Guerrilla Caliph," in Ingram, Whiteside and Winter, The ISIS Reader, 2020, pp. 293-301; Milton, "The al-Mawla TIRs," 2020.
77 Haroro J. Ingram and Craig Whiteside, "Caliph Abu Unknown: Succession and Legitimacy in the Islamic State," War on the Rocks, 25 November 2019. Available at: https://warontherocks.com/2019/11/caliph-abu-unknown-succession-and-legitimacy-in-the-islamic-state/.
78 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "The 'Boko Haram' Allegiance Pledge to Islamic State: An Ansar al-Shari'a Tunisia Connection," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, 8 August 2018. Available at: http://www.aymennjawad.org/21476/the-boko-haram-allegiance-pledge-to-islamic-state.
79 Milton, "Stepping out from the Shadows," 2020.
80 Precedence for this can be found in the release of Kataib Hezbollah leader Qais Khazali's interrogation reports in 2018, AEI "The Qayis Khazali Papers," AEI.org. Available at: https://www.aei.org/the-qayis-al-khazali-papers/.
81 Al-Hashimi, "Interview: ISIS's Abdul Nasser Qardash," 2020.

takfir and its implications.[82] These tensions within the Islamic State will be exacerbated by breakdowns in communication across the organisation and the effects of defeats in the field on morale.

Finally, adhocracies can sometimes attempt to hastily transition as an organisation. For the purposes of this study, the issue of hastiness is perhaps secondary to the transition itself. The Islamic State remains in a period of organisational transition as it moves from a state-like bureaucratic hierarchy into a uniform insurgency in Iraq and Syria managing a transnational enterprise. History demonstrates that the Islamic State can cyclically build and rebuild its organisation as it moves up and down the phases of its politico-military strategy. Periods of transition are times of vulnerability for any organisation but especially those with adhocratic traits. This highlights the importance of maintaining pressure on the Islamic State in the variety of different ways outlined in this paper.

Pillar 4: Salt the earth to prevent legacy-based resurgences

The Islamic State tends to re-emerge in locations where it has had previous success. While returning to locations that are known and where previous networks were forged certainly contributes to this trend, the Islamic State often plays upon nostalgia to re-write the history of its occupations to sow the psychosocial seeds for a return. It is a strategy that tends to resonate when central government efforts to rehabilitate and develop these communities have failed in the aftermath of the Islamic State's removal. There is a compounding dynamic that emerges in which the failure of rehabilitation efforts and resentments towards the central authorities (e.g. the national government) for their perceived failings increases susceptibility to the Islamic State's legacy appeals. In such

contexts, civil society plays a crucial role in offering communities an alternative to pro-Islamic State and other violent extremist actors. It is vital that civil society groups actually living in vulnerable communities develop an understanding of Islamic State strategies and use this to devise nuanced, grassroots, local campaigns to defensively and proactively pushback against legacy-based resurgence efforts.[83]

Summary

The challenge of keeping focus on the Islamic State threat has been made considerably more difficult by the pivot of many nations, especially in the west, towards great power competition. Yet maintaining pressure on the Islamic State, especially as described here, is not mutually exclusive towards those broader strategic aims. Indeed, supporting fragile partner nations in their efforts to deal with the Islamic State threat – whether across the Middle East (e.g. Iraq), Africa (e.g. Nigeria, Congo, Mozambique), or Asia (e.g. Philippines) – should be a means to strengthen partnerships in geopolitically important locations. Indeed, the archipelagic approach to countering the Islamic State can be a means to strengthen the fronts against Russian and Chinese influence.

Conclusion

The ability of the Islamic State to survive the loss of its caliph and caliphate in the last two years is readily apparent to most, even those rightfully interested in leaving this behind to focus on greater threats to global stability and peace. The political and military defeat of the caliphate project, as successful a cooperative effort the globe has seen in recent years, has obscured the trends easily seen in the data we present and compare with many others in this paper. The Islamic State's effort to globalise has been just as successful, and the trends look

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82 Abu al-Faruq al-Masri, "1437AH, Message on the Manhaj," Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, 31 October 2016. Translated by Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi. Available at: www.aymennjawad.org/19341/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-abu-al-faruq-al; "Dissent in the Islamic State's Yemen Affiliates: Documents, Translation & Analysis," 29 February 2016. Translated by Aymenn Jawd al-Tamimi. Available at: www.aymennjawad.org/2016/02/dissent-in-the-islamic-state-yemen-affiliates; Cole Bunzel, "Ideological infighting in the Islamic State," Perspectives on Terrorism, Vol. 13, No. 1 (February 2019). Available at: https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/customsites/perspectives-on-terrorism/2019/issue-1/bunzel.pdf.

83 Omar Mohammed, "Exposing Terror, Building Resilience: Harnessing Citizen Journalists and Social Media to Confront Terrorism", Global Network on Extremism & Technology, 29 September 2020. Available at: https://gnet-research.org/2020/09/29/exposing-terror-building-resilience-harnessing-citizen-journalists-and-social-media-to-confront-terrorism/.

poor for those interested in stability and peace in countries across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia dealing with various manifestations of this threat. While global cooperation will be essential to ensure that the Islamic State threat is confronted wherever it emerges, it does not necessarily require investments by western nations, especially the United States, on the scale of the last two decades. At least, it does not have to.

What we have attempted to outline here are the broad parameters for a strategy to confront the Islamic State's global insurgencies that is based on a nuanced understanding of the threat. It is why pressure needs to be maintained across those key theatres to ensure, in outcompeting the Islamic State on military, political, governance and propaganda grounds, it is unable to strategically and organisationally transition. The Islamic State will be presented with opportunities – whether through its own actions or the missteps of adversaries – that it will seek to exploit but even then, there will be risks that can be leveraged. Equally, potential opportunities will emerge to strike decisively at the Islamic State but they, too, will have risks that need to be considered. By transforming the paradigm from 'defeat' to 'outcompete', a more realistic and sustainable posture that emphasises the role of global partners will be necessary. The Islamic State is a problem that cannot be wished away by being ignored nor willed away by a refocusing on great power competition.

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