



February 15, 2017

Carmel Davis, a Franklin Fellow at the U.S. Department of State, received a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the U.S. Government.

Abstract: The Islamic State has severe limits and poses a manageable problem. Its limits include that it is unable to occupy ordered areas or Shiite areas. The Islamic State's military capability and its ability to govern territory are modest. It collaborates poorly with like-minded organizations and it has elicited a military response from countries, reducing its territory and imperiling its existence.

How concerned should we be about the Islamic State?¹ President Donald Trump is concerned: he spoke at his inauguration about “Radical Islamic Terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the earth,” and he signed a Presidential Memorandum on January 28 that states that the Islamic State “is not the only threat from radical Islamic terrorism that the United States faces, but it is among the most vicious and aggressive” and that “It is the policy of the United States that ISIS be defeated.”² The United States was concerned enough that it deployed over 5,200 U.S. personnel to Iraq and 300 to Syria by December 2016 and conducted over 13,700 air strikes in Iraq and Syria as of Jan. 19, 2017.³ Former Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter spoke about “the need to defeat ISIL,” a “specific plan” to do so, and “usi[ng] the great might of American power” to

¹ I use “Islamic State” to include the Islamic State proclaimed by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 and its predecessor organizations. My focus is on the limitations of the series of organizations rather than their history.

² “Remarks of President Donald J. Trump – As Prepared for Delivery: Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address> and “Presidential Memorandum Plan to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” January 28, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/28/plan-defeat-islamic-state-iraq>.

³ The “Force Management Level” on Dec. 5, 2016 was 5,262 in Iraq and 300 in Syria. “Letter from the President—War Powers Resolution,” Dec. 5, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/05/letter-president-supplemental-6-month-war-powers-letter>. The “Force Management Level” may not include all U.S. military personnel. For airstrikes, see “Operation Inherent Resolve: Targeted Operations against ISIL Terrorists,” Jan. 20, 2017, www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814-Inherent-Resolve.

implement it.⁴ France began bombing the Islamic State in Iraq in 2014, expanded its campaign to Syria in September 2015, and increased the intensity of bombing after the Islamic State launched attacks in Paris in November 2015. Britain began bombing in Iraq in 2014 and expanded its campaign into Syria in December 2015. Some are alarmed. For example, Frederick Kagan and his coauthors characterized the Islamic State as an existential threat to the United States and Europe in early 2016.⁵ Others are less concerned, arguing that demographic, geographic, and military factors limit the Islamic State's expansion.⁶

Opportunistic Occupation of Disordered Sunni Areas

The Islamic State now occupies disordered areas but has little presence in ordered areas, that is, areas where interactions are structured by institutions responsive to a recognized, generally central, government.⁷ In 2006, the Islamic State of Iraq was proclaimed, incorporating the Sunni area of Iraq in the context of the emergence of semi-autonomous Shiite and Kurdish areas. Today, the Islamic State is present in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Iraq has experienced a social revolution, "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structure . . . accompanied and, in part, carried through by class-based revolts from below," and Syria is experiencing something similar.⁸ The Islamic State has affiliates, organizations that have pledged allegiance, in Egypt, Afghanistan, Yemen, West Africa, the Caucasus, and the Philippines. Few of these areas maintain institutions responsive to central governments that structure interactions. These areas are fragile, troubled, and have high levels of perceived corruption.⁹

The Islamic State is opportunistic. It takes advantage of areas disordered before its arrival, but it has not yet disrupted ordered areas. Its predecessors emerged in Iraq during insurgency that followed the U.S. invasion. The Islamic State in Iraq was marginalized during the Anbar Awakening when Sunni tribes and the United States cooperated to assert Sunni tribal organization in western Iraq. It dispatched forces into Syria in 2011, several months after civil war began. In early 2013, it began to gain traction in Iraq during sectarian conflict and quickly took control of much of

⁴ "Remarks by Secretary Carter at the World Economic Forum in Davos Switzerland, Jan. 22, 2016," www.defense.gov/News/News-Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/644230/remarks-by-secretary-carter-at-the-world-economic-forum-in-davos-switzerland.

⁵ Frederick Kagan et al., *Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Threats to the U.S. and Europe*, Jan. 2016, www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/PLANEX%20Report%201%20-%20FINALFINALFINAL.pdf.

⁶ Faysal Itani, "The Limits of Islamic State Expansion," June 24, 2015, www.lawfareblog.com/limits-islamic-state-expansion.

⁷ Douglass C. North, "Institutions," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Winter 1991, p. 97.

⁸ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 4.

⁹ "Corruption Perceptions Index 2011," Transparency International, http://www.transparency.org/cpi2011/in_detail. Of 182 countries, Afghanistan was ranked 180, Iraq 175, Libya 168, Yemen 164, Russia and Nigeria 143, Syria and Philippines 129, and Egypt 112.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5126653>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5126653>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)