

How to deal with the Islamic State?

An analysis of the terrorist state



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INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State is the extremist's answer to the counter-terrorism phenomenon of the 21st century. IS is a formation that had started as a terrorist cell in Iraq, and has become the flagship of the jihadist movement all over the world. It cannot be classified as a terrorist group, and thus requires a different approach. The purpose of this article is to analyze the Islamic State and find a way to deal with the organization.

SUMMARY

ISIS is a jihadist group whose goal is to establish a state which is based on fundamentalist Islamism. It gained power as a consequence of the Iraqi occupation and the civil war in Syria. It can be defined as a pseudo-state and not as a terrorist group as it holds territory, has a population and possesses a

conventional army. ISIS poses a threat to peace in the Middle East, and due to the complicated relationships between the nations of the Arabian Peninsula, it is very difficult to deal with it. I propose a three-stage action plan. First, consider finding a peaceful solution through diplomacy. Involved parties should promote reforms that pacify Sunni Arabs, who, as a result, will turn away from ISIS. Second, I recommend taking a step back and let ISIS destroy itself. Third, form an international military coalition that, through careful timing, will be able to neutralize the IS.

ANALYSIS

The roots of the Islamic State

In order to forecast the future of the ISIS, one must understand the organization itself first: *Why is it called ISIS? What are its goals? What are its beliefs? What is the story behind it?*

Terminology

The Islamic State has multiple names. In the earliest days of the terrorist state (1999-2004) the group had been known as *Jamaat al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* (Organization of Monotheism and Jihad). In 2004, they pledged their allegiance to the Al-Qaida, and after that they were known as the *Tanzim Qaidat al-Jihad fi Bilad al-Rafidaynal* (al-Qaeda in the Land of Two Rivers or al-Qaeda in Iraq). In 2006, they had severed ties with the ‘mother organization’, and since they have been operating mainly in Iraq, they took up the *Al-Dawla Al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq* (Islamic State of Iraq) name. In 2013, having gained foothold in Syria, they added the *al-Sham* (Syria) suffix to complete its current name: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. In the Arab world the organization is often referenced to as Daesh, the abbreviation of the Arabic name of ISIS. The ‘Islamic State’ is the term the terrorist state prefers to call itself, stressing that they are *the* one true state of Islamic nature. ([Aaron Y. Zelin: The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement, 2014](#))([Independent, 2014](#))

ISIS, having enjoyed the support of Al-Qaida, has the know-how, the manpower and the determination to be a serious threat to neighboring states in the region. The fact that it has survived for more than 16 years indicates the professionalism the Islamic State operates with.

Goals

The declared goal of the organization is to create a Sunni Islamic caliphate (“*Khilafa*”) that cultivates *Sharia* law (a legal code in Muslim countries, often incorporated into the legal system) ([CFR, 2014](#)). The name Caliphate refers to the political-religious Muslim state of the 7th century ([Encyclopaedia Britannica](#)).

The Dabiq, the magazine of the IS, describes the road to the *Khilafa* in five key steps:

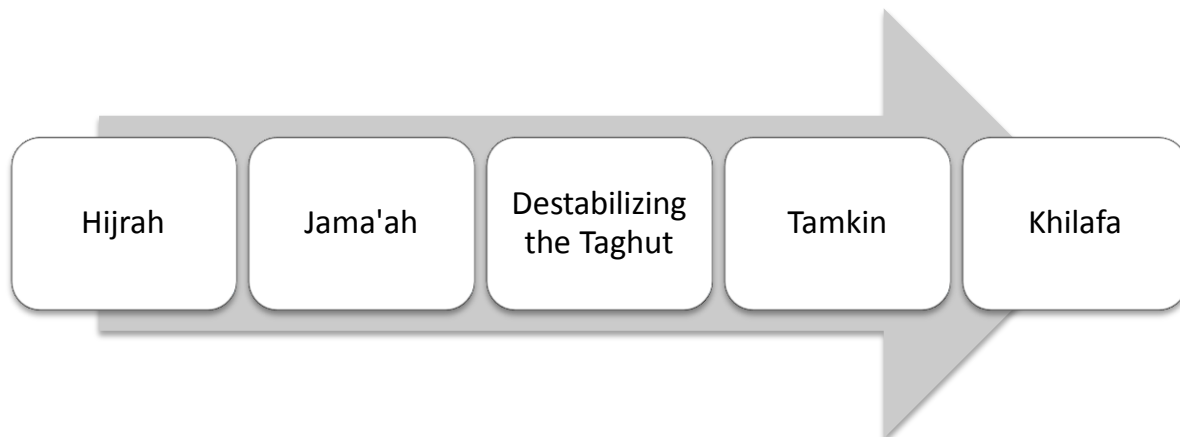


Figure 1

The Islamic State borrows heavily from the tactics of the *mujahidin*, who fought the Soviet Union during the Afghanistan War in the 1980s. ISIS uses the term *mujahidin* for any fighter who has fought for Islam. They consider themselves descendants of the Afghan freedom fighters. The Islamic State acknowledges in Dabiq that the war fought in Afghanistan is very similar to the one they’re fighting right now. They state that it is pivotal, as it was in Afghanistan, to set aside ethnic differences between the parties and unite against the common enemy. ISIS learnt from the mistakes the Afghans made: do not let ethnic

differences rise, provide sufficient training for the troops, and provide a clear hierarchy for the military.

The first step in the creation of the Caliphate is *hijra* (emigration). The *hijra* is the base of the religious fight for Islam, the jihad. The *hijra* is a gathering call to Muslims all around the world to join their fight. *Hijra* is a way of establishing a steady supply of foreign fighters for the military force.

The next step is creating communities, or ‘safe havens’ (*Jama’ah*) that can shelter the members of ISIS. These havens function just like Pakistan did in the Soviet-Afghan war. The Dabiq describes Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Somalia as such places. The *Jama’ahs* serve as bases of operations as well.

The third step is creating chaos and weakening a *Taghut* (“tyrant ruling by manmade law”) state, the territory that jihadists wish to conquer. The operations against the *Taghut* regimes can be categorized as the following: *nikayah* (injury) and *tamkin* (consolidation). The goal of *nikayah* operation is causing pain and suffering to the enemy. The *nikayah* include sabotages, executions and theft.

The fourth step is carrying out *tamkin* missions. These missions “pave the way for the claiming of territory”. This includes building infrastructure and establishing governing institutions in territories where Islamic law is applied. ([Middle-East Institute, 2015](#))

The Islamic State would develop a full-fledged state in the ruins of the old one, thus reaching the goal: the *Khilafa*. Figure 2 displays the intended size of the final Caliphate. It shows close resemblance to the Omayyad Arab Caliphate of the 7th century. It includes the Arabian Peninsula, North- and Central-Africa, Iberian Peninsula, Balkans, Turkey, ‘the Stans’, India and parts of Eastern-Europe.



Figure 2

Beliefs

According to the [Dabiq](#) the population of the world is divided into two camps: the believers and hypocrites. The former consists of Muslims and *mujahidin* around the globe, and the latter is “*camp of the jews, the crusaders, their allies, and with them the rest of the nations and religions*”

Having mentioned all this it is clear that the ISIS does not want to build alliances and partnerships with other nation-states. It only wants to form such partnerships with entities that rigorously follow the set of beliefs of ISIS. This agenda isolates the organization from the international system for they cannot count on overt help from any major powers. The fundamentalist approach hurts the ISIS more than it helps the group. Furthermore ISIS has shown multiple times that both its propaganda and military operations are pragmatic. The question is: Is the Islamist fundamentalist approach just rhetoric or a declaration on foreign politics?

History

The geopolitics of the region played a pivotal role in the current flourish of the IS. First, one must consider the background of Iraq and Syria first in order to understand the IS.

The situation in Iraq

The Islamic State came to being as a direct result of the 2003 United States intervention in Iraq. The invasion had three components that later played a key role: **A**; *The invasion had led to the unification of the Iraqi tribes*. This enabled a strong and a more or less organized resistance movement and spawned numerous organizations such as the Al-Qaida of Iraq. **B**; *The U.S. assigned [Nouri Maliki](#) as prime minister of Iraq without considering the ethnic consequences*. According to the [CIA Factbook](#) the ethnic distribution of the country is 60-65% Shia, 32-37% Sunni. Maliki, being a Shiite, excluded the Sunni minority ([National Interest, 2015](#)). Before 2003, the situation was the complete opposite. The Sunni government ignored the rights of Shiite citizens. The mutual exclusions also furthered the tension between the Shiites and Sunnis ([Wall Street Journal 2015](#)). In 2012, the Sunnis organized protests against the Shiite government. Maliki feared that this would lead to another ‘Arab Spring’ in Iraq so he used armed force to suppress the protests. This led the Sunnis right into the hands of ISIS ([Vox, 2014](#)). **C**; *The United States didn’t manage to train a proper Iraqi armed force*. After the U.S. had left the country in 2011, the Iraqi government failed to maintain an able military force to combat both the external and internal threats that they face now ([Washington Post, 2014](#)). Despite possessing superior equipment and weaponry, the Iraqi military ultimately collapsed and fled during battles with the Islamic State.

The situation in Syria

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria started in Iraq but probably wouldn’t have gotten far without the Arab Spring and the following civil war in Syria.

Syria, not unlike Iraq, is not a traditional nation-state like Egypt, Iran or even Israel. The current border of Syria is a result of an agreement (the Sykes-Picot Agreement) between the British and the French. This pact completely ignored the ethnic and religious conditions of the region. Thus, Syria is an inherently unstable state-formation in the region. Syria, to this day, has been held together by centralized, authoritarian rule. The event that jumpstarted ISIS was the Arab

Spring. The Arab Spring in Syria started out as peaceful protests for civil and humanitarian rights but the events soon escalated. [President al-Assad](#) responded to the protests with force and this led to an armed rebellion. The rebels formed a military force called the Free Syrian Army from the deserting member of the Syrian Armed Forces. During this time the Kurdish minority in the northern part of the country rose up as well. This created a “power tetragon” consisting of al-Assad, the FSA, the Kurds and the newly renamed ISIS. In the midst of this chaotic situation ISIS, the jihadist group, managed to seize more and more territory in Syria.

Current state

U.S. intelligence estimates that there are between 9,000–18,000 soldiers fighting under the banner of the Islamic State ([CNN, 2015](#)). Despite successful campaigns by Iraqi forces that have cleared them out of key cities such as Tikrit, Babil and Diyala, ISIS still holds key areas of Northern-Iraq and Syria ([Business Insider, 2015](#)). The Pentagon stated that at their peak, ISIS had held 55,000 km² (roughly the equivalent of Croatia or Costa Rica). Recently shrinking by 25%, ISIS now controls a territory of roughly 41,500 km² (around the territory of the Netherlands)([ABC, 2015](#))¹. Figure 3 shows ISIS territories (orange shows the territories it has full control of, and the striped territories are areas of operation) as of April 1.

¹ This information however, is debated. In this article the author argues that the Pentagon’s data is inconclusive and misleading. It doesn’t depict the territorial gains of ISIS in the given time period (July 2014-April 2015) ([Daily Beast, 2015](#)).



Figure 3

ISIS understands economics despite its religious extremism. In 2006, a map surfaced on the Internet (Figure 4). It shows the territories of Syria and Iraq in yellow and the territory ISIS held in orange. The black objects are the oil wells in the immediate region. This map demonstrates that the AQI, the predecessor of ISIS, planned their advance very carefully. According to 2014 data, ISIS made 3 million dollars daily only by selling the oil that their wells had extracted ([Syria Deeply, 2014](#)).

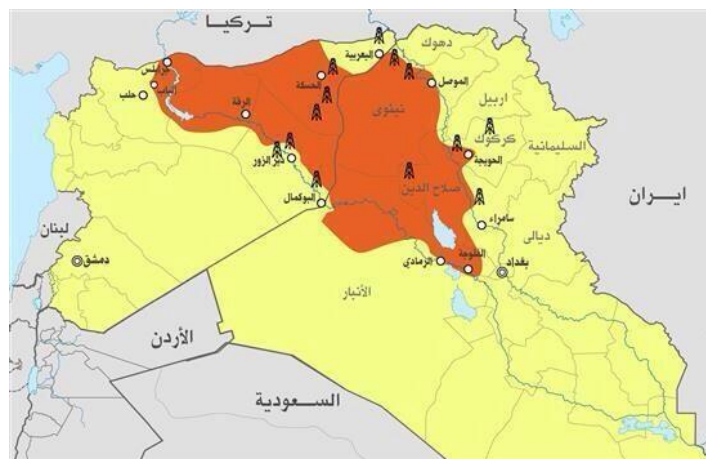


Figure 4

Why is it successful?

There are four components to the success of the IS:



Figure 5

The first element is chaos. Without the events that the Arabian Peninsula had gone under in the past 10-15 years, the foundation of ISIS would not have been possible. In Iraq, the U.S. invasion allowed the Al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations to flourish. After the U.S. had left the country, the actions of the government outraged the Sunni minority. Many of whom joined the relatively small, fundamentalist, jihadist group, the ISI. Iraq's weak military has been unable to deal with the numerous insurgent groups that arose after 2011. Similarly in Syria, the Assad regime had been incapable of controlling the demonstrations and protests, which led to the deterioration of state power and ultimately a civil war. The instability of the country favors the IS and other insurgent factions. Today, both in Iraq and Syria, the governments lack the power to exercise real authority over its territories. This forces the population living in the areas controlled by the IS to succumb to the terrorist state.

The second component is propaganda. The ISIS is the first truly Web 2.0 pseudo-terrorist group. It uses the social media just as heavily as any other customer-oriented firm or organization. It has a Facebook page, it tweets regularly, and even shares videos ([National Interest, 2015](#)). Its propaganda films, particularly the one named Flames of War ([YouTube, 2014](#)) could easily be mistaken for an army recruitment video. It publishes a news magazine which is en par (in terms of design and structure) with any other defense and military magazine ([Clarion Project, 2014](#)). From the outside the IS seems like a ruthless,

jihadist terror-group that cannot be stopped. This is why it is so attractive to young foreign fighters coming from the Middle East, North-Africa, and even from the United Kingdom and Germany to join the ranks of the Islamic State. ([The Atlantic, 2015](#))

The third component is fear. The unrivaled brutality deriving from religious fundamentalism creates fear in both the population it has control over and in its enemies. With the use of the Internet, the group strengthens its position on the short run by publishing videos of mass executions ([Clash Daily, 2015](#)), beheadings ([Iraqi News, 2014](#)) and other atrocities. However, in the long run it alienates its people and the international community. The videos reinforce the image that the ISIS jihadists are savages, irrational actors of the system that cannot be reasoned with.

The most important element is momentum. The IS was in a right place at the right time. After two major wars in the Middle-East, the United States changed its strategic doctrine in 2010. Instead of fighting conventional wars in the Middle-East, it shifted focus to developing COIN (Counter-Insurgency) capabilities and bilateral partnerships in order to promote peace in the region ([White House, 2010](#)). One of the key slogans of Barack Obama in 2008 was ending the Iraqi and Afghan wars in the Middle-East. Hence a conventional war in the Arabian Peninsula is not likely in the current political climate in the USA. President Obama even stated that there would be “*no [American] boots on the ground*” to defeat ISIS” ([The Atlantic, 2014](#)). This ties the hands of Washington, and forces it to look for other partners to help with defeating the terrorist state.

The fact that the largest military force in the world wouldn't intervene in Syria or Iraq, gives the IS a tremendous advantage: it can focus on defeating the regional players and does not have to allocate resources to handling the United States.

Current efforts

There have been numerous efforts to stabilize Syria and pacify the Islamic State. The first attempt was in 2012 when Gen. Petraeus, CIA director at the time, Secretary of State Clinton and other high ranking officials proposed a plan to arm moderate rebels in Syria in order to stop the massacre in the country ([The Hill, 2013](#)) President Obama had halted the plan because he had feared that a deeper involvement in the Syrian crisis could backfire on his reelection ([NY Times, 2013](#)).

In 2013 the Islamic State expanded to Syria and in just over a year they mustered enough strength to take Fallujah and Ramadi in Iraq ([BBC, 2014](#)). Fearing that the IS would destabilize the whole Peninsula, the United States had to take action. From the summer of 2014 the U.S has led air strikes in coalition with the Gulf States against the IS. The airstrikes have continued since, without considerable effect. The Obama administration had stated that it relied heavily on the moderate Syrian rebels and the newly formed Iraqi government to help ([CNN, 2014](#)),

Other than the United States, two major powers have shown key interest in defeating the Islamic State: Russia and China

Russia, the most powerful state to support Iran, has raised concerns regarding the Islamic State, and during a meeting between foreign minister Lavrov and secretary of state Kerry, the two countries reached an agreement on combating the IS ([Al-Monitor, 2014](#)). In February, the FSB (Federal Security Service, the successor agency to the KGB) chief expressed the willingness of Russian security services to work with U.S. forces in fighting ISIS ([Russia Beyond, 2015](#)).

China is also interested in the future of the Islamic State. For China, Muslim extremism is an internal challenge. According to reports, Uyghur separatists fled the country to join the ranks of the IS ([National Interest, 2015](#)). These individuals pose a great threat to China for two reasons: **1:** the presence of

battle-proven fighters would increase the difficulty of dealing with an uprising in the Xinjiang province which is the westernmost province of China with separatist aspirations **2**: the terrorists could inflict major damage on the Chinese infrastructure once they return home ([Week, 2015](#)).

The future of the Islamic State

Handling the Islamic State requires a fundamentally different approach than dealing with terrorist organizations. ISIS is not a terrorist group. Although they share a number of similarities as in acts of terrorism/deterrence and the use of guerilla techniques, the Islamic State differs from conventional jihadist terrorist groups in numerous ways. For instance, instead of using the “cell-structure”, designed to minimize the risk of the enemy capturing a comrade, the Islamic State has a conventional military based on hierarchy. The Al-Qaida and other terrorist groups do not hold territory in a traditional sense, while the IS controls substantial territory in Iraq and Syria as well ([Foreign Affairs, 2015](#)). In a sense, the IS represents the “new wave” of jihadist groups, a quasi-state with the likeliness of a terrorist group.

The U.S. has led air strikes since August 2014 with no apparent results. Clearly, a different approach is required. The Islamic State and its leadership quickly learned how to counter these strikes, as did the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War, and the Taliban during the invasion of Afghanistan ([Braking Defense, 2014](#)). This method is the result of the “no boots” policy of the United States. The only considerable effect of the air strikes is that they bought some time to figure out the next step, the real solution to the problem. Thus the United States and its allies have to abandon using counter-insurgency techniques.

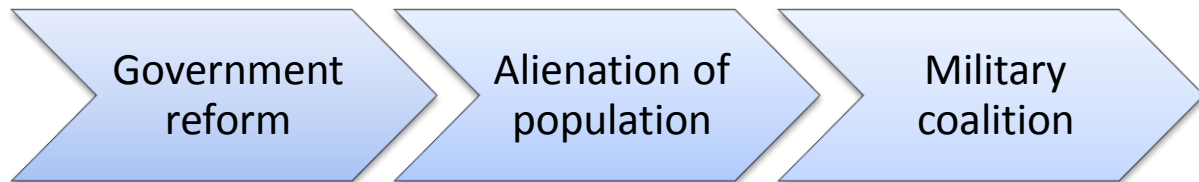


Figure 6

I propose a three-stage action plan as shown in Figure 6 above: **1**, put international pressure on the Iraqi government and preferably on the Assad regime as well to introduce reforms that satisfy the Sunni minority, **2**, let ISIS run its course, **3**, neutralize the organization.

The most reasonable solution would be diplomacy. The United States, Russia and China have to bring the parties to the negotiating table. The newly elected government of al-Abbadi in Iraq ([Al Jazeera, 2014](#)) has the power to dissipate the influence of ISIS in Iraqi territory through careful reforms that please Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds alike. This way, the non-fundamentalist Sunni minority would succumb to the authority of the government and ISIS would lose the support of the locals which is vital to its efforts. Al-Assad faces a more difficult situation in Syria. He must restore his governing power in Syria first, and that means dealing with the FSA, the Kurdish militias and ISIS as well. He deliberately avoids fighting the Islamic State because it is a great leverage for him: The international community considers ISIS a potentially greater threat than the Assad regime.

In the background of the conflict lies a power struggle between the most potent regional players, Iran and Saudi-Arabia. In order to make any peaceful resolutions to work, the two states have to back off from the conflicts. They will be very reluctant to do so. Iran is the greatest supporter of the Assad regime (Assad being an Alewite, an offspring of Shiiteism) and militant groups in Iraq who fight ISIS. Saudi Arabia supports ISIS and many other Sunni jihadist groups in the Peninsula. The two regional powers should withdraw from the conflict so that the reforms and the restoration of government power can take place. And why would they do that? On one hand the U.S. is a strategic ally of Saudi Arabia and can thus pressure the al Saud-regime. On the other hand Russia is the most influential ally of Iran, who helped President Rouhani during the international embargo of Iran ([Telegraph, 2014](#)). Russia too can exert such influence on its ally.

The second proposition is letting ISIS run its course and fail. Despite the obvious drawbacks, this policy has a few advantages. Al-Qaeda in Iraq had experienced a similar flourish to the current situation back in 2006 but by 2008 it lost its territory and nearly all of its personnel. This event is known as the Anbar Awakening. The downfall was the result of losing support from the population it kept under its control. The Sunni population turned on the AQI, partnered up with the American forces and other insurgent tribes due to the AQI's extreme brutality ([Vox, 2014](#)). Extremism and fundamentalism have remained core principles for ISIS practices. Therefore, we can expect a similar outcome in the foreseeable future. Reports have already surfaced regarding the governance of the Islamic State stating that their practices progressively alienate the population they have control of. ([Vox, 2015](#))

Ultimately, a joint effort from the surrounding Arab States combined with the support of major powers, has the greatest potential of ending ISIS. To put it simply, a ground force appears necessary to break the advance of the IS. The role of the United States and Russia is to start dialogue between Syria, Iraq, Saudi-Arabia and Iran. This would prove extremely difficult for several reasons. The deep fractures between these nations, having developed over the past few centuries, are hard to overcome. Different religions and ethnicities make the matter even worse. Once the Arab nations and Tehran can set aside their differences and see the benefits of getting rid of extremism in the neighborhood, real negotiations can start. All nations will have to discuss the problem of internal chaos of Syria and Iraq, and figure out a way to build a "counter-ISIS" ground force. This military, backed by U.S. technology and advisory, can potentially be the cure for the instability of the region. Timing is critical however.

There is an inherent paradox of the IS. The closer it is to reaching its goal, the weaker it becomes. During the advent of the organization it could rely on guerilla warfare and terrorist doctrines. But gradually, the more it tries to turn into an actual nation state run by a centralized government, which collects taxes

and provides health-care, education and so on, the more fragile to a conventional army it becomes. In this phase its fighters will not be able to use terrorist tactics, and the state will not be able to use the guerilla strategy that ISIS had previously relied on. It will have to defend its territorial borders, population and infrastructure. Attacking in the right time brings numerous advantages, summarized by Figure 7.

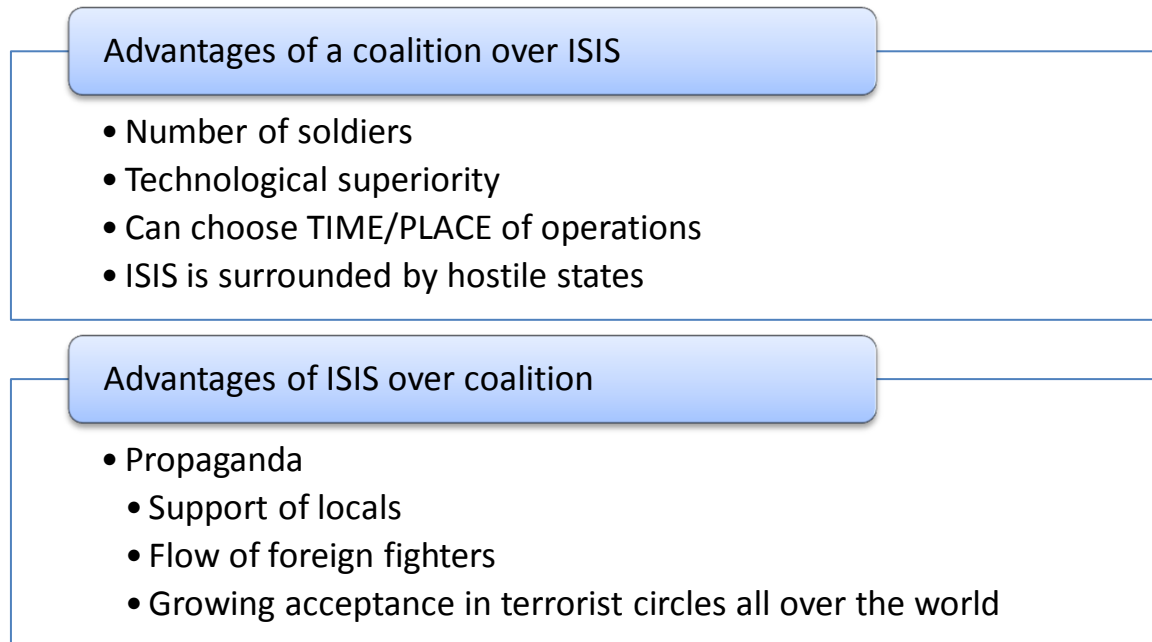


Figure 7

First, the coalition will have the advantage of numbers. Once the statehood of ISIS is established, it will have a quantifiable, measurable armed force. After that, the coalition can muster up forces which counter ISIS's army.

However, the sheer advantage of numbers won't be enough. That is when US technology comes in. To be able to draw a realistic picture of ISIS's forces, professional intelligence will be necessary. The U.S. can provide these assets, from satellite imagery to drone reconnaissance. In addition to recon and intelligence the U.S. can also grant the coalition the necessary C2 (command and control) equipment and other apparatus that will give an edge to the coalition forces in a time of war.

Third, the coalition will be able to choose when and where to attack. ISIS is surrounded by hostile states: Syria, Iraq and Kurdistan. All of its neighbors want the ISIS gone. This, combined with the fact that the Islamic State has no natural borders makes it extremely difficult for the jihadists to effectively defend the borders of the state.

On the other hand, the ISIS still has numerous advantages over this hypothetical coalition. Its propaganda is superb and influences a lot of people. The propaganda is the primary reason the organization reached world-wide fame. It is why thousands of young men join them as foreign fighters and why a number of infamous terrorist organizations have already pledged allegiance to the ISIS. Additionally the organization is still supported by the locals as of this day.

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