Countering ISIS: One Year Later
February 10, 2016
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Executive Summary: On December 3, 2015, The Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) sponsored a conference, “Countering ISIS: One Year Later”. The purpose of the conference was to critically re-assess the assumptions, policies, and strategic objectives of the U.S.-led effort to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), or Da’ish. The conference examined the continuities and changes in this effort over the past year, to include strategic challenges, regional dynamics, adaptations in Da’ish financing, messaging, and recruitment, and successes and failures in Iraq and Syria. Over 100 participants attended the event, including representatives from U.S. government agencies, regional analysts, practitioners, scholars, and think tank experts who specialize on Iraq, Syria, counter-terrorism, and Middle Eastern affairs.

Key Findings:

- Assumptions, means, and strategic end state. U.S. assumptions about Da’ish do not necessarily support the means and/or strategic end state to defeat Da’ish. The use of terms, degrading, defeating, and/or destroying Da’ish interchangeably undermines clarity of objectives.

- Regional partners: Regional and local partners have distinct threat perceptions and political objectives that are not necessarily aligned with U.S. strategic aims. Defeating Da’ish is not a shared priority for regional actors; some are benefitting from the persistence of Da’ish to advance their political agendas and gain economically.

- Sectarian divides; geopolitical tensions. Countering Da’ish efforts are embedded in regional sectarian and geopolitical tensions that directly affect non-state actors. They have led to the creation of local proxies that are becoming more politicized and the proliferation of various militias acting as renegade vigilantes outside the control of central governments.

- Da’ish Enablers. While Da’ish financing has been weakened its messaging and recruitment continues to thrive. The visa waiver program is a threat to U.S. homeland security due to the volume of Europeans who travel to Syria to fight. Also, as Da’ish power declines in Iraq and Syria it may seek to emphasize power elsewhere, such as in the Sinai and Libya. Concern remains for the next potential Da’ish iteration and possible re-unification with al-Qaeda.

- Centers of Gravity: Iraq and Syria. Da’ish is a symptom of pre-existing conflicts and instability in Iraq and Syria, which have become more complex over time. A sound countering Da’ish strategy ultimately requires a political solution that includes stabilizing weak states and their borders.
Reassessing assumptions, means, and end-states.
Since the creation of the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in December 2014, U.S. objectives have been to defeat Da’ish, preserve a unified, federal, and stable Iraqi state, and support a political transition in Syria that de-escalates the war. These objectives, which are part of a broader aim to achieve regional stability, are based on four key assumptions; 1) Da’ish is a global organization with Iraq and Syria as the center of gravity; defeats in Iraq and Syria will make it inviable for it to maintain the organization globally; 2) the campaign needs to rely on and enable local partners; 3) defeating Da’ish ultimately requires a political solution in Iraq and Syria; and 4) defeating Da’ish will be a multi-faceted and multi-year campaign.

U.S. strategy has been designed around nine lines of effort (LOEs) that target key Da’ish enablers and sources of state instability. They include; 1) supporting effective governance in Iraq; 2) denying Da’ish safe-havens; 3) building partner capacity; 4) enhancing intelligence collection on Da’ish; 5) disrupting Da’ish finances; 6) exposing the true nature of Da’ish; 7) disrupting the flow of foreign fighters; 8) protecting the homeland; and 9) humanitarian support.¹

LOEs have been tailored to the distinct political opportunities and constraints in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. has pursued an Iraq-first approach given the availability of reliable partners on the ground; a viable Iraqi government under Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and Kurdish peshmerga forces. The assumed was that these local partners could effectively dislodge Da’ish strongholds with Coalition support while addressing the underlying political roots of Da’ish in Iraq: Sunni Arab disfranchisement.

The approach differed in Syria, which has been mired in a civil war since 2011. In contrast to Iraq, the U.S does not regard the regime of Bashar al-Assad as a local partner. It also initially rejected the train and equip program for a moderate opposition force. Instead, the U.S. has focused on a negotiated end to the Syrian civil war and Assad regime that would maintain state institutions. This approach, pursued through a series of conferences in Geneva and Vienna, is based on the assumption that if Assad willingly steps aside the Syrian army and nationalist rebels would join forces against Da’ish. With Iran and Russia now part of the negotiations alongside key regional actors, the U.S. hopes to deliver Assad to the political transition process as outlined by the 2012 Geneva Agreement. Over the past year, it has also increased Coalition support to local partners, namely the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and smaller groups of Christian and Sunni Arab fighters as part of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance.

Should the U.S. Do More? The U.S has realized some progress in its countering Da’ish efforts thus far. It has assembled a 65-member Coalition, re-taken about twenty-five to forty percent of Da’ish territories, helped reduce Da’ish oil revenues, targeted Da’ish leadership, and enhanced intelligence and information sharing with regional and European partners on Da’ish operations. Some participants claim that the U.S. has also successfully enhanced Iraqi government capabilities, as well as local partners fighting Da’ish in Iraq and Syria. About 90 percent of displaced families have returned to Da’ish-free territories in parts of Iraq and northeastern Syria.

Still, some participants argued that the U.S. has missed important opportunities to defeat Da’ish. A key criticism is the lack of clarity in projecting U.S. objectives. Using the terms degrade, destroy, and eventually defeat Da’ish interchangeably is ambiguous since they are different and distinct end states. One expert stated that current efforts are not aimed at destroying Da’ish but containing it. The

¹ FACT SHEET: The Administration’s Strategy to Counter the Islamic state of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and the Updated FY2015 Overseas Contingency Operations Request”, November 7, 2014.
decision not to engage in a full war effort but rather, a multi-year campaign has resulted in a war of attrition; holding Da’ish down, degrading it, and then “assuming that something positive will occur.” During the first eighteen months the U.S. employed limited tactics in the absence of advisors forward deployed, use of Army fire, artillery, and Apache helicopters that could have effectively targeted Da’ish. Another criticism is that the military plan to degrade Da’ish does not coincide with necessary political accommodations in Iraq and Syria. Despite successes in ridding Da’ish safe havens in Iraq and the return of families to their homes, Baghdad has been unable to fully take back population centers, even in Tikrit and Beiji. Syria has also proven to be resilient to countering Da’ish efforts. One expert lamented, “We had a wish and a prayer for good faith negotiations. Instead, the way in which chemical red-line crisis was handled encouraged some very bad actors to think they could act with absolute impunity.”

Some participants called for a shift in U.S. strategy, particularly greater military engagement. “Without the mindset of all-out war the only result will be to continue mowing the grass to manage this conflict, and not to accomplish anything.” One proposal is to put U.S. troops on the ground in numbers beyond Special Forces. Another is to create a “coalition of the willing” - an international force comprised of largely vetted, well-trained and equipped people from the region that involves an international component. Experts also argued that “raiding does not work, as it failed to draw out al-Qaeda in Falluja.”

Others questioned the need to “do more” and the implications on stability and sustainability. Time and political will is a central factor. Greater military engagement demands that the U.S. inject a level of urgency and mobilize others to join the fight for the long-term while not letting Da’ish gain momentum. The U.S also cannot lose the strategic consent of Baghdad to engage in activities in Iraq. Large-scale U.S. forces in Iraq would risk damaging the delicate political balance with the Iraqi government and further embolden Iranian-backed Shi’a militias and those seeking to undermine Prime Minister Abadi. An enlarged U.S. footprint would also act as a substitute for supporting and enabling local partners who need the capabilities to defend and secure their own territories. Moreover, there is little U.S. domestic support for increased military engagement and uncertainty in its sustainability over the long term. Any effort to deepen engagement, particularly after the Paris terrorist attacks in November 2015, should be to rally other Coalition partners to do more, including Europe and elsewhere.

Regional Partners: Opportunities or Obstacles?
Coalition partners and regional states do not have a shared priority to defeat Da’ish. One participant remarked that “Da’ish is the number three or four problem for several states. It is the number one problem for no one.” Rather, regional political priorities are based on domestic security concerns, sectarianism, and geopolitical interests that take precedence over or co-exist with Da’ish threats. Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Russia are also benefitting from the weak and hyper-fragmented Iraqi and Syrian states by supporting proxy groups to entrench their interests. One expert stated that “Iraq has become a security client state for Iran and may be increasingly for Russia because of the intelligence and military cooperation against ISIS.” Similarly, Turkey has penetrated northern Iraq in the attempt to create a Sunni Muslim sphere of influence, control Mosul and its oil resources, and check the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK).

These interventions have created or reinforced geopolitical tensions and alliances between states. Russian president Vladimir Putin visited Iran for the first time in a decade, Moscow berated Turkey in the aftermath of the SU 24 shoot-down, and Russia and Israel are cooperating to de-conflict airspace. Changing regional dynamics also have created new opportunities and obstacles to defeating Da’ish in
Iraq and Syria, most importantly from Turkey and Russia.

*Turkey’s Turnaround: How Far?* Since July 2015 Turkey has increased its support for the anti-Da’ish campaign to include tightening its border with Syria and permitting the use of its Incirlik air base to launch Coalition airstrikes. The positive effects of Turkey’s engagement are reflected in recent Da’ish propaganda, which now states that it does not trust Turkey and that foreign fighters should adjust their route, avoid the Istanbul airport, and be aware of Turkish intelligence. Da’ish has also increased its recruitment efforts in Turkey to include producing high quality videos and translating Salafi texts into Turkish and Kurdish.

Turkey’s current challenge is not only to seal and monitor its geopolitically complex 500-mile Syrian border but also to break up illegal and smuggling networks that have benefited from its lax border policy. Turkey was criticized for not doing more to close its border to Da’ish fighters and other radical jihadists. One expert stated, “It’s [Turkey] military is infantry-based and ground-centric. It could seal off the border if the government decided to, but it has not decided to fully do so.”

Ankara remains preoccupied with domestic PKK security concerns, which drives its perceptions and policies in Syria. Turkey is especially sensitive to the PKK affiliate, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria and the nature of the U.S-PKD alliance in fighting Da’ish. This concern has increased as the PYD expands territorial control and gains semi-legitimacy abroad. Conversely, the PYD’s view of Turkey depends entirely on Ankara’s resolution of the PKK and Kurdish problem. This relationship and the prospects for an Ankara-PKD entente can change, although it depends upon trans-border Kurdish and internal Turkey-PKK dynamics. The Turkish government is likely to continue its bombing campaign against the PKK in the near future as a means of bringing the PKK to the negotiating table from a position of weakness.

*Russian Red Lines and End Games.* Russia’s military intervention in Syria in September 2015 is the first time since the Cold War that Moscow has deployed a substantial force far outside areas of the Soviet Union. The ability of Russia to penetrate Syria so robustly is not surprising. According to one expert, “Russia does not have a strategy. It has strategic goals. It pursues them by primarily seeking opportunities rather than developing clear plans.” The Da’ish threat also represents a major part of Russia’s domestic security concerns; regime perpetuation. Russia is concerned by the rise of extremist Sunni Islam and the Sunni export of terror to Russia; about eight percent of Russia’s population, or between 15 and 18 million people, are Sunni Muslim. These demographics coexist with an ongoing insurgency in Dagastan and the migration of many Chechens to Syria since the civil war commenced in 2011. Russian president Valdimir Putin emphasized this threat in a public statement, “I have 2,000 Russian militants in ISIS and I have to deal with them.” Russia’s concern with radical Islam coexists with other pressures, such as the collapse of oil prices, inflation of the ruble, sanctions against Russia after Crimea, and the economic fallout of closing off exports to Turkey.

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Russia also has regional security interests. It seeks to secure and protect Tartus, its only base in Syria, which serves as a bridge to Iran that gets equity through Hezbollah in Lebanon. Additionally, Putin has red lines that he clearly indicated as early as 2012, the most important of which was the fall of the Assad regime, especially if induced by outside forces. According to one expert, “Russia may also want to poke the eye of the U.S. and the West and show that Moscow has engaged where the U.S. has not and will not.”

Equally important is the manner in which Russia has engaged in Syria. It employed a ‘shock and awe effect’ to emphasize Russia capabilities, including precision-guided munitions and Caliber missiles from the Caspian Sea. One expert argued that the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft missile system deployment is “strategically very troubling because it can reach deep into Turkey, Israel, and the Mediterranean Sea, which changes the security equation in the region.” Another concern is Russia’s reactions, which are likely to be asymmetrical and aimed at hurting Turkey where Ankara will not expect it. One likely way is through the Kurds, and specifically by strengthening the capabilities of the PKK and its PYD affiliate.
What are Moscow’s end games in Syria?
Moscow’s engagement in Syria reflects a “series of end games from best to worst”, none of which are likely to induce Assad to step down or to sell out Assad or his inner circle. Politically, Russia’s optimal goal is to reform the Syrian state and bring the status quo back to 2011; a re-centralized government in Damascus with a strong role played by the Syrian army that can regain control of the entirety of territories. In this scenario, Russia could discuss the role of Assad, although it would prefer to keep him for reasons that have nothing to do with Syria. Rather, Putin can use Assad to reinforce the notion that he never lets down his allies and does not accept regime change. Russia’s attempts to “give a second life to Assad’s regime” may include forcing Damascus to have quick legislative elections in the following six months and to form a national unity government with some ‘pseudo-opponents’. Putin is also unlikely to sell out Assad because he opposes what Moscow regards as U.S. democratization and “regime change jihad” that needs to be countered before it arrives on the Kremlin’s doorstep.

Russia may also have to accept a “Plan B”, which could be to protect the contours of what is now referred to as “useful Syria” - the borders that stretch from Latakia in the north, through Jabal Akkrad, and close to Homs and Aleppo. In this scenario, Russia can check the Syrian opposition and enable Assad to hold on until next year, after a change in the U.S. administration or shift in global conditions. In doing so Putin could be planning a “diplomatic coup”; forcing the hand of Western powers to choose the lesser of two evils, Assad or Da’ish, which could result in a U.S.-Russian coalition against Da’ish. Putin’s military campaign is consistent with this approach of creating a situation whereby the choice is between “the barrel bomber and Baghdadi”, which would be a humiliation for the U.S but “the ultimate brass ring” for Putin. Further, Russia may have a “Plan B premium”: taking territory in hold, freezing the conflict, waiting for adversaries to exhaust themselves, and negotiating a political solution whereby Russia becomes a protector of useful Syria, including its gas fields and shores of the Mediterranean. These options are important because they indicate that the U.S. will not necessarily face one end game in Syria, but several end games.

Others cautioned against over-determining Russian capabilities. Russia could fall into its own Syrian quagmire that affects its willingness to engage against the Assad regime. One participant stated that the “Russians have hit a hornets’ nest in Syria; it is not going as cleanly as they hoped could ease Assad out.” Although months of heavy Russian bombing have helped to reverse rebel gains made last year and tipped the war in Assad’s favor, the attempt to retake Aleppo has been a fiasco. Even if Assad gains the upper hand, Russia would not support ousting the Ba’athist regime, which is a Russian pillar of stability not just for the Alawites but for the Christian Orthodox community.

Sectarian and geopolitical dynamics. The effort to counter Da’ish has become embedded in sectarian and geopolitical tensions. Regional states are aligned along a Sunni and Shi’a divide, although one that is also fragmented by different Islamic beliefs, domestic security priorities, and economic alliances. For instance, Turkey may seek to create a Sunni Muslim sphere of influence and check Iran, but its regional policies differ from those of Saudi Arabia. Ankara does not have Riyadh’s financial muscle, has sympathies with the Muslim Brotherhood, which it shares with Qatar, and prioritizes controlling the PKK. Turkey also maintains important energy and commercial ties with Iran that may increase with the lifting of sanctions, contrary to the cold war between Riyadh and Tehran.

Nor does Iran act or speak with one voice. According to one participant, reactions inside Iran to the nuclear agreement, Da’ish, and Iranian President Rouhani’s domestic politics is a
“complete replay of the Khatemi era”. While progress is occurring on one side of the regime, there is a complete retreat from other aspects, which partly explains the penetration of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Iraq and Syria. Given the absence of a single coherent strategy in Iran, it is very possible that Tehran negotiates with Sunni Muslim extremists, including Da’ish, which has been demonstrated by Iran’s activity in Afghanistan. One expert argued that “Iran sees Iraq and Syria as a multi-playing field; there are certain areas that can be captured indefinitely while other areas will be outside Iran’s control”. One of Tehran’s key concerns is how to create some sort of Shi’a safe zone that ensures their safe passage for years to come.

Local sectarian dynamics. Geopolitical and sectarian power struggles have directly affected non-state actors. Local Salafists have become politically engaged because they believe that state rivalry has forced them to enter the political arena, despite the fact that political activism is anti-thetical to traditional Salafist ideology. Local Salafist behavior also has a profound religious and ideological dimension that is tied to how people identify as Muslims and “the other” in Arab societies. Most non-violent Salafists in Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, and Syria traditionally believe in quietism and pursuing dawa, or the call to Islam on a popular level. Yet they regard Iran as the rising power in the Middle East that will not only invade and take over Arab lands, but extinguish the Sunni sect. Their new activism has translated into developing political parties and more recently, entering social media space. For instance, one Salafist with twelve million Twitter followers “tweets daily against the Shi’a and has greatly influenced public opinion.”

Activist Salafism also reflects contestations within the Sunni Muslim community that vary across states. According to one expert, “many Sunni Muslims, including Salafists, do not support Da’ish and are tweeting against it.” In Egypt, Salafists have been active for many years, including the brief presidency of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi in 2012, but do not want an Islamic state. Similarly, unlike Salafists in Saudi Arabia, Salafists in Lebanon oppose an Islamic state but want Sunni Islam to be considered as a form of governance within the Lebanese state structure. These countries, which were staunchly secular and authoritarian for decades, are also negotiating the degree of Islamic tradition that will influence governance.

Another response to the evolution of Sunni Islam is the forceful development of Shi’a militias. In Iraq some of these militias are supported by the IRGC while others are part of the Iraqi government’s popular mobilization units (PMUs) that formed after the fatwa issued by Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani in Iraq in 2014, which called for armed engagement against Da’ish. Like Salafists, Shi’a militias are largely but not solely driven by ideology and religion. Although Sistani’s fatwa clearly called for all Iraqis to combat Da’ish, only the Shi’a initially responded. The result has been the creation of various militias acting essentially as renegade vigilantes outside the control of the Iraqi government and the Shi’a religious establishment, or marja’iyya and controlled by the IRGC. Although the Shi’a militias state that they will capture the lands and return them to displaced Sunni Arab populations, in many instances they have taken over towns and ransacked Sunni Arab homes. In other instances such as Ramadi, PMUs have not entered or taken Sunni Arab territories, which has resulted in more accommodating relations. About 40,000 Sunni Arab fighters have also joined or are prepared to join the PMUs within the ISF, although as distinct Sunni Arab forces.

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4 This type of fatwa is unprecedented in Shi’a Islam beyond Ayatollah Khomeini’s call for Iranians to take arms against Iraq in 1980 at the outset of the Iran-Iraq war.
Da’ish Enablers. Da’ish capabilities have weakened in some areas and strengthened in others. These shifts are tied to three key enablers; social media, foreign fighters, and finance.

- **Social Media.** Da’ish social messaging and propaganda efforts are essential to convincing groups to join or at least to not oppose it. Messaging aims to intimidate foes, attract foreign fighters, and aid Da’ish expansion efforts in places like the Sinai and Libya, particularly as Da’ish tries to become a truly global organization. Da’ish is also very technologically proficient. It understands social media, can produce a good video, generates excitement, and has solid networks to distribute its material - far more than al-Qaeda. Its message is “al-Qaeda is doing nothing and we have definitively eclipsed them.”

Da’ish propaganda has three non-distinct phases; strength, governance, and expansion. It emphasizes each of these components as separate messages that are part of a broader strategy. The message of strength is depicted through Da’ish brutality and demonstrated through open social media sources that show beheadings and men burning alive or drowning in a swimming pool. It is not just about brutality itself but projecting the organization’s strength. For instance, Da’ish has effectively used its social media dexterity through videos of
convoys and flags on government buildings to convince the Western media that it controlled the Libyan city of Deria, when in fact it did not. Da’ish also courted Boko Haram to show it had a strong Africa presence and that the costs of defecting would not be too large.

Additionally, Da’ish emphasizes that it has a functioning society. Alongside the beheadings is a focus on governing territories. Its social media emphasizes a kids’ day in Raqqa with big blow-up slides and bouncy castles, a grand opening at a luxury hotel, or Da’ish garbage men cleaning the streets. Da’ish shows stores with wheat, bread and culturally appropriate foods that cater to European fighters. The point is to show “that they have it all.”

Da’ish is now in an expansion phase. It has made it very clear that it aims to re-establish the boundaries of the caliphate as it used to exist, and that it has to keep on expanding. Da’ish has attempted to project its growth through affiliate organizations and alliances within or outside their provinces. Its pace of attacks abroad is now increasing, which indicates that the November 2015 Paris attacks that killed 129 people were not necessarily a shift in strategy. Rather, Da’ish has been telegraphing its desire to attack the west for well over a year, even after the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris in January 2015.\(^5\)

Other worrying trends are in Jordan, a politically and socially conservative country, where Da’ish has gained popularity in areas that are not supposed to be Islamized. For example, the town of the Jordanian pilot who was burned and assassinated by Da’ish in 2015 is majoritarian pro-Da’ish or pro-Jabhat al-Nusra. Additionally, three sons of members of parliament (MP) in Jordan who are normally under control and very loyal to the kingdom died fighting for either Da’ish or Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

Da’ish may be shifting its strategy in another sense. As its power declines in Iraq and Syria it may seek to emphasize power elsewhere, such as in the Sinai and Libya, which affirms the strength phase. This strategy has created challenges and weaknesses for Da’ish. It has raised the criteria for support; recruits have to believe that genocide, beheadings, torture, and sexual slavery are all good, which may be beyond what Da’ish followers or potential followers can bear. Also, a narrative based on strength is reversible; Da’ish has put itself in a position where it can undermine their own legitimacy.

Foreign Fighters. Da’ish has drawn on foreign fighters from over 120 countries. It continues to tap into and manipulate a sense of disaffection and ideology that is mobilizing people to global jihad. A recent study of Western foreign fighters that have gone to Syria indicates several common characteristics: female, young, and active online, particularly American fighters.\(^6\) Western Da’ish supporters post assiduously on jihadi websites and deal directly with Da’ish in Turkey and Syria. One out of three of these Western foreign fighters has also had previous familial connection to jihad, whether through relatives currently fighting in Syria or Iraq, or through marriage.

\(^5\) Abdelhamid Abaaoud, who was the leader of the Paris attacks, was in Belgium at the time and managed to escape to Syria, evading French security services.

\(^6\) The study is based on 474 individuals from 25 countries. Women are represented in unprecedented numbers, as compared to the Afghan and Bosnian jihad, where women fighters were either non-existent or very close to zero. The average age is 25.
One problem with assessing foreign fighters is tracing their locations due to lack of accurate information. Of the Western fighters who have gone to Syria or Iraq, a few are in government custody, half are dead, and a significant number are still at large. Many fighters have indicated that their path to Syria was through Turkey, although half have given no indication of their route.

Identifying foreign fighters is another challenge. One expert surmised that of the estimated 25,000 foreign fighters in Da’ish, Interpol has the names of about 5,000 people; the remaining have not been identified. This challenge is further complicated by the distant geography of Da’ish recruits, which extend as far as Trinidad and Tobago, a small island nation with a population of one million. Trinidad and Tobago have 43 proven foreign fighters, with as much as 80 having gone to fight in Syria.

What does this mean for U.S. homeland security? The threat to the United States from returning foreign fighters is very low, and likely manageable. Da’ish-inspired bombings in the U.S. remain a serious concern, although the U.S. is protected by two important factors, geography and the small volume of people returning. The threat of returning fighters is higher in Europe.

[7] There are only two cases publicly known of foreign fighters returning from Syria to the United States. One case is the Floridian Moner Abu Salha, who came back to Florida after training in Syria, tried to recruit a number of people in Florida, and then went back to Syria and conducted a suicide attack. This does not, however, suggest that Jabhat al-Nusra was interested in directing him to attack the United States. Rather, it indicates that it used him as cannon fodder on the frontlines in Syria. The second case involved a man called Abu Rahman Muhammad, who was also allegedly recruited by Jabhat al-Nusra and not by Da’ish.
The real problem for U.S. homeland security is the visa waiver program due to the volume of Europeans who travel to Syria to fight. Another potential threat is the next iteration of Da’ish, which could represent a merging with al-Qaeda again. At present, the differences between Da’ish and al-Qaeda are not about aims but to some degree about tactics, and mostly about personalities. One expert argued that “this split [between Da’ish and al-Qaeda] is unlikely to be permanent.” The distinctions between Da’ish and other iterations also have implications for wider Salafi jihadi constellations; who is going to govern the Islamic world, the Sunni Islamic leadership framework, and what that future looks like.8 Da’ish is part of a larger phenomenon that includes an al-Qaeda part of the equation, and a rebranding that makes them very dangerous.

**Finance.** Da’ish behaves as a criminal state where there is a convergence of terrorism and crime. As long as Da’ish controls territories that are extremely resource rich within weak states, its revenues will derive from criminality. Coalition forces have dramatically attacked parts of the oil infrastructure in Iraq and Syria controlled by Da’ish; however, the main source of revenue is extortion and taxation. Da’ish revenue networks are deeply embedded in the local economies and society that thrive from the weak Iraqi and Syria states, which makes direct Coalition targeting problematic, if not unlikely. Most of these networks are based on the same smuggling routes used by Saddam Hussein’s Ba’athists to evade international sanctions during the 1990s. Da’ish also continues to raise money from donors and through social media well beyond Iraq and Syria.

Still, the Da’ish model cannot succeed in the long run because it is not reliant on outside sources, but internal revenue flows. Although Da’ish initially received indiscriminate Gulf donations to “Sunni groups against Assad” either by direct contribution or predation of fellow groups. This external funding is now minimal, if it exists at all.

**Centers of Gravity: Syria and Iraq.** Defeating Da’ish and stabilizing Syria and Iraq demands differentiating the symptoms from the manifestations of the problem. A key question is whether Syria and Iraq are unstable because of Da’ish or whether Da’ish can function because Syria and Iraq are unstable. One expert argued that Da’ish is a symptom of pre-existing conflicts and instability in Iraq and Syria. Unless these political problems are resolved, at least in part, then they will continue to “toss up ISIS, and sons of ISIS, and grandsons of ISIS, and great-grandsons of ISIS until there’s political stability there.”

Consequently, military force and traditional counter-terrorism strategy have important limitations. Targeting Da’ish leaders and assets may assist in garnering intelligence and cause Da’ish temporary setbacks, but it does not address the political roots of Da’ish, which include stabilizing weak states and their borders. Da’ish drivers have also shifted and become more complex over time. They now involve dynamics between the Kurds, Sunni Arabs, Shi’a militias, and Turkey as they affect expanded territories, demographic changes, and control of resources.

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Syria. Syria is the “low-hanging fruit” for Da’ish, which controls about 50-60 percent of the country’s land mass. Unlike Iraq, Da’ish is an imposed presence in Syria that does not have roots. Most Syrians despise Da’ish but genuinely like Jabhat al-Nusra, which remains a significant problem. The Da’ish threat is also superimposed over an increasingly hyper-fragmented state, which affects how and where Da’ish can survive, and how to think about stabilizing Syria after its defeat. Rather than an Assad Syria and a Da’ish Syria fighting each other, the country has several parts fighting each other in a multi-front war with competing aims.

For instance, Syrian Kurds are benefitting from Coalition support and Russian engagement to not only expel Da’ish, but to expand their territories and carve out an enclave between three main regions they call ‘Rojava’; Hasakah (the Jazira region), Kobane, and west Jabal Amel. These regions function separately from one another, although they are considered part of ‘Rojava’. The southern front, which includes the stretch of Da’ish-free territories around the provinces of Daraa, Quneitra, and Suwayda, is becoming more autonomous over time, and monitored by Jordanian and Israeli intelligence groups. The deserted center and mainland of Syria is being fought between Da’ish and non-Da’ish rebel groups. Defeating Da’ish in eastern Syria, therefore, does not require a political settlement in western Syria.

Defeating Da’ish in Syria remains stuck on the issue of Assad. The political issue is not whether Assad should leave power, but when and how he should be deposed. Some participants prioritize defeating Da’ish first and turning Damascus into a counter-terrorism partner, alongside Russia. Others insist that as long as Assad is in power, Damascus cannot be a partner in the fight Da’ish. These issues are a key part of the Vienna conferences that have
reaffirmed the Geneva communiqué as the basis for political settlement in Syria and which agreed to work towards a U.N.-supervised election and nationwide ceasefire.

Yet the Vienna process is strongly criticized for back-peddling on Assad’s departure. Sectarian and political divisions among participants and opposition groups continue to frustrate decision-making, much the way they did with previous meetings in Geneva. For instance, Jordan is leading one commission to devise a list of local participants to attend the conference. This effort includes determining which rebel groups are jihadists, non-jihadists, and radical jihadists, and is being pressured by Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

According to some experts, the Vienna process also lacks real “diplomatic steam” and does not correspond with changing political realities. Despite the failure to train and equip a moderate opposition and increased Russian military engagement, the U.S. continues to affirm the same 2012 formula that aims to strengthen the moderate opposition in Syria and pressure the Assad regime to force a political solution. One participant opined, “…there is no more moderate opposition, Da’ish [ISIS] is controlling half of the country, and we are no more talking about a political solution, at least from the same nature.” The fear is that the Syrian conflict will become a second Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the region, and that the U.S. will have a “Geneva 1, Geneva 2, and Vienna 1, Vienna 2…” without any real resolution.

Iraq. Like Syria, the Da’ish threat has been superimposed over a hyper-fragmented and weak Iraqi state whereby groups are vying for their own territories, revenues, and resources. It is a symptom of Sunni Arab grievances and distinct local dynamics that demand a negotiated settlement between the Iraqi government and Sunni Arab populations. The persistence of Da’ish in Iraq also reflects U.S. mirror imaging and miscalculating the capabilities and interests of its Kurdish partners, who do not prioritize defeating Da’ish but rather, expanding territories and remaining strategically significant. From the outset, Kurdish forces that should have unified and partnered to defeat Da’ish have been more concerned with the political arrangements after Da’ish.

For instance, since the anti-Da’ish campaign commenced, Kurdish power struggles have exacerbated as different groups seek weapons, legitimacy, and external support. The main tensions - which existed decades before the Da’ish onslaught - are between Ma’sud Barzani’s Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the main power holder and recipient of military support to the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the PKK, whose PYG militia are fighting Da’ish in Syria and Iraqi Kurdistan. Within these two main divisions are other Kurdish peshmerga and groups seeking to counter Barzani and PKK power.

Kurdish territorial gains have also instigated or reinforced pre-existing disputes between communities. In northern Iraq’s disputed territories, which have become Da’ish battlegrounds, armed conflicts have occurred between Shi’a militias supported by Iran and the Kurdish peshmerga, who have pushed the notional ‘green line’ south into Sunni Arab and Shi’a Turcoman territories. In clearing Da’ish territories, Kurdish peshmerga and some PMUs have also retaliated against Sunni Arabs, deepening local grievances and preventing the types of negotiated political settlements that are needed to defeat Da’ish.

The Shi’a majority is also deeply divided and preventing Sunni and Shi’a Arab reconciliation. Internal power struggles run deep between two strong camps within Abad’s Dawa party and the State of Law Coalition (SOL). The first camp is led

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by Prime Minister Abadi, which includes Muqtada al-Sadār and Ammār al-Hakīm, and the parties and constituencies they bring with them. The second is headed by former Prime Minister Nūrī al-Malīkī, and includes Iranian-backed groups and militias to include the Badr Corps and Asa’īb Aḥl al-Ḥaq (AAH). Abādī may be supported by the west, but he is considered weak and ineffective inside Iraq, which has permitted the second group of Iranian-backed militias and their party leaders to maintain influence. Even support from Ayātollāh Sīstānī has wavered with Abādī’s inability to enact his reform package.

Sunni fragmentation and incompatibility. Iraq Sunni Arab and Sunni Turcoman communities are also becoming more fragmented over time. Some are allied with the Iraqi government while others are opposed to Baghdad politically, although not necessarily in terms of armed opposition. Still others are engaged in armed resistance. All Sunni groups are opposed to one another and are competing for political leadership after Da’īsh. This competition reflects the fading of traditional Sunni Arab political leadership, mainly due to the loss of credibility in post-Saddam Iraq and displacement from their homes. More than half of Sunni Arab Iraq is dispossessed and living as refugees or residing inside their territories that have become wastelands. These power struggles also reflect the fact that about half of the Sunni Arab community does not support its own leadership in the Iraqi Parliament and provincial governance, leaving the Sunni community to seek new leaders that are more radicalized.

Most Sunni Arab Iraqi leaders want inclusive governance and different forms of local and regional autonomy with minimal interference from Baghdad. They also lack a shared political objective and do not want to be under the control of fellow Sunni Arabs. Some seek an arrangement similar to the relationship between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Baghdad to include control over their own resources, revenues, and security. Others seek greater autonomy and a confederation with Anbar, Ninewah and Salahiddin. Still others want a newly configured Ninewah province but challenge the notion of a distinct Sunni Arab region, arguing instead for a province based on Sunni Arabs and minority groups. Sunni Arabs in Anbar want greater local authorities but under a strong Iraqi government. As a result of these divisions, it is unlikely that a single or strong Sunni Arab region, or a ‘Sunnistan’ will emerge in the future. Sunni Arab demands are also totally incompatible with the aims of Iraqi Kurds, who have expanded into traditionally Sunni territories.

Implications for U.S. policy. Since commencing its war against Da’īsh in 2014, the U.S. has realized progress and some successes. To continue this momentum it needs to reassess its initial assumptions, ways and means, and strategic end-states to ultimate defeat Da’īsh. Policy options include:

- Intensify pressures against Da’īsh in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. and Coalition should intensify pressures against Da’īsh on multiple fronts. This effort can include adding a small component of special expeditionary forces – at the Iraqi government’s request – enhancing the training of Iraq’s elite counter-terrorism forces, and increasing efforts to train and equip Sunni Arab brigades in coordination with Baghdad. In Syria, it should continue to balance Coalition support for Kurdish fighters with more evident engagement with Sunni Arabs. The U.S. should work with
Russia and set a series of benchmarks that should be met and which would allow for cooperation in Syria at this time. The U.S. should also continue to affirm its support for the territorial integrity of Syria, and seek to assuage Turkish tensions over the U.S. and PYD cooperation by encouraging a ceasefire between Turkish forces and the PKK in Turkey.

- **Address Da’ish expansion.** While Iraq and Syria should remain the center of gravity for the fight against Da’ish, the U.S. should address increasing global threats. It should put more pressure on the individual branches of Da’ish across the region, particularly in the Sinai and Libya. Da’ish inspired, Paris-like attacks also demand that the U.S. move with greater urgency on multiple fronts - intelligence sharing, foreign fighter flow, and financing - with Coalition partners.

- **Counter-Da’ish messaging.** The U.S. should re-focus its counter-messaging efforts by undermining the ideological aspect of Da’ish. This effort requires an effective counter-messaging digital online campaign that targets new safe havens and Da’ish’ sense of invincibility. An effective campaign also needs to understand Da’ish weaknesses. The U.S. should more effectively promote the message about people who have defected from Da’ish through credible third parties, and whose voices will resonate in the Muslim world, to include the voices of defectors. Another core component of an effective countering Da’ish narrative should target the ethno-sectarian and intra-sectarian divides that Da’ish is exploiting.

- **Address root causes of Da’ish and instability.** While focusing on Da’ish as an organization, the U.S. should pay closer attention to the broader political picture of Da’ish drivers; local power struggles and aims to expand and control territories and resources. The U.S. cannot resolve these problems but should seek to mitigate the consequences of external support on the local balance of power and ultimately, Sunni Arab sense of disfranchisement.

- **Post-Da’ish stabilization.** Even if the U.S. defeats Da’ish tomorrow, there will be a day-after problem in much of Iraq and Syria. U.S. aims to stabilize Iraq and Syria should address the larger problem of weakened states and the emergence of strong, violent non-state and sub-state actors. This effort will demand a stable set of political security arrangements that can avoid the emergence of another Da’ish in the future. It should also assure that liberated areas are successful and stable so that people can return. This effort should include providing massive refugee assistance, immediate resources and humanitarian aid, developing local power sharing and security agreements, building local institutions, and mitigating regional spillover. The U.S. should mobilize its international partners to provide this assistance so that it can mitigate potential future instability, alleviate humanitarian crises, show success, and support the Iraqi government economically and politically.

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