



**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES**

# **The ISIS Challenge in Syria** *Implications for Israeli Security*

Hillel Frisch



Mideast Security and Policy Studies No. 118

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**THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES  
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

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Hillel Frisch

[Hillel.frisch@gmail.com](mailto:Hillel.frisch@gmail.com)

© The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies  
Bar-Ilan University  
Ramat Gan 5290002 Israel  
Tel. 972-3-5318959  
Fax. 972-3-5359195

[office@besacenter.org](mailto:office@besacenter.org)  
[www.besacenter.org](http://www.besacenter.org)  
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# **The ISIS Challenge in Syria**

## *Implications for Israeli Security*

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# The ISIS Challenge in Syria

## *Implications for Israeli Security*

*Hillel Frisch*

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ISIS captured the world's attention when it routed the Iraqi army in Mosul and took control over the city in early June 2014. At one point, its advance southward reached to within 75 km of Israel's border on the Golan Heights.

The organization's remarkable ascent raises the question: to what extent does ISIS pose a threat to Israeli national security, and what should Israel do to meet that threat? This study evaluates the ISIS threat to Israel by examining the organization's strategic goals and military performance, the relative strength of its opponents, and the reactions of those opponents—especially that of Iran—to possible ISIS gains.

The study concludes that:

- ISIS, unlike the Palestinians, would not enjoy international support that might seriously inhibit Israeli action.
- Israel would enjoy a freer hand against ISIS than did the Syrian regime, which had to compromise its fight against the organization because of its need for the very oil that ISIS had wrested from the state.
- Israel should communicate an effective quid pro quo formula that would allow ISIS to assess the cost of hostile moves against it. Israel would have to make sure that the punishment it exacts would be far greater than any damage it might suffer.
- Israel's chief security concern is a complete takeover of Lebanon by Iran, undertaken with the object of containing an ISIS advance in Syria.

Israel must send three clear messages. First, it must convey its red lines, the most important of which is the prohibition of the transfer of advanced

missile launchers and rockets through both seaports and airports into Lebanon and the Alawite state (if not overrun by ISIS).

Second, Israel must clearly signal to Iran that infringement of these red lines will result in the destruction of the installations in question. Regarding Beirut International Airport, Israel should adopt a gradually escalating response.

Third, Israel must signal that as long as Iran does not infringe its red lines, Israel will remain militarily neutral in the conflict with ISIS, with the possible exception of defensive activity on the Golan Heights, such as support for Jabal al-Druze.

# The ISIS Challenge in Syria

## *Implications for Israeli Security*

*Hillel Frisch*

### INTRODUCTION

ISIS captured the world's attention when it routed the Iraqi army in Mosul and took control over the city in early June 2014. It then proceeded over the next two months to capture most of the inhabited portions of northern Iraq and eastern Syria, thus wiping out the Syrian-Iraqi border. The movement's gains in the summer of 2014 were indeed distinctive in several ways. For the first time, a jihadist organization in the Middle East succeeded in taking over a major metropolitan area, Mosul, in an important and relatively advanced state. Iraq was far more developed than Afghanistan and Somalia, the only two states heretofore to have succumbed to the rule of jihadist organizations, and Mosul was a far more developed city than the capitals of Afghanistan or Somalia.

Erasing the Syrian-Iraqi border was no less memorable. The process began in January 2014 with the conquest of the Deir ez-Zor province in eastern Syria, excluding most of the city by that name, which remained in the hands of the regime. Contrary to popular perceptions, border changes in the Modern Middle East since WWII have been far rarer than in Europe. The three main examples of border change—the highly contested Israeli conquest of the Golan, Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria in 1967; the voluntary erasure of an international border following the unification of the Republic of Yemen and the Democratic Republic in 1990; and the 2009 partition of Sudan—could hardly be compared in importance to the disappearance of a border between Iraq and Syria, two major states in the Middle East. ISIS also gained

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Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

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the upper hand against many of its jihadist contenders just before and during this period. It was hardly surprising, then, that many analysts expressed alarm over a movement that accomplished so much in so little time, perceptions that were only amplified by well-publicized and recurrent displays of barbarity.

This study attempts to evaluate the threat ISIS poses to Israel, directly or indirectly, by studying its strategic goals, military performance, the relative strengths and weaknesses of its opponents, their reactions to possible ISIS gains, and the ramifications for Israeli security of such reactions. Though the paper is highly focused on assessing the ISIS challenge to Israeli security, such an assessment requires a much broader research scope that includes international and regional factors far beyond a study of the organization *per se*.

The study is divided into four parts. It begins by assessing the military and political efficiency of ISIS to date in the Syrian and Iraqi theaters, which are central both to ISIS itself and to Israeli security concerns. It then proceeds in the second section to assess ISIS's programmatic goals as revealed by its actions rather than by its visionary rhetoric. The third section is devoted to assessing the security challenges that ISIS gains might pose to Israel, directly or indirectly. The study ends with a discussion of the policies and measures Israel should take to address these challenges. The ISIS presence in the Sinai is not covered in the paper, on the assumption that the Egyptian state and its armed forces have sufficient motivation and capabilities to counter the ISIS threat facing Egypt and, by the same token, Israel.

## **EVALUATING THE MILITARY EFFICIENCY OF ISIS**

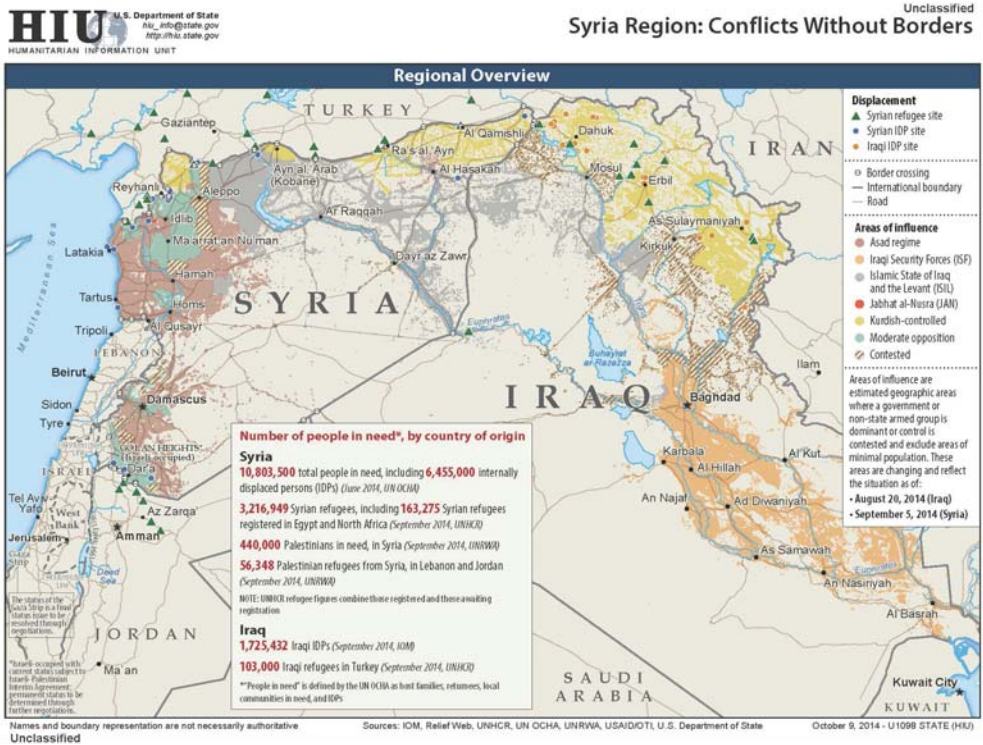
ISIS in the public imagination evokes an image of an invincible military organization characterized by considerable strengths and minor weaknesses. A more comprehensive look at what transpired before ISIS captured the world's attention, together with the benefit of evidence accumulated since then (a year and a half since those dramatic events), reveals the movement's shortcomings as a military organization as well as its strengths.

### ***Comparing ISIS Performance in Sunni and Non-Sunni Areas***

With an eye on both the map and the timeline of ISIS-related events, it is clear that ISIS, and indeed the other Sunni movements in Syria and Iraq, have primarily focused on military action aimed at creating a state in areas overwhelmingly populated by Sunni Arabs, or almost totally unpopulated areas. Attempts to take control of territory inhabited predominantly by other groups have failed. As early as the summer of 2013, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and jihadist organizations (ISIS among them, albeit in a comparatively minor role) failed in a bid to conquer territory in Latakia, in western Syria. These Syrian opposition groups had in early August overrun 12 Alawite villages—including Aramo, just 20 kilometers from President Bashar al-Assad's hometown of Qardaha—only to relinquish them two weeks later in the face of a Syrian Arab Army (SAA) counterattack.<sup>1</sup> The subsequent fall of Idlib, Ariha, and Jisr al-Shughur (in an area south of Aleppo, Syria's biggest city and close to the Turkish border) to opposition forces in winter 2014 and spring 2015, and the subsequent failure to advance from there into Alawite territory, only serve to emphasize the difficulty of conquering territory inhabited by non-Sunni or non-Arab populations. This is especially true of territory inhabited by the Alawite minority, which forms the nucleus of Syria's ruling elite (see map).<sup>2</sup> All three of these captured towns are predominantly Sunni, the last being the center of an Islamist rebellion against the regime in 1980.<sup>3</sup> Similarly in Iraq, continuous attempts by ISIS between June 2014 and the summer of 2015 to wrest Kirkuk, a predominantly Arab Sunni city, from the Kurds, have failed.<sup>4</sup>

ISIS's inability to penetrate non-Sunni or non-Arab areas is also reflected in the failure to take over Kobani, a predominantly Kurdish town on the Turkish-Syrian border, from which it retreated in January 2015; the failure to make headway on the eastern fringes of Iraqi Kurdish areas, including Kirkuk; and the failure to establish control in the predominantly Alawite areas of western Syria and the Tartus mountains. In the summer of 2015, Kurdish forces succeeded in evicting ISIS from Tel-Abyad—only 50 kilometers from al-Raqqa, the unofficial ISIS capital in Syria<sup>5</sup>—and capturing a part of al-Hasakah, a city in which a sizeable Kurdish minority lives amidst a Sunni Arab majority (see map).<sup>6</sup> In doing so, the Kurds had essentially defeated an ISIS offensive launched in the area at the end of May 2015 to retake over 200 villages the movement had

conquered between June and August 2014 and lost in the subsequent months.<sup>7</sup> The only ISIS foray into an overwhelmingly Shi'ite area in Iraq occurred with the capture of the Sunni-populated town of Jurf al-Sakhar, on the Baghdad-Karbala highway. A combined Iraqi Army (IA) and Shi'ite militia onslaught on October 25, with the help of US air attacks, rendered their stay short-lived (see map).<sup>8</sup> Though ISIS forces had greater staying power in the Sinjar mountain area, inhabited predominantly by the Yazidi minority, there too they were driven out by November 2015,<sup>9</sup> even though Sinjar is surrounded by strategic Sunni-populated areas that ISIS controls, most notably Mosul.<sup>10</sup>



Evidently, ISIS operatives have a hard time infiltrating and controlling non-Sunni territories. Non-Sunnis are likely to fight more decisively against ISIS, because it poses a much higher risk to them than to Arab Sunnis. ISIS massacres of Shi'ites and Kurds have definitely increased the determination of Shia and Kurdish forces to defend their territory.

Unlike Arab Sunnis, non-Sunnis and Kurds do not have the option of surrendering to ISIS and accepting its rule. This is the classic security dilemma inherent in civil wars.

ISIS, judging from its behavior, has indeed internalized its limitations and incorporated them into its strategic thinking since Kobani, if not long before that. Aaron Zelin, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, claims to have discovered a 2006 map belonging to Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS's forebear) which roughly approximates the group's territorial hold today.<sup>11</sup> It has not only avoided, to date, waging major campaigns against the predominantly Shi'ite areas of Iraq (aside from individual or small group terrorism), it has refrained from doing so even against the much smaller Druze community in Jabal al-Druze in Syria, which number only some 500,000 souls. ISIS refrains from attacking the Druze even though Druze are conscripted into the Syrian army and Druze soldiers have fallen on the battlefields in Damascus and Aleppo, as attested by the death notices in Druze internet media.<sup>12</sup>

Although ISIS has been unsuccessful in penetrating non-Sunni areas so far, clearly the organization has been able to hold territory, and to govern the territory it holds. The core territory it controls, stretching from the Mosul area to al-Raqqah in Syria, includes most of the populated areas of the Iraqi Anbar province, comprising 36,000 square kilometers and a population between five and six million (see map). These have been under ISIS control for at least eighteen months. The ISIS offensive strategy seems to have adopted the principles of Western counterinsurgency doctrine. It takes over territory through covert infiltration, reconnaissance, subversive activity, identification of potential collaborators and enemies, and terrorist attacks. It clears it of hostile elements, holds it against counterattacks, and then builds up civil and policing institutions to govern it. This strategy has been detailed, for instance, by German reporter Christopher Reuter, who had access to ISIS strategy papers.<sup>13</sup>

To date, there have been no reliable reports of famine or even severe food shortages, or any evidence of the spread of contagious diseases in the areas the organization controls. Public security in ISIS areas seems to be exemplary: "You can travel from Raqqah to Mosul, and no one will dare to stop you even if you carry \$1 million," according to an inhabitant

of al-Raqqa, quoted in a *New York Times* article on the organization's state-building efforts.<sup>14</sup> All of this suggests that the organization has been successful in providing at least minimal public services relating to welfare, health, and sewage, and in the economic sphere, in keeping goods flowing from and into the area. Thus, ISIS has succeeded in exporting an estimated half a billion dollars of oil to Turkey in 2015, and earning half a million dollars daily on fees imposed on truckers at the Jordanian Tarabil and Syrian al-Walid crossings into Iraq, despite the fact that ISIS control has been a blow to regional trade as a whole, especially Turkish trade with Iraq.<sup>15</sup> While the challenges of governing Syria's "backbone"—its four large cities linked by the M5 highway—would be on a scale and level of complexity far greater than it faces today, the organization looks well poised to meet the challenge.

### ***Variation in Performance Due to the Quality of the Enemy***

Sometimes it is the quality of the foe that determines how successful in military terms any organization might be. There is clearly a difference between the battlefield achievements ISIS scored against the Iraqi army and its militia allies, compared to its record against the Syrian army and its militia allies. The Iraqi army, which was recreated almost from scratch after its dismemberment in 2003, fell apart in a major way on at least two occasions: in Mosul in June 2014, and to a lesser extent in Ramadi in May 2015. In the Syrian arena, easy routs of this kind have rarely if ever taken place. In the overwhelming number of cases, the Syrian army either withdrew in orderly fashion, or was overcome after lengthy resistance. The fall of the Menagh air base in northern Syria is a good example. Its defenders held out for a full year against assaults, and finally succumbed on August 5, 2013 to a combined attack of the Free Syrian Army and ISIS.<sup>16</sup> The subsequent execution of the survivors could have only bolstered the will of Syrian soldiers to resist falling into the movement's hands and meeting the same fate. This might partially explain why the defenders of the besieged Wadi al-Deif and al-Hamidiyah military bases in southern Idlib Province held out against joint Jabhat al-Nusra (JN) and Ahrar al-Sham (HASI) attacks for nearly two years before being

overrun in December 2014,<sup>17</sup> or the tenacity of the Syrian forces in the Abu Dhuhur air base, outside Idlib, which only succumbed to JN after two years of almost total encirclement.<sup>18</sup>

The rare occasions on which Syrian troops have been described as fleeing the battleground took place when ISIS or the opposition enjoyed an overwhelming superiority of forces. This was the case in the ISIS May 2015 offensive and takeover of Tadmur (Palmira), where after several days of inconclusive battle, ISIS succeeded in bringing in reinforcements estimated at between 600 and 800 fighters against a Syrian force consisting of one battalion.<sup>19</sup> Rushing reinforcements to Tadmur may have exacted a price on the organization: it subsequently relinquished ground on the al-Hasakah front to the Kurdish YPG (the People's Protection Units) and the FSA, which succeeded in expanding Kurdish control into the Tel Abyad region in late May, just as ISIS took over Tadmur.<sup>20</sup>

The Syrian army's tenaciousness and success in maintaining control of isolated areas should also be noted. Deir ez-Zor, the largest city in eastern Syria, is located 450 kilometers from Damascus and 100 kilometers east of al-Raqqa, which had been taken by rebel forces in March 2013. Despite the Syrian army's isolated position there, and the repeated offensives against it from the summer of 2011 onwards (the latest of which were directed by ISIS), Syrian government control has remained intact over most of the destroyed city.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the Syrian army succeeded in sending a convoy of 500 Republican Guards to Deir ez-Zor in November 2014 at the most precarious moment facing the Syrian army, as ISIS forces had just reached the perimeter of the local military air base. The ability to get a convoy through on the ground belied ISIS's claim that it was in total control of the province. There is no doubt, however, that good fighters in the Syrian army are in short supply. In a similar ISIS offensive in May 2015, the 104th airborne brigade of the Republican Guards, which had left Deir ez-Zor to reinforce Syrian troops on the eastern outskirts of Damascus and was already halfway to the capital, was rushed back to the city to contain the offensive.<sup>22</sup>

Airports and other vital infrastructure have been tenaciously defended. Only eight of the 27 civilian and military airports have fallen to the opposition (four of them controlled by ISIS). Two large airports controlled by the

regime, in Deir ez-Zor and in Quairis, east of Aleppo, have been under ISIS heavy siege for two years. Deir ez-Zor continues to withstand attacks, while the siege of Qairis was broken in November 2015, in large part thanks to Russian air attacks on ISIS forces.<sup>23</sup> As noted, the Abu Dhuhur air base, the most important airport to fall to the opposition, succumbed to Jabhat al-Nusra al-Qaeda (JN) only after two years of bitter siege. In Aleppo, Syrian soldiers in the city's Central Prison held out against attacks for almost two years, until the SAA relieved the siege in May 2014.<sup>24</sup> Such government steadfastness is by no means unknown in the Iraqi theater, and Iraqi forces in Baiji and Haditha successfully repelled ISIS for long periods of time, but there the examples have been far rarer than in the Syrian case.

The type and size of cities and towns that ISIS has captured in Syria, compared to Iraq, are another indicator of the relative success of ISIS in the two arenas. In Iraq, ISIS secured Mosul, the second-biggest and third most important city in Iraq, in addition to major tertiary level towns such as Ramadi, Falluja, Abu Ghraib, and al-Qaim, all of which contained populations of 200,000 or more at the time of Hussein's downfall. In Syria, by contrast, ISIS has hardly gained a foothold in five of the country's major cities: Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Latakia. The first two are Syria's biggest cities and metropolitan centers, and the latter is its main port (see map).<sup>25</sup> Even in Aleppo, which is divided between government and rebel forces (albeit with the government in control of the larger part), the rebel forces do not include ISIS. The organization does, however, control the vast hinterland to the east of the city, beginning 15 kilometers east and north from the city center. Mosul's population alone is double the combined populations of the three major towns under ISIS control in Syria (al-Raqqa, Idlib, and Tadmur), of which only one, al-Raqqa, is comparable in size to Ramadi and Falluja in Iraq.<sup>26</sup>

The Syrian army and its supporters have also been able to retake or totally control the major cities of Homs and Hama after years of fighting, and to firmly maintain their hold on them afterwards. The Iraqi government forces and their allies, by contrast, have only succeeded in wresting from ISIS one major town, Tikrit, which is significantly smaller than Homs in Syria. The qualitative difference between the Syrian and Iraqi armies provides much of the explanation for the speed of ISIS's territorial gains in Iraq, compared to its far slower advances in Syria.

The combined al-Nusra–ISIS attack in August 2014 on Aarsal, a Lebanese Sunni town on the Lebanese-Syrian border, offers another example of the difficulty of defeating an organized army willing to fight. The rebel forces eventually decided to withdraw, albeit after capturing Lebanese soldiers, whom they continue to hold against the release of jihadist detainees in Lebanese jails. Essentially, the Syrian army and its allies enjoy a qualitative edge over the opposition forces, but suffer from a numerical deficit. In Iraq, the government army, its allies, and the Shi'ite majority have the greater numbers, but suffer from a qualitative deficit in their fight against ISIS.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Baath Officers and ISIS***

ISIS forces in Iraq had enjoyed one more advantage over counterparts operating in Syria. In Iraq, the organization enjoyed the services of prominent senior officers in the former Baathist-dominated Iraqi army. Ostensibly, this was hardly new. The movement's precursor in Iraq, al-Qaeda under Mus'ab al-Zarqawi, had recruited former Baathist officers rendered jobless by a decision of the Provisional Government of Iraq to disband the army.<sup>28</sup> However, they were distrusted by al-Zarqawi, which paved the way for the US to secure their services during its "surge" in Iraq. The US employed up to 150 former Baathist officers to train and lead Iraqi Sunni forces—collectively known as the Awakening—against Sunni jihadists. But again, this was not for long; they and others became once again the opposition with the departure of the Americans in 2010 and the continued tenure of the al-Maliki government, which in the eyes of most Sunnis adopted a discriminatory policy towards the Sunni minority. Many joined ISIS, the successor to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Presumably, the present ISIS leader has deliberately sought out these former officers and placed them in shadow positions, from which they wield the real power over the nominal "emirs" of provinces in both Iraq and Syria. This is not to say that all Baathist officers have joined or even support ISIS. The organization has arrested many of them, and at least one organization composed of Baathist officers, the Shaqbandi Order in Iraq, has even clashed on occasion with ISIS

fighters.<sup>29</sup> In the Syrian arena, Baathist officer defections have been scarce, and when they have occurred, most have defected to the Free Syrian Army rather than to the jihadist alternative.

### *Losing Touch with the Desert and Logistical Constraints*

Jihadist movements up to the early twentieth century typically emerged from the desert to attack the sown. Their ability to survive and move quickly in the desert under harsh conditions and to surprise the enemy were key elements in their success. The Wahhabi movement, an organization which ISIS believes it emulates, was expert in this form of warfare.

Looking at the movement's pattern of expansion, one realizes how different the modern jihadist movement is from earlier movements. ISIS has expanded almost exclusively along the major water routes in the area, and pick-up trucks rather than camels or feet on the ground are the typical means by which the movement attacks. Its dependence on water might explain why, well over a year after ISIS forces (in pick-ups) overwhelmed al-Rutba, the last Iraqi town along the 800 kilometer Baghdad-Amman road, and momentarily even took over the Tarabil border post, they have nevertheless refrained from taking on Jordanian forces.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, ISIS has refrained from targeting Saudi border forces, with the exception of a January 2015 attack on the Saudi outpost at Ar'ar Jadida, on one of the two roads linking Iraq with Saudi Arabia.<sup>31</sup>

ISIS pays a price for being out of touch with the desert. Movement along water routes and roads exposes it to air strikes. Depending on pick-up trucks imposes logistical costs, and constrains the fighters' maneuverability. Both factors make it costly to engage either the Jordanian or Saudi forces, which are protected by hundreds of kilometers of desert impassable to vehicles, except on solitary roads which can easily be attacked by air.

It is hard to believe then that ISIS will be able to replicate the presumed victories of their forebear, Khalid bin Walid, in his first foray into Syria in 633, when he surprised the Byzantines by taking the desert route (or more precisely, finding a route through the desert where none existed) from the

Najd, through present day Jordan, and south of the Dead Sea. He then moved northwards to defeat the Byzantines at Anjadyn. The Byzantines were expecting an attack along more water-rich routes through central Syria. A similar approach was taken by more recent predecessors such as the Wahhabis, who were known to descend on their rural or urban prey in a 70-kilometer sweep from their advanced posts to the target, conducted from dusk to dawn, before the victim could register their existence let alone call for reinforcements.

Though ISIS militarily is unlike the Wahhabi Ikhwan who challenged British imperial control—and Iraqi and Jordanian state-building efforts under its strict gaze—in the 1920s and 1930s, there is an important lesson for its opponents today. There is growing awareness amongst historians that, however impressive the RAF’s achievements in curtailing Wahhabi attacks in Trans-Jordan and Iraq, there was no substitute for military control on the ground in the form of outposts, armored patrols, and intelligence gathering to defeat the Ikhwan and stabilize the borders of Jordan and Iraq.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, it cannot be denied that the air force cancelled out both the element of surprise and the freshness of the attacking troops, since aircraft were able to spot attackers and strafe them sometimes long before they hit their target. In contemporary times, aircraft do much more than that; in Syria more so than Iraq, aircraft also provision besieged troops, bring in reinforcements, and evacuate the wounded. Nevertheless, ISIS could potentially use “desert rats” more effectively if it was more in touch with the desert.

### ***Lack of Popular Support***

One of the Islamic State’s greatest drawbacks is the palpable lack of broad public support for the organization. YouTube and Facebook video posts of public parades and military displays of Islamic State power across the vast area it controls consistently have something in common: few members of the general public come out to participate in these displays and pageants. In Syria, especially, the lack of support has major strategic importance.<sup>33</sup> The Sunni middle classes in Syria, by avoiding aiding the Islamic State and the other jihadist organizations, have helped ensure the

complete control the government enjoys over the modern centers of its major cities, and in particular in its capital, Damascus.<sup>34</sup> This is reflected by the almost total absence of gunfights in the Damascus center after the aborted summer Syrian Free Army offensive in summer 2012, and by the relatively few acts of terrorism since. The 2013 bombing of the Russian embassy, in which more than 50 people were killed,<sup>35</sup> and the killing of seven Iranian Shi'ites in a suicide attack near the Shi'ite Sayyida Zeinab shrine two years later, are the major exceptions to the rule.<sup>36</sup> These trends continued even as thousands of Syrian troops and Hezbollah fighters were relocated from the Damascus area in 2014-15, to cope with ISIS advances in the east and opposition successes in the Idlib area in the north and in the south.<sup>37</sup>

The relative peace prevailing in the city center stands in marked contrast to the constant skirmishes in the outer suburbs of Damascus. The absence of violence in the center of Damascus suggests the inability of the jihadist organizations to develop sleeper cells in middle class neighborhoods, even those which are predominantly Sunni Muslim. Robert Fisk of the Independent summarized the situation in the Damascus city center in an article published in June 2015:

Its public parks blossom with bougainvillea and jacaranda trees, its roads are swept, its music is kept alive. A women's volunteer orchestra performs in town once a week to show that culture has not died—it is no creature of the Baath party—and schoolchildren are still required to wear formal uniform at all classes. Not so much law perhaps. But very definitely order.<sup>38</sup>

He could have added that the schools and university continue to function. And why is this?

...most of Damascus' population is Sunni, and most of Syria's army—and many of its generals—are Sunni, and they know, courtesy of Nusrah and Isis, what kind of country awaits them if the government falls.<sup>39</sup>

In Aleppo, the evidence for the opposition's lack of popularity emanates from different quarters. Aleppo has been both divided and in relative stalemate for at least three years, with the wealthier modern section in

the west controlled by the government and the old city and its shanty town neighborhoods in the east controlled by the rebels. Any significant shifts in the status quo—the retreat of government forces in early 2013, and then major government advances in the fall of 2014—took place on the city’s outskirts.

The eastern hinterland, beginning some 15 kilometers from the city center, is for the most part controlled by ISIS. Tactically, one can understand why an army short on manpower would avoid an onslaught on the old town, characterized by long winding maze-like narrow roads and alleys and multi-floor buildings—a murderous mix of medieval and modern features that would be a nightmare for an invading force. But why should the rebels, in conjunction with ISIS, not participate in an onslaught on the more accessible western part of the city? One of the answers lies in the lack of manpower. On the battlefield, whether open terrain or built-up areas, the importance of attackers outnumbering the defenders remains a constant. The question then arises as to why the opposition refrains from recruiting local manpower. One must assume that the local youth either resist or exit the area.

Even in Iraq, where the Sunni-heterodox divide is probably sharper than it is in Syria, ISIS’s attacks in Baghdad (with its 9.5 million residents) have hardly extended beyond suicide attacks, vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), and other improvised explosive devices (IEDs), although these are used recurrently, sometimes on a massive scale. Given the relative proximity to the capital of cities it controls, such as Falluja, the existence of massive predominantly Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad itself, and the previous history of intensive urban insurgency between 2003 and 2007, one would expect that the organization would be able to engage in open guerrilla warfare in the capital itself.<sup>40</sup> After all, in its massive attacks on prisons in Baquba in 2012 and Abu Ghraib a year later, ISIS freed dozens of former al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) leaders, who probably reminded them of the AQI plan to occupy the Baghdad Belts in order to control Baghdad.<sup>41</sup> Yet this scenario of open warfare has not come to pass.<sup>42</sup> Instead, ISIS lost control of the northern Baghdad belts from which it threatened the city in the summer of 2014.

This might explain, in part, why real estate prices in Baghdad have been rising,<sup>43</sup> which could hardly occur had there been extensive urban insurgency.<sup>44</sup> After all, the wealthy are the first to flee in a situation of widespread insurgency. And while homes (though significantly, not their inhabitants) were burned down in May 2015 in the Sunni district of Adhamiyya, in retaliation for a suicide bombing on a Shi'ite mosque, there has been no repeat of the urban warfare and insurgency between Shi'ites and Sunnis that took place in 2006-07.<sup>45</sup> The famous Sunni neighborhood on the eastern side of the Tigris, bordered on both the west and northeast by large Shi'ite neighborhoods, was a major base for AQI, the Islamic State's predecessor.<sup>46</sup>

Though the modes of violence employed by ISIS in Baghdad indicate that terrorists from the organization easily penetrate the length and breadth of the city, they also demonstrate the extent to which the violence is terrorist rather than insurgent. In July 2015, for example, Baghdad experienced one suicide car bomb, four suicide bombers, 18 car bombs, 25 sticky bombs, and 112 IEDs, versus just 45 shootings.<sup>47</sup> Of the 436 killed and 1,108 wounded during the month in the province, 324 of the dead and 1,060 of the injured were casualties of bombings.<sup>48</sup> Were Baghdad facing urban insurgency, this would be reflected in recurrent shooting incidents, and casualties from shootings would be of an entirely different magnitude.

One of the reasons for the Islamic State's failure in Baghdad to repeat the successes of its predecessor a decade earlier might be a lack of public support for the organization. ISIS has failed to mobilize the Sunni neighborhoods, as the Shi'ite militias have done in the predominantly Shi'ite neighborhoods to meet the Islamic State threat.<sup>49</sup> Because of the impression made by the much larger expansion of ISIS control compared to its predecessor, it is easy to overlook facts that point in the other direction. Iraqi Shi'ite and state control over Baghdad, home to a third of the Iraqi population, is much more powerful than it was a decade ago. This control is especially impressive in light of the ethnic cleansing and ethnic consolidation of neighborhoods which occurred in between 2005 and 2007 along the east/west divide of the Tigris River. Such consolidation should have facilitated Islamic State-led insurgency in the predominantly Sunni neighborhoods.<sup>50</sup> Yet more than a year after ISIS victories brought

it to the outer reaches of metropolitan Baghdad, the government and its militias control Baghdad to the same extent that they did before the June 2014 offensive. This lack of popularity is not only limited to Baghdad. In Rutba, along the Jordanian-Baghdad highway, ISIS has had to take steps to punish those leaving without permission, confiscating their homes, shaming them in public, and flogging them.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Manpower Constraints and Strategy***

For any combatant, repeated back-and-forth episodes in which advances on one front are canceled out by the relinquishing of control over another, indicate manpower constraints. When these episodes are experienced by all the major actors in a struggle, this is a sign of strategic stalemate.

Despite the fanfare over the pace and breadth of the flow of foreign recruits to ISIS, the organization seems to suffer from manpower constraints. These constraints were visible from the outset of ISIS expansion in January 2014. It is worth recalling that when ISIS, in mid-January 2014, retook the entire city of al-Raqqa from a coalition of rebel factions, the same rebel factions fully expelled ISIS fighters from Aleppo and the villages to its west. In March of that year, ISIS advances in the Deir ez-Zor province were again offset by a full ISIS retreat from the Idlib governorate. On March 4, ISIS retreated from the border town of Azaz and other nearby villages, choosing instead to consolidate around al-Raqqa in an anticipation of an escalation in fighting with al-Nusra.<sup>52</sup>

A year later, one sees a similar pattern. As already mentioned, moving reinforcements to Tadmur seems to have come at the cost of relinquishing ground to the YPG and the FSA on the al-Hasakah front in Syria's northeast. The FSA succeeded in expanding Kurdish control into the Tel Abyad region in late May, just as ISIS took over Tadmur.<sup>53</sup>

However, the relative stalemate that results from these manpower constraints is hardly even. Though ISIS has not been able to replicate its successes in early and mid-2014, of the five major collective actors in the fray—ISIS, the Syrian regime, the Iraqi regime, the various opposition forces, and the Kurds—the organization has scored the most successes, principally in its

drive towards Tadmur and beyond. Losses in the al-Hasakah area were more than augmented on the Iraqi front by the takeover of Ramadi in mid-May 2015, and by the push in Syria, after the fall of Tadmur, to Qaryatayn and the rich oil fields in its vicinity. Over the subsequent five months, ISIS forces reached and captured the village of Mahin in the Homs district over 100 kilometers west of Tadmur as the crow flies, and were within twenty kilometers of the strategic M5 highway, the lifeline of the regime over most of the distance between Damascus and Aleppo. Yet even on this front, ISIS found itself stalemated. Militias affiliated to the Syrian regime captured Mahin at the end of December 2015.<sup>54</sup>

Manpower constraints have been most visible among the SAA and its allies.<sup>55</sup> Repeatedly, gains on one front come at the expense of losses on another, as troops are withdrawn from one area to shore up an offensive elsewhere. Thus, the reduction of the Syrian regime's presence in a large area of the Deir ez-Zor province—which resulted in the successful rebel drive in April 2013 to take control of the region—was carried out in order to concentrate troops on the offensive in the al-Qusayr area, southeast of the city of Homs. Al-Qasayr is vital for the regime's ability to maintain land routes between Damascus and the northern cities of Homs and Aleppo, and between both those cities and the coastal city of Tartus. After two months of fierce fighting, the SAA, with the aid of Hezbollah, was able to take back al-Qusayr from opposition forces.<sup>56</sup> This pattern repeated itself in the first half of 2014, during which the regime relinquished control over major parts of the Idlib area in order to concentrate its efforts on retaking Homs. The Homs offensive began in March, and culminated in a negotiated withdrawal of opposition forces in May 2014.<sup>57</sup>

Because of its severe manpower constraints, the regime has often scored net gains only when the opposition forces were busy fighting each other. For example, infighting between ISIS and its rebel competitors in the Idlib and Deir ez-Zor areas enabled the Syrian army, over the months of February and March 2014, to take control of a number of territories: the Sahel in the Qalamoun region; Zara in the Homs governorate; two key rebel supply routes to Lebanon; the Rima Farms region directly facing Yabrud; and, on March 16, Yabrud itself, this after the Free Syrian Army withdrew unexpectedly and left the al-Nusra Front to fight in the city on its own, in what became known as the “Battle of the Hills.”<sup>58</sup>

The limited ethnic manpower pool from which the regime can draw loyal manpower is probably its most major long-term constraint. The Syrian regime might enjoy the tacit support of a sizeable percentage of Sunnis, especially the urban middle class, but Sunnis are not trusted as fighters. As one Damascus-based SAA commander bluntly put it in April 2013: “Most of the soldiers in my unit are Sunnis. They don’t trust me, and I don’t trust them.”<sup>59</sup>

Unfortunately for the regime, the minorities that can be trusted—the Alawites, the Shi’ites, and to a certain extent, the Druze—form a very small part of the population. Eyal Zisser, a veteran scholar of Syria, claims—on the basis of demographic growth by region (a proxy measure, in the absence of census data that refers specifically to ethnic origins)—that both the Alawite and Druze areas have consistently shown smaller demographic growth than the predominantly Sunni areas, especially in the periphery. He estimates, on the basis of differential growth rate, that Alawites probably comprise just seven percent of the Syrian population, compared to the traditional estimate of 12-14 percent.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, the Druze and Shi’ites have always been very small minorities (less than two percent combined), and as a proportion of the population are likely to be smaller still over time, due to a comparably lower birthrate than their Sunni fellow citizens.<sup>61</sup> This means a loyal manpower pool of nine to ten percent at most, especially since there is increasing Druze resistance to the draft, and a preference on their part to create their own militias in the Jabal al-Druz.<sup>62</sup>

Taking into account the relevant cohort structure of the Syrian population in 2000-04, the SAA can recruit at most 5,250 soldiers annually, assuming that one quarter of the Syrian army serves as combatants [see footnote for relevant computations].<sup>63</sup> This is approximately half the number of fresh recruits needed, based on existing estimates of Syrian army combat losses during the civil war.<sup>64</sup> Yet the intake of new recruits also has to cover the loss of wounded who cannot return to the battlefield, and attrition due to the natural aging and retirement of existing forces. These calculations also assume a static rather than declining manpower pool, while the latter might very well be the case. It is much more probable that a significant percentage of both Alawites and Shi’ites have also chosen to emigrate, like their Sunni Syrian counterparts, although probably in smaller proportion. Faced with a prolonged and deteriorating civil war, people vote with their feet.

## **ISIS STRATEGY: TO BRING DOWN THE SYRIAN REGIME**

In theory, ISIS's basic thrust is to bring down the Syrian regime and then expand the Islamic State, and if not to rule over the entirety of Syria, then at least to achieve control over Syria's spine and heart—the four major cities connected by Syria's main M5 highway. A sequel second stage, however, would be well-nigh inevitable: a drive to take over the coastline and Syria's two major ports, Tartus and Latakia, as well as the remaining airports under the regime's control. This would almost inevitably involve a bloodbath against the Alawite community.

How quickly this sequel might play out is contingent upon whether the regime disintegrates or makes an organized retreat, and on the support the regime receives from Russia and from Iran, its most trusted ally. In the case of the regime disintegrating, ISIS would push on immediately. However, should the regime make an organized retreat, as seems more likely, then ISIS would first have to impose rule on the cities it conquers, and engage in massive forced conscription there. Without conscription, ISIS would most likely not have the manpower to take on the SAA and its allies on home ground. Even if were successful in its conscription efforts, the Alawites would probably be reinforced by thousands of Iranians flown in to protect the Alawite heartland. ISIS would be unable to prevent the airlift, since one can safely assume that either the Syrian air force, Russia, the Allied forces, or even Israel (or any combination thereof) would destroy any aircraft left on the ground in ISIS-controlled territory. These air forces would also be able to disable any heavy air defense capacity (as opposed to MANPADS, which can be avoided using evasive tactics).

After Syria, the newly expanded Islamic Syrian State would take on Lebanon, especially Beirut (a major economic prize), and attempt to decimate its chief military rival after the Syrian military—Hezbollah. In the process, the organization would attempt to achieve another long-term strategic objective: the homogenization of society in a heterogeneous Levant along fundamentalist Sunni lines, or, simply put, to engage in mass slaughter.

At least until these objectives are met, the Iraqi theatre from which ISIS emerged would serve only to divert Shi'ite Iraqi energies and Iranian

capabilities from focusing on Syria. This is the strategic lesson learned from the organization's spectacular advance in the summer and fall of 2014, and the stalemate that has ensued in Iraq since then. In the summer of 2014, at least a thousand Iraqi Shi'ite fighters left the battlefields of Syria to defend Baghdad's outskirts, forcing the Syrians and Iranians to either bring in Iranian fighters, which was politically awkward for Syria, or recruit Hazara (Afghani) Shi'ites resident in Iran, who are inferior fighters compared to the Iraqi Shi'ites they replaced. The primary aim of ISIS activity in Iraq is to pin down potential reinforcements to the Syrian theatre.

Syria is the priority both because of what it represents and contains, and because of the complexities of the Iranian theatre. Conquering Damascus would evoke stirring memories of the *futuh*, the early Islamic conquests, which every schoolchild in the Arab world learns in great detail. After initial forays into Iraq in 633, the Syrian theatre rapidly became the focus of the Islamic armies. Damascus was the first major city outside of the Arabian Peninsula to fall, and it became the capital of the caliphs of the Ummayyad dynasty. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS, would become the first caliph since the "righteous" caliphs to take Damascus from heretics—an achievement of truly millennial proportions.

Damascus and the three other major cities are predominantly or overwhelmingly Sunni, and therefore governable once the back of the regime is broken, at least in theory. By contrast, an onslaught on Baghdad means not only conquering a megalopolis over three times the population of either Damascus or Aleppo, but one with a Shi'ite majority, and thus in all likelihood this scenario would entail massive urban warfare against ISIS. One can safely assume that the present Shi'ite militias, with the backing of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and its Basij Resistance Force, have already made major preparations to resist an ISIS occupation, should Baghdad fall the way Mosul did. These future scenarios act as a constraint on the organization's present strategy and behavior. If analyst Jessica Lewis could write in June 2014 that it is "more reasonable to expect that ISIS has a battle plan for Baghdad than to presume that ISIS would not create one because they recognize how difficult the task of controlling the city [is],"<sup>65</sup> the opposite is probably true today.

The need for manpower also dictates prioritizing the Syrian front over Iraq. There are 15 million Arab Sunnis in Syria, compared to half that number in Iraq, and they are mostly concentrated in Syria's major cities. In Iraq, the smaller recruitment pool is much more widely dispersed. One can also assume that the Syrian Sunnis, many of whom are middle class, are better educated and more homogenous than the Sunnis in Iraq, most of whom live in the periphery. They are also less tribal, and therefore less easily controlled. Of course, the organization would also have to contend with the fact that many youngsters would choose to leave rather than be recruited.

ISIS's focus on Syria is also influenced by the nature of the enemies it faces in the two theatres. Essentially, on the Syrian fronts, ISIS faces hardcore opposition from no more than two million Alawites, two to two-and-a-half million Shi'ites (in Syria and Lebanon combined), and highly divided opposition forces who spend as much time fighting each other as they do fighting the regime. In southern Iraq, on the other hand, ISIS faces at least 15 million Shi'ites, as well as Iran, which has a long border with the Shi'ite south in Iraq.

In addition, in Syria the organization faces a far more fragmented situation, especially among the opposition groups, many of whom have fought against each other as well as against ISIS. Thus, the FSA has frequently clashed with JN, and the latter has fought against both the Kurdish YPG and the Syrian regime. In Iraq, however, ISIS faces a more united Shi'ite coalition (albeit not entirely free of inter-militia violence), and a Kurdish enemy, which for the most part has cooperated with the Iraqi Army. In Syria, the opposition militias comprise literally hundreds of groups, all of which are much weaker than ISIS, while the several Shi'ite militias in Iraq are not nearly as fractured. In short, the enemy in Iraq is not only formidable, but also more united than in Syria.

One can hardly deny that southern Iraq, and presumably Baghdad as its gateway, presents a major economic draw for ISIS. The oil-rich Basra area produces nearly three quarters of Iraq's huge oil output (3.06 million out of 4.18 million barrels a day).<sup>66</sup> However, the organization would have to overcome two major obstacles were it to overcome Baghdad in an onslaught on southern Iraq. One would be the policing

of 15 million Shi'ites. The other is the high likelihood of massive Iranian intervention, if not occupation of the oil-rich area through its various security agencies. The three mega oil fields that account for most of the oil production of southern Iraq—Missan, Zubair, and Rumaila—are located within 70 kilometers of the Iranian border, in sparsely populated territory. Except for the Shatt al-Arab waterway, the terrain presents no formidable barrier to a massive armored and mobile infantry attack. It is almost inconceivable that Iran lacks blueprints to deal with this possible scenario.

Heading south might also provoke an international coalition to destroy the oil installations, now that a nuclear deal with Iran has been signed and Iran is likely to become a second swing producer (in addition to Saudi Arabia), whose increased output could partially offset the loss of Iraqi oil on the world market. And even if the installations were not bombed, ISIS would hardly be able to export this oil, in the face of a probable maritime embargo imposed by the major powers (and easily enforced in the Gulf), as well as sanctions against any oil and oil-shipping companies who do business with the organization.

## **THE IMPLICATIONS OF AN ISIS VICTORY IN SYRIA FOR ISRAEL**

By far the most immediate and pressing ramification of an Islamic State takeover in Syria for Israel is likely to be the impact of the Iranian presence in the area during and immediately after such a victory. Already, tensions exist over Iranian and Hezbollah involvement in the fighting in the northern Golan. In Teheran, this involvement is perceived as a preemptive move to protect the Shi'ites in southern Lebanon, while in Jerusalem it is seen as crossing a red line vital to its security. The situation has already given rise to considerable clashes, and there is potential for escalation. It can safely be assumed that the fall of Syria's major cities would prompt Iran to take control of Lebanon, with the support of Hezbollah and possibly Amal, and to assume control of the Lebanese army. Lebanon, whose claim to sovereignty is already weak, would become a client—if not puppet—state of Iran and Hezbollah.

This state of affairs could lead to three potential scenarios:

### ***1. An Israeli-Iranian War***

Such an extreme change in the balance of power would inflame tensions to an even greater level than that which prevailed in the 1970s between Israel, the PLO, and Syria, as the PLO created its mini-state in southern and central Lebanon, or during the subsequent two decades in the standoff between Israel and Hezbollah, up to the Israeli withdrawal in 2000. It might not be an exaggeration to say that an Iranian occupation of Lebanon—is likely to lead to a full-scale inter-state confrontation between Iran and Israel, not least because Israel might feel the necessity of a preemptive strike in order to forestall a solid Iranian grip on the Golan. A strong Iranian foothold in the Golan Heights would have direct implications for the stability of Jordan, and would carry the prospect of increased penetration of Judea and Samaria. Less probable, given the long history of enmity between Sunni Ottoman and Shi'ite Persian dynasties, but not entirely impossible, is a potential alliance between Iran and ISIS against a common enemy: Israel. This would be the first major inter-state confrontation involving Israel since the 1973 war.

### ***2. Acquiescence to an Iranian-Controlled Lebanon***

Alternatively, Israel might choose to acquiesce to an Iranian-controlled Lebanon for fear that a preemptive strike might facilitate an Iranian-Islamic State détente. The logic would be that Iran, in a confrontation with Israel, would be waging a two-front war: in the north and east against ISIS, and in the south against Israel. To avoid such a threat, Iran might seek to come to terms with ISIS, which itself would be facing a four-front war (against Iran and Hezbollah, the international coalition, the Iraqi Kurds, and Russia). Cutting a deal with Iran to direct their fire at Israel, at least for the short to medium term, might prove attractive to both parties. ISIS could easily explain the necessity of fighting Israel first as the greater evil, leaving the cleansing of Lebanon from Shi'a and Iran to a later stage. By reducing Iranian vulnerability, ISIS could reduce Iran's incentive to attack Israel.

Acquiescence is also likely to be costly, of course, because the conflict between Iran, Hezbollah and ISIS would probably be in the Shi'ites' favor. It would be easier for Iran and Hezbollah to consolidate their hold over Lebanon than for ISIS to establish its state in Syria. This means essentially that Iran and Hezbollah would have the upper hand, and in the long term would be able to transform Lebanon into a base of operations against Israel to a greater degree than it is already.

An ISIS takeover of Syria, characterized by the demise of the Assad regime, does not necessarily imply a firm footing for ISIS in Syria. A very wide panoply of opposition elements, massively funded by outside actors, is likely to engage in the same kind of terrorist-insurgency activity against ISIS that the organization itself waged against the Syrian state. Turkey, with the blessing of the US and its allies, might continue to finance, equip, and even train “secular” or moderate opposition groups to engage in terrorism in the Homs-Idlib area; the Saudis would support the remnants of JN in the same region; the Iranians would no doubt massively support Alawite guerrilla activity in western Syria; and both Israel and Jordan would do their utmost to support the Druze in Jabal Druze. Islamic State rule would face a maritime siege of its ports by an international coalition, probably under UN auspices.

Unfortunately, Israel cannot hope that occupying Lebanon as a base of operations against the Islamic State would pose the same degree of challenge to Iran and Hezbollah as ISIS would face in consolidating its state in Syria. The greatest threat in Lebanon would be the potential Sunni fifth column. The Sunnis are probably the third-largest confessional group in Lebanon, at least one-million strong, with a longstanding animosity to Iran and the Shi'ites that has only intensified over the last two decades. The high point in the animosity between the two confessions occurred after the assassination of Sunni Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2004, and the resultant political schism between the “March 14” alliance led by Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated prime minister, and the “March 8” coalition led by Hezbollah and some Christian supporters. This divide has continued to plague Lebanese politics ever since. Many if not most Sunnis believe Rafik Hariri was assassinated by Hezbollah agents at the bidding of the Assad regime, and with the blessing of the regime's patron, Iran. An international tribunal confirmed these suspicions when

it indicted and issued arrest warrants to four Hezbollah members for their role in Hariri's assassination.<sup>67</sup> Saudi Arabia would likely be heavily involved in funding a proxy war against the Iranian presence in Lebanon. Fortunately for Hezbollah and Iran, the Sunnis are not well-organized. The leading party, al-Istiqlal, lacks a military wing, and the Sunni jihadi organizations are weak, due in part to heavy-handed counter-terrorist measures taken by the Lebanese state against them over many years.

Although the same can be said of the Druze today, they do have one major advantage over the Sunnis: topography. Most of the Druze live in the Shouf mountains, which offer the ideal terrain for conducting guerrilla operations. But the Druze are few, and could be massacred or expelled in massive numbers to deny their guerrillas a civilian support base. The Druze are also likely to see the Iranians and Hezbollah as the lesser evil because the Shi'ites accept the consociation principle, whereas Islamic fundamentalists regard the Druze as shirk, or polytheists, who according to sharia are punishable by death. The Christians are likely to vote with their feet and emigrate, as so many of their co-religionists have been doing for over a century.

One of the major objectives of ISIS would be to deny Iran use of the Beirut international airport, which is vulnerable because it is surrounded on three sides by elevated areas stretching up to 1,000 meters above sea level. Its vulnerability was exposed in the Shouf mountain battles in fall 1983 between the Christian and Druze militias and their external allies (especially the battle over the village of Suk al-Gharb in September 1983), when the Druze, backed by the Syrians, aimed their guns at the international airport which was no more than seven kilometers away.<sup>68</sup> Once again, the Druze (and to a far lesser extent, the Christians) are likely to join forces with the Iranian-Hezbollah coalition in order to deny ISIS the ability to close down the airport, which would be so critical logistically for the Hezbollah-Iranian war effort. The Iranians would be less able to utilize the only other airport suitable for heavy transport planes (and even then, only after considerable renovation)—the Rene Mouawad air base—because of its proximity to the Syrian border in north Lebanon.

Iran and Hezbollah, then, would likely have the upper hand against the Islamic State as each side tried to promote subversion on the other side of the border or line of control. This asymmetry is clearly a problem for Israel. Iran might feel that, with the balance of power in its favor in the confrontation with ISIS, it could engage Israel in a missile war of attrition, and launch limited attacks (including attempts to take over territory), conducted by its proxies. Hamas would then be in the enviable position of being financed by Iran to do the bidding of the Islamic State, with which it would want to merge. Hamas would also be likely to win diplomatic support from Turkey.

### ***3. A Destructive War of Attrition between ISIS and Iran/Hezbollah***

Of course, the preferable scenario from Israel's perspective is a painful war of attrition between ISIS and Iran on both the Syrian and Iraqi fronts, which might seriously drain Iranian financial and manpower resources. In early September 2015, the financial committee in the Iraqi Parliament warned that Iraq is likely to end 2015 with a \$45 billion deficit, climbing to a \$60 billion deficit by the end of 2016, due to the high costs of warfare against a fall in oil prices of 50 percent since the summer of 2014. Iraqi reserves stand at 77 billion barrels,<sup>69</sup> and the Iraqi government might not be able to finance the war should it be prolonged beyond 2016. Iran would have to step in to aid its ally, just as it has been aiding Syria. According to CIA World Factbook data, Syria's revenues in 2014 amounted to \$1.73 billion, compared to expenditures over three times that amount, of \$5.5 billion.<sup>70</sup> The costs of engagement in Iran's three battlefields (Yemen included) could become an unsustainable burden for the Iranian government, whose revenues stand at only \$60 billion,<sup>71</sup> especially in the face of declining Iranian oil sales, and even after the signing of the nuclear agreement.<sup>72</sup> ISIS activity, covertly financed by the Gulf States, could then create the conditions to force Iran to abandon its offensive and subversive posture and become a status quo state, or risk revolution at home. It is even possible to envision Iran shelving its nuclear program rather than face mass protests, which might arise should the expected economic gains after the signing of the nuclear deal not materialize. After all, both Russia and Saudi Arabia are likely to flood

the market with oil to maintain low oil and gas prices for a considerable time to come, the former because of its dire need for revenue, the latter as a means to counter its bitter rival.

## **ASSESSING ISIS AS A DIRECT THREAT TO ISRAEL**

However shocking the fall of major cities in Iraq in 2014 might have been, especially Mosul, it's worth noting that after years of conflict in Iraq and Syria, the organization has yet to topple the regimes of either state. In both Syria and Iraq, the overwhelming sources of wealth and infrastructure remain in the hands of the government and its supporters. We have already noted two indications of this reality: in Syria, the government maintains control of 19 of 27 of the country's air bases and both its deep seaports; in Iraq, oil production—most of which takes place in the Shi'ite south—grew substantially in the very year that the Iraqi government sustained losses in the north to ISIS (from 3.3 billion barrels a day in June 2014 to 4.18 billion in June 2015).<sup>73</sup> In both countries, ISIS essentially controls the poorer periphery rather than the richer core. One can then clearly conclude by comparison that ISIS is hardly an existential threat in the immediate future to Israel, a more unified and militarily stronger state than either Iraq or Syria.

In military terms, ISIS has no air force, navy, or armored capabilities (beyond the occasional tanks it displays), and because it lacks a powerful state sponsor, it has little chance of making any headway in developing any of these capabilities. It is almost certain that were the major air bases or ports in Syria to fall into ISIS hands, both the platforms—ships, planes, and helicopters—and the military infrastructure would be immediately destroyed by either the Israeli Air Force (IAF) or the allied air forces. It is entirely reasonable to assume that just as these air forces have operated with impunity in Syrian air space against the will of the Syrian government, they would do so with even greater ease and resolve should the government fall to ISIS. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States would only entertain the idea of supplying planes and helicopters to ISIS if the state it forms were on the verge of collapse in the face of an Iranian onslaught, and soon to be replaced by an Iranian-sponsored

rump state. At that point, any planes and helicopters delivered would pose little threat to Israel. In general, the IAF can probably decimate any conventional air threat in the area. The only constraints it faces are political, not military, and it can be assumed that it would be given free rein in combat with ISIS.

Israel would have the benefit of being separated from ISIS by buffer zones. It is reasonable to assume that Hezbollah, with Iranian support, would prevent any ISIS presence on Israel's northern border. Along the northern Golan, with cooperation from Jordan, Israel could do much to create a Druze buffer zone east of the area, and promote guerrilla operations against ISIS by rival fundamentalist groups.

In any event, the border area in the Golan that would be exposed to the hostility of an ISIS state in Syria would be relatively easy to control compared to at least two of Israel's existing borders, those with Gaza and Lebanon. First, the border is relatively distant from major Israeli population and industrial centers, at least in terms of Israel's Lilliputian dimensions. A missile launched from Gaza City can hit, within a 35-kilometer radius, a major city and Israel's largest port—Ashdod—with a population of 225,000; within half of that radius, it can strike Ashkelon, with a population of at least 110,000. Haifa, Israel's third most populous city, a major port, and the country's main area for heavy industry, lies within this range from the Lebanese border (as do the sizeable population centers immediately north of Haifa). By contrast, only three minor towns—Safed, Tiberias, and Qiryat Shemona—fall within the 35-kilometer radius from the Syrian Golan Heights. Their combined population (94,000) is less than that of Ashkelon alone, and none is a significant industrial or economic center.

The area immediately adjacent to the Golan border is sparsely populated on both sides and therefore relatively easily patrolled, monitored, and defended. There is no possibility for the enemy to engage in urban warfare. Given the distances involved, and the fact that most of the Golan Heights is covered by hard basalt stone,<sup>74</sup> the jihadists would not be able to engage in extensive tunneling against army and civilian population sites. Within the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, the population—composed of the Druze

minority and the Jewish communities created since 1967—is hostile to ISIS and would be fully supportive of Israeli defense efforts. Under these conditions, ISIS could at most engage in cross-border forays and strikes against IDF patrols of a hit-and-run nature, and subject the small Israeli settlements to mortar fire and bombardment. Any build-up of forces would be easily detected and destroyed, which is probably why the Assad regime never took that route in the four decades following the 1973 war.

Asymmetry in both capabilities and vulnerabilities would work in Israel's favor, and would likely deter ISIS from being too violent against its Israeli neighbor. Consider the asymmetry in vulnerability: whereas Israel's major population centers are relatively far from the Golan border (Haifa and environs lie 70 kilometers away as the crow flies, and the Dan metropolitan area some 120 kilometers), Damascus, Syria's capital and its second-largest city, is only 55 kilometers from the border, well within reach of Israeli artillery and rocket fire. All of Syria would be vulnerable to IAF sorties against which ISIS would have little with which to defend itself, and it would also lack any effective way to impose a counter cost. ISIS, unlike the Palestinians, would not enjoy international support that might seriously inhibit Israeli action, especially given the precedent of international forces operating in urban spaces with resultant collateral civilian damage.

Israel would enjoy a freer hand against ISIS than did the Syrian regime, which had to compromise its fight against the organization because of its need for the very oil that ISIS had wrested away from the state. Israel can destroy the relatively sophisticated oil production centers at will. It would be able to communicate an effective quid pro quo formula that would allow ISIS to assess the cost of hostile moves against Israel. Israel would have to make sure that the punishment it exacts would be far greater than any damage it might suffer.

A future ISIS Syrian state would be considerably hampered by the lack of a powerful state patron, as enjoyed over the years by the two quasi-states of Hamastan and Hezbollah-controlled areas of Lebanon in their conflicts with Israel. Their only potential patron, Turkey, would find it difficult to fulfill this role even in the event that Erdogan and the AKP continued to govern. Turkey is a regional industrial powerhouse with extensive economic ties to the US, the European Union, Russia,

and China, all of whom would look askance at such a relationship.<sup>75</sup> Even if Turkey were to decide to support ISIS state-building and war-making, it would most likely want to use ISIS to help suppress the Kurds and create a more effective balance against Iran, rather than support it in a conflict with Israel.

Nonetheless, the prospects of an alliance, albeit far from the public eye, between Turkey and the Islamic State cannot be totally discounted, even on economic grounds. After all, Syria is not only a large potential market for Turkey, but also an important transit route to the Iraqi and Gulf State markets.<sup>76</sup> Israel should avoid, for the foreseeable future, transferring to Turkey state-of-the-art military technology that might find its way into ISIS hands, exposing the IDF and its allies to increased military dangers. It should also build up its intelligence capabilities to help it expose cooperation between Turkey and ISIS, should it occur. This is an important means for pressuring allies to play their share in curtailing, at the very least, the military aspects of such a relationship.

It is also important not to underestimate opposition to ISIS even if it were to take hold of government. As was noted, the organization in Syria cannot assume a minimal level of support even among the Sunni majority, unlike the support it commands among Sunnis in Iraq. And even in Iraq there are Sunni groups that fight against ISIS, despite the presence of a threatening Shi'ite majority and a Shi'ite-controlled state. It is even more likely that Syrian Sunnis would continue to resist, until utterly crushed by ISIS. In addition, numerous external actors would commit considerable resources to weakening the organization's state-building and war-making efforts.

Nor can ISIS derive inspiration from Iran's ability to endure as a radical theocracy. Iran's success can to a great extent be attributed to its substantial oil output. Though oil production declined perceptibly during the early years of the revolution compared to the end of the Shah's rule (from 6.6 million barrels a day under the Shah in 1976, down to 2 million during the 1980s), nevertheless, by 1981 oil production in the Islamic Republic of Iran was at least sixty times (two million barrels daily) the oil output of Syria's rapidly-depleting fields (33,000 barrels a day) in 2012.<sup>77</sup> ISIS, then, would be inheriting an impoverished and partially

destroyed country, bereft of a significant segment of its middle classes, who have either already fled or are highly likely to do so on the eve of an impending ISIS victory. As isolated as the Islamic Republic of Iran was over the course of the years, the political and economic isolation the ISIS state would face, and the costs of such isolation, are significantly greater.

The upshot then of an ISIS takeover in Syria to Israeli security interests is not so much the ISIS threat per se, but rather the Iranian reaction to the takeover, and the threat such a reaction would pose to Israel. Israel must meet the Iranian challenge in the following ways:

1. Establish clear red lines, the most important of which is the prohibition of the transfer of advanced missile launchers and rockets through both seaports and airports in Lebanon and the Alawite state (if not overrun by ISIS). Israel must develop the intelligence capabilities to monitor these facilities, if it has not already done so.
2. Clearly signal to Iran that infringement of these red lines will result in the partial or complete destruction of the installations in question. Regarding Beirut International Airport, Israel should adopt a gradually escalating response. Israel should also claim the right to interdict shipment of such supplies by sea. This right to interdiction would obviously include Gaza.
3. Clearly signal that any attack on Israel will result in a far more painful counterattack on Iranian or Hezbollah installations.
4. Clearly signal to Iran that as long as Iran does not infringe its red lines, Israel will remain militarily neutral in the conflict with ISIS, with the possible exception of defensive activity on the Golan Heights, such as support for Jabal al-Druze.
5. Politically, Israel should act as an advocate for Lebanese political actors in the March 14 Alliance who would voice opposition to an Iranian occupation of Lebanon among Western allies and in international forums. The key discourse should stress Iranian occupation and its illegality.
6. Establish a geographical red line in southern Lebanon beyond which an Iranian presence will not be tolerated.

Regarding ISIS:

1. Israel should consider an ISIS assault on Jabal al-Druze as a red line, automatically initiating a forceful Israeli response.
2. Israel should set up a forum within its security establishment to assess the relative threats posed by ISIS compared to Iran and its allies in the Syrian and Lebanese arena, and should create an executive arm that could upgrade Israeli intelligence, artillery, and combined armored and infantry capabilities beyond the Golan Heights borders, commensurate with the ISIS threat.
3. Israel should signal to the organization that it will forcefully oppose any ISIS attacks or subversion against Jordan.
4. Israel should signal to ISIS that any attack on Israel or Israeli citizens outside Israel, or any attempts to begin operations in Judea and Samaria, will meet with a disproportionate counterattack on ISIS personnel and infrastructure.
5. Israel should signal to the organization that it will freely attack any strategic platforms that might threaten major Israel population centers or installations, even if not immediately employed against Israel.
6. Israel must prepare itself in the event of a massive and panicked exit of Syrian refugees from the Damascus area and the south, some of whom will seek refuge in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. Many will be Druze, but given the publicity accorded Israeli medical treatment of wounded rebels and civilians, they will include Syrian Muslims and Christians as well. To cope with this potential situation, Israeli policy makers must convene four forums in anticipation of this wave: a) a political forum to establish policy guidelines on how to deal with this wave of refugees, which could easily amount to tens of thousands, if not more; b) a military and security forum to deal with the security aspects; c) a technical inter-ministerial committee to provide and coordinate immediate relief; and d) a public diplomacy forum and network to work on problems of image and legitimacy. Obviously, the basic thrust must be that the refugees are an international problem

necessitating financial and technical assistance from the leading actors in the international community. The Israeli government must make clear that any aid to refugees will be given outside of Israel's borders, on the Golan Heights.

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- 63 According to ESCWA United Nations Data, there were 4.192 million Syrians in the 5-14 age cohort in Syria in 2000, who today are would be of age relevant for military service. Since combat remains basically an essentially male pursuit in Syria, this means an approximate military recruitment pool of 2.1 million divided by the ten years of this cohort, which yields an intake of 210,000. However, ten percent or less of these or less are Alawites, Druze, or Shi’ite, translating into an intake of 21,000 at most. The computations are based on data found in “The Demographic Profile of Syrian Arab Republic,” *UNESCWA Population Information Network*, <http://www.escwa.un.org/popin/members/syria.pdf>. A recent study of 30 armies found that on average, 26 per cent served in combatant roles. Assuming that the same rate for the SAA yields an intake of 5,250 new recruits annually. See: John T. Bennett, “Report: U.S. Last in Combat Gear Output Per Spent Dollar,” *Defense News*, March. 15, 2010, <http://archive.defensenews.com/article/20100315/DEFSECT04/3150309/Report-U-S-Last-Combat-Gear-Output-Per-Spent-Dollar>.
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