



## The Threat of ISIS to the UK RUSI Threat Assessment

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*RUSI threat assessments are designed to raise awareness of, and inform public debate on, key threats to UK national security. The assessments are based on open-source analysis and expert insight, and have been through a rigorous process of validation.*

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is well financed, well equipped and brutal. It is also a plausible threat to the UK. The group operates across large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq, where the sustained conflicts continue to attract large numbers of foreign fighters. Official estimates suggest the total travelling to the region has now exceeded 15,000, including 500 from the UK. It is unclear what proportion has joined ISIS, though it is understood that a majority of these UK citizens have joined its ranks. It is this community of foreign fighters that poses an immediate terrorist threat to the West.

ISIS is an evolution of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi's Al-Qa'ida in the Land of the Two Rivers (or Al-Qa'ida in Iraq/AQI), a group that dramatically split from Al-Qa'ida in April 2013 when it tried to claim Jabhat Al-Nusrah (JaN) as its Syrian affiliate. The ensuing fracture developed into a full schism just under a year later when Al-Qa'ida formally denounced ISIS.

In June, the group captured the world's attention as it made rapid inroads, alongside other factions, into the Sunni-dominated parts of Iraq. Fearful of the militants' barbaric reputation and suffering from poor leadership, Iraqi security forces deserted in their thousands leaving equipment, military bases and munitions stores without protection. ISIS gained ammunition, vehicles and heavy artillery from the fleeing forces, substantially strengthening their military capability while the Iraqi Army crumbled.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Gareth Stansfield, 'The New Rules of the Game in Iraq', *RUSI.org*, 18 June 2014.

The group's seizure of Mosul (a city of almost 2 million) was a particularly symbolic victory. The collapse of the Iraqi Army and the resources gained presented a narrative of strength and success. For disaffected Sunni Muslims this was immensely powerful.<sup>2</sup> The group was able to capitalise on its Iraqi successes through the announcement in late June 2014 of the establishment of an 'Islamic Caliphate', declaring itself the 'Islamic State' with leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi as Caliph.

The group has been able to broadcast these successes via professionally edited videos and a controlled social-media campaign directly to its audience, bypassing the traditional vehicle of the mainstream media. This propaganda strategy has contributed to the unprecedented number of foreign fighters travelling to Syria and Iraq: in only three years, the number travelling to Syria has exceeded those who went to Afghanistan during its ten-year conflict.<sup>3</sup>

As the UK joins the coalition against this increasingly dominant jihadist force, understanding the scale of the threat and the complexity of the challenge is crucial. This briefing analyses four key questions:

- What is the group's current narrative and interest?
- How is this narrative being heard in the UK?
- What would change to make ISIS refocus from its regional concentration to a global one?
- How might a new 'awakening' movement be stimulated in Iraq?

This briefing provides an objective view on ISIS and some judgements about its current threat trajectory. It draws on a series of discussions held at RUSI, which involved internal and external expertise, to come to some key judgements on the group.

## Key Judgments

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### **1. Well established jihadist groups have not abandoned Al-Qa'ida in favour of the caliphate.**

No established jihadist groups have pledged allegiance to the new caliphate. Some have actively rejected it, while others have used the opportunity to reaffirm their allegiance to the weakened, but ever-present, Al-Qa'ida Core. What support has been generated has come largely from previously unknown splinter groups or looser affiliates, based on a desire to use the ISIS brand to gain support, recruits and finances. It is not the result of ISIS outreach. On the battlefield in Syria, while the group seems to have established a sort of

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2. Gareth Stansfield, 'Have We Misunderstood the Threat from ISIS?', *RUSI.org*, 14 August 2014.

3. Richard Barrett, 'Foreign Fighters in Syria', The Soufan Group, 2 June 2014, available at <<http://soufangroup.com/foreign-fighters-in-syria/>>, accessed 19 September 2014.

*modus vivendi* with other factions, it is unclear that this currently translates into active support.

**2. The principal threat from ISIS is to Western targets in the Levant, or to the countries of origin of other foreign fighters that have been drawn to Syria and Iraq.**

ISIS's precursor, Al-Qa'ida in Iraq, launched few attacks outside its immediate area of operations. When it did strike, it was Western hotels in Amman. This kind of targeting of neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey is the most likely immediate threat from ISIS. Further afield, supporters of the group might choose to launch 'sympathy' attacks on Western targets: for example, the murder of French hiker Hervé Gourdel in Algeria. A more immediate large-scale threat from foreign fighters is in places like Libya, Tunisia or Indonesia, where substantial numbers have joined ISIS and would face relatively weaker domestic security forces on their return.

**3. British citizens who have joined terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq pose a threat to the UK.**

ISIS's current focus is the consolidation and protection of its declared caliphate. But a small portion of the group is likely to also be seeking to target the West. ISIS media statements have highlighted the group's intent to do so, and the significant number of Western recruits will offer some willing operatives. This sits alongside the real and immediate terrorist threat to the UK from British citizens returning from the region and conducting lone-actor attacks (that is, without ISIS's assistance or knowledge). But ISIS-linked activity is only one strand of the threat to the UK from Syria: the Al-Qa'ida-affiliated Al-Nusrah Front and Khorasan Group also pose a significant threat and continue to seek to advance Al-Qa'ida's international targeting.

**4. A Sunni 'awakening' will be difficult to achieve due to the legacy of sectarian divisions in Iraq.**

Under the former government of Nouri Al-Maliki, Sunni Arabs were marginalised and excluded from key roles. There were further widespread allegations of persecution by Shia militias that were at least implicitly authorised by the regime. Without substantive political change, there is little prospect of Sunni Arabs opposing ISIS to exchange one form of oppression for another.

Even with the coalition air strikes, given its substantial presence ISIS will not be completely destroyed until the civil war in Syria has been resolved and Iraq has managed to bring the Sunni parts of the country fully under Baghdad's control.

The coalition air strikes in Iraq and Syria will help to restrict ISIS's operating environment, but they will not solve the problem. The long-term solution

remains the same: political transition and an end to the civil war. This will require coercion and targeted strikes, but also greater effort to foster talks between the various factions to try to bring Syria's civil war to some resolution.

**5. ISIS's narrative is resonating strongly, producing both passive and active support in the UK and West.**

ISIS's professionally edited videos, strong message and controlled use of social media are producing widespread support for the group. In many cases this does not extend to active participation and it would be erroneous to consider all online supporters as members of the group. However, it has been one important factor in driving unprecedented numbers of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria, including more than 500 from the UK (the majority of whom are fighting alongside ISIS).

## Threat Assessment

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### What is the Current ISIS Narrative and Interest?

The recent public executions of UK and US hostages were primarily aimed at the West, and their specific purpose was to complicate any UK or US involvement in countering the group. Currently, there is no evidence to indicate an intention to directly orchestrate attacks within the UK,<sup>4</sup> though the group possesses the capability to do so. Furthermore, as recent arrests in Australia and Europe have shown, elements within the group are not beyond trying to instigate supporters to carry out attacks in the West, though it is unclear the extent to which such operations have been sanctioned by the ISIS senior leadership.<sup>5</sup>

ISIS's current focus is the protection, consolidation and further expansion of its declared caliphate's borders. For the moment, any expansion will be limited: ISIS is focused on surviving the aerial bombardment on both sides of the border. But it will continue to seek to grow its area of control in Iraq and Syria, as well as potentially launch attacks in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey in an attempt to destabilise the wider region. Further large-scale incursions into neighbouring states would excessively stretch resources, placing the group at greater risk of a counter-reaction that could be heavily damaging.

Should the group continue to strengthen however, other countries should be considered at risk. There is support for ISIS within Jordan, offering the possibility of some home-grown expansion into the country by ISIS or its supporters, though the state's strong security apparatus has so far managed

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4. Raffaello Pantucci, 'Is ISIS a Threat to the UK?', *RUSI.org*, 21 August 2014.

5. Paul Maley and Dan Box, 'Police Swoop on Sydney, Brisbane Homes in Terror Raids', *The Australian*, 18 September 2014.

to mitigate the threat. But it should be remembered that historically, the group founded by Al-Zarqawi launched its most brutal out-of-Iraq operation in Amman in 2005, showing the group's longstanding interest in targeting Jordan. In contrast, any major advance into Turkey will remain unlikely. The ISIS leadership has repeatedly demonstrated clear calculation in its operations, and from a strategic perspective Turkey is more valuable as a hesitant supporter of international action against the group, rather than an aggressive antagonist preventing ISIS activity on its territory. It also acts as a hub through which new mujahedeen enter Syria, as a source of revenue for oil extracted from the group's occupied fields, and as a source of basic goods that are distributed in *dawa* (propagation) activities as well as providing support for the group's fighters.

This final aspect of *dawa* is crucial in the group's self-identity. Not seeing itself as the nihilistic 'death-cult' that Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott has branded it,<sup>6</sup> ISIS has taken great care to cultivate an image of providing social services, law and some semblance of state order in areas it controls. In doing this, the group seeks to live up to its aspirational name of 'Islamic State' and this narrative is one that is increasingly resonating amongst the recruits drawn to the group, who express an eagerness to see what the 'Islamic State' looks like. Furthermore, the group's ability to impose order in previously ineffectively governed parts of Iraq and Syria has had the effect of winning some local support, further complicating a possible 'awakening' movement against the group.

#### **What Could Make ISIS Refocus towards Global Aims?**

At this point, the group is not expected to launch major operations in Western capitals. Its objective is instead to draw the West into a protracted ground campaign. This would reinforce the group's narrative that the West is the enemy of Islam, and further enhance its claim as the ultimate defender of the Sunni population.

Current air strikes do not assist in this goal as ISIS cannot hit back at them. The recent release of videos has therefore been intended to force a cessation of the aerial bombardment. ISIS has long held British and American citizens as hostages; the recent public beheadings were in direct response to US military intervention. The strategy behind such brutal acts is an attempt to compel a change in Western policy through the complication of the political calculus at home – the logic being to make it more difficult for Western leaders to justify air strikes when they appear to directly threaten their own citizens. Once this option is removed, policy may refocus on the ground assault ISIS is trying to provoke. If

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6. Helen Davidson, 'Tony Abbott: Australia to Send Military Force to Fight ISIS "Death Cult"', *Guardian*, 14 September 2014.

successful, it would bring Western armies back into the Levant in a potentially bloody and protracted conflict with no clear resolution on the horizon.

Targeted strikes against the group could lead to the erosion of its leadership structures and fragmentation. However, this might create a situation in which there is greater devolution of the group's command and control structures. ISIS already operates in a strongly devolved manner (though with clear strategic direction and broad co-ordination from a core) – the natural evolution of this is greater decision-making at lower levels, which might lead to more attempted attacks like those already disrupted in the UK and Australia. In those cases, there was evidence of a connection, but little clarity around where exactly the direction was coming from, with the implication that the attacks were being instigated from the battlefield by groups close to ISIS, but not necessarily carried out under the direction of senior leadership. Were such an attack to succeed, it would not necessarily be immediately clear whether it would be attributable to the group's senior leadership (and therefore a strategic shift by the group) or to an isolated commander. Nevertheless, in the response to an attack by an isolated commander, a cycle of reaction and counter-reaction could escalate into a more direct confrontation between ISIS and Western powers.

#### **How Might a New 'Awakening' Movement be Stimulated in Iraq?**

The resurgence of Sunni forces would offer substantial advantages in the fight against ISIS. Previously, it was an 'awakening' movement amongst the Sunni tribes in western Iraq who rose up to reject what was then ISI (the Islamic State of Iraq) and first led to the group's withdrawal. Stimulating a similar uprising now could be key to countering ISIS's advances in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi Army has failed to stand up to the group, while Kurdish Peshmerga forces remain focused on the protection of Kurdistan. At present, Western military intervention has been limited to air strikes, but while they may be able to halt ISIS's advance, they will not be able to eliminate or degrade the group completely. ISIS is a highly mobile fighting force: a difficult target from the air. Air strikes will be equally unable to force ISIS from cities such as Mosul, Aleppo and Tikrit – at least without substantial civilian casualties.

Further, as the Peshmerga and Shia militias push into predominantly Sunni territory, revived historical sectarian tensions may further complicate the situation. In Syria, Assad and the rebels have been at a stalemate for months. The falling out of ISIS and Al-Qa'ida, and the actions of the moderate opposition, temporarily rolled ISIS back – but it has now regained this space. Some other force needs to be identified to provide the ground troops to expel ISIS. The political resolution and the end of the civil war in Syria seems a long way off. Stalemate will likely continue.

Waiting or seeking a solution to the situation in Syria and Iraq through a 'second awakening' remains optimistic. Under Maliki's sectarian rule, Sunni Arabs were marginalised and excluded from the government and from state security forces.<sup>7</sup> There are allegations that kidnappings, torture and summary executions were conducted by Shia militias and implicitly sanctioned by the regime, if not directly ordered.<sup>8</sup> This has sown widespread disillusionment and created deeply entrenched grievances. While the insurgent group Jaysh Al-Tariqa Al-Naqshbandia (JRTN) opposes the ideology of ISIS, such is their opposition to the government that they formed an unlikely alliance that has blossomed into battlefield victories. They were instrumental in ISIS's early successes, including the seizure of Mosul from government control.<sup>9</sup> The alliance highlights the wellspring of sectarian division from which ISIS is able to draw in Iraq, suggesting that a Sunni uprising to fight alongside the government is unlikely, at least in the immediate short term.

Similarly, while the caliphate has not been welcomed by the wider Sunni population, fears of retribution from Shia militias and a return to sectarian government offer little incentive to oppose ISIS. After years of suppression under Maliki, the tribal groups that previously fought against Al-Qa'ida and insurgent groups such as JRTN now view some form of Sunni autonomy as the only acceptable outcome.

### **How is ISIS's Narrative Being Heard in the UK?**

ISIS's professional use of social media and YouTube to convey its message has allowed it to directly reach individuals in the UK. In contrast to Al-Qa'ida's lengthy documents and speeches outlining complex ideological arguments in dense prose, ISIS posts well edited videos and photographs from the battlefield on easily accessible platforms such as Twitter and YouTube that provide a clean and simple narrative.

ISIS fighters also have individual social-media accounts, interacting with UK followers who consequently feel part of the movement with a direct link to the group. These connections have provided individuals with information and virtual access to the battlefield (that has in some cases translated into actual access).<sup>10</sup> The life of the mujahedeen is frequently presented in a light-hearted tone, portraying jihad in a somewhat fanciful light with captions such as '[a]n iPad is essential, along with hair products (my afro is melting)'.<sup>11</sup>

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7. Stansfield, 'The New Rules of the Game in Iraq'.

8. Human Rights Watch, 'Iraq: Pro-Government Militias' Trail of Death', 31 July 2014.

9. Shane Harris, 'The Re-Baathification of Iraq', *Foreign Policy*, 21 August 2014.

10. Sandra Laville, 'First British Conviction for Syria-Related Terror Offence,' *Guardian*, 20 May 2014.

11. Ruth Sherlock, 'What Every Jihadi in Syria Needs: Hair Gel, an iPad and Kit-Kats', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 November 2013.

Such positive propaganda, and the narrative of a powerful and successful fraternity of mujahedeen, have found resonance amongst some in the UK.

More recently, there has been a noticeable development in narratives from the battlefield, with people increasingly talking about the construction of the 'Islamic State' as a driving narrative, rather than protection of the Syrian people from the oppressive Assad regime. The full impact of this shifting narrative (from protecting Syrians to building a caliphate) on the group's appeal to foreign fighters has not been felt yet, but offers an evolution potentially drawing people to ISIS – and one that that needs countering. Notwithstanding the group's brutality, people are still drawn in, seeing it as a mighty group that is able to confront a superpower and is in the midst of the building an Islamic caliphate.

All of this has translated into a stream of young Britons being drawn to fight alongside the group in Syria and Iraq. Across the UK, families in at-risk communities (and more broadly) worry as their young men and women are attracted by this easy narrative and take the short trip to join the conflict. There is no distinct profile of those being drawn to the group, though it is clear that many are part of a generation which interacts extensively through social media and have identified with this aspect of ISIS's propaganda.

The threat from ISIS to the UK is one that has yet to materialise in any substantial form, though echoes of the threat from the battlefield in Syria have already started to manifest themselves in the UK and elsewhere. Foreign fighters provide the most obvious vector for a threat to come back to the UK from Syria and Iraq, but it is likely that the local threat from the group to other Levantine states is more immediately substantial. The ISIS narrative continues to resonate strongly amongst a wide audience and this is unlikely to change until the conflict in Syria and the longstanding tensions in Iraq are brought to a close. Until some conclusion to Syria's brutal civil war is on the horizon, it seems unlikely that the threat from ISIS or foreign fighters will abate. Rather, it will continue to be the principal preoccupation of British and European security services.

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## BRIEFING PAPER

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