

Exploiting Vulnerabilities of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham: Policy Recommendations

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Abstract

The rapid and ruthless rise of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has captured the world's attention. The group has made horrifying headlines and have caused government and non-government institutions alike to condemn their actions. The group has multiple strengths but within those strengths weaknesses ensue. Although ISIS has quickly risen to power in Iraq and Syria and has become one of the most influential insurgent groups, the organization presents multiple vulnerabilities that can be exploited by the international community. These exploitations will be key to initiating and ultimately ending ISIS's control in Iraqi and Syrian territories.

Keywords: Tahut, Tamkin, Hijrah, Khilafah, Strengths, Vulnerabilities, Delegitimize, Disrupt, Exploitation, Policy Recommendations

Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), is a terror organization that has taken the international community by surprise with their swift, brutal and effective tactics demonstrated throughout the Middle East. Within a relatively short period of time, it has extended its influence across the globe and has essentially re-written the 'terrorist handbook'. A once unknown and unpopular group now has the international community struggling for a successful strategy that will rid the Middle East of its' presence. Policy and strategy development will depend on a multitude of factors, however understanding the organization and discovering their weaknesses will ultimately assist in the process. An effective policy and strategy towards diminishing and ultimately defeating ISIS will have to incorporate an understanding of their strengths and exploiting their vulnerabilities.

ISIS's Strategic Strategy

In order to apply an effective political policy and military strategy towards defeating ISIS the international community must be committed to understanding their adversary. They will have to analyze ISIS's overall strategic strategy in order to develop a successful counter-strategy. Fortunately, the international community only had to look as far as ISIS's first issue of their multi-language, propaganda magazine titled *Dabiq* (Clarion Project, 2014). The first issue of the magazine was published during the month of Ramadan in 1435 (in the Gregorian calendar 2014), titled "The Return of the Khilafah," which contained ISIS's grand strategy for restoring a khilafah or caliphate (Clarion Project, 2014). Their overall strategy can be summed up into four

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major phases: weakening the *Tahut*, *Tamkin*, Hijrah, and finally declaring a Khilafah (Lewis, 2014). The weakening or “destabilizing the *Tahut*” refers to creating chaos, inciting civil war and ultimately neutralizing borders. This unstable environment permits ISIS to flourish by gaining military and political victories. The second phase is *Tamkin*, or consolidation (Lewis, 2014). This phase focuses on creating an Islamic Emirate in Iraq and Syria, ultimately consolidating its forces and occupied territories (Lewis, 2014). The third phase or Hijrah, is calling an emigration of individuals who have a similar mind set to join the Islamic Emirate by dwelling and fighting within the Emirate (Lewis, 2014). The final and overall goal is to establish a caliphate (Lewis, 2014). These goals are similar to goals outlined by many other insurgent groups, the difference is in the order in which ISIS has carried out these goals. Insurgent organizations such as Al-Qaeda (AQ) have sought to establish a caliphate first and then proceed with a military campaign however, ISIS has proceeded to carry out its military campaign prior to establishing a caliphate (Lewis, 2014). ISIS declared its’ caliphate on June 29, 2014 (Lewis, 2014).

ISIS has been able to accomplish the majority of these phases due to their methodology. They have approached these phases through a strategy that relies on military dominance in weak or chaotic states. The military strategy utilized is a sophisticated, well organized network that operates more like an army rather than a network of insurgents. After military strong holds have been established, ISIS almost immediately sets the foundation for religious, social, and governance control over the conquered territory (Lewis, 2014). This social and governmental control is enforced by providing social services expected of legitimate state governments which provides financial opportunities and a sense of security through rule of law (however strict it may be). ISIS also has more violent methods for enforcing its political dominance which includes mass killings, assassinations, internal displacement of civilians and enslavement (Lewis, 2014). Controlling the populace has become a critical component for ISIS’s success. The organization is able to establish an almost legitimate-style government component that far surpasses the usual shadow governance established by the majority of insurgent groups such as AQ and the Taliban. This in itself affords a strategic power to the group. As ISIS’s military victories have increased its’ legitimacy has also amplified making its’ claim to one day having a post conflict caliphate, that only constitutes fighters on the perimeter fending off non-Muslims, more credible (Lewis, 2014). It has also become extraordinarily successful in a short period of time because it has been able to garnish foreign fighters at an alarming rate. It is estimated that by October 2014, ISIS ranks consisted of approximately 31,000 fighters (Lister, 2014). These are just some of the main details that can be attributed to ISIS’s success over such a short period of time.

Acknowledging Overall Strengths

An examination of ISIS’s strengths is also imperative when developing a counter-strategy. These strengths have differentiated them from other terror organizations and can be attributed to their success. One of the organization’s strengths is that ISIS did not debut itself immediately. It took its’ time developing, which included gathering followers and establishing a sophisticated network before it began a robust military campaign. ISIS has also capitalized on the chaotic environments created by Syria’s civil war and Iraq’s weak central government (Lister, 2014). By demonstrating to the Sunni local populace that they could provide more security and public services than the Syrian and Iraqi governments, they were given credibility. ISIS has shown extraordinary skill in not only filling power vacuums but also creating them and

then filling them as well. In fact, ISIS is reliant on its' ability to create and fill these power vacuums which fuel instability, thus providing opportunity, power and credibility. In Iraq, in particular, its' reliance on instability is partially due to the wavering alliances with prominent Sunni factions (Lister, 2014). If these alliances were to fail, ISIS would lose a portion of their credibility amongst the Iraqi populace. Which leads to another strength ISIS has drawn upon, its ability to 'convince' multiple ethnic groups, villages and government officials to unite for the cause of the Islamic State (IS) (Lister, 2014). This has allowed ISIS to tap into expertise and knowledge of the surrounding areas that it might not have had otherwise (Lister, 2014). For example, after the occupation of Mosul and Tikrit ISIS appointed two former Ba'athist Iraqi military generals as governors of the two cities (Lister, 2014). This assisted ISIS not only in gaining alliances but also served as a tactical advantage for ISIS to maintain order, discipline, and local expertise in managing the two cities. This practice also provides loyalty to the organization; by giving employment to the local nationals it demonstrates ISIS's ability to provide services and opportunity to the people.

One of ISIS's largest strengths has been its' financial strategy. Unlike AQ and other terror networks, ISIS was self-sufficient for its' first eight years of operation (Levitt, 2014). Traditionally terror networks have relied on outside donors, state sponsors and abusing non-governmental systems (Levitt, 2014). Although currently ISIS does have some state and non-state sponsors it only makes up for an extremely small percentage of its annual revenue at an estimated \$50 million annually (Brisard & Martinez, 2014). ISIS's primary sources of income come from internal and external extortion and criminal activities (Levitt, 2014). One of ISIS's most popular forms of revenue has been the production and sale of oil. As the terror organization seizes control of critical assets such as oil fields in Iraq and Syria, it has bolstered its monthly revenue to \$40 million, giving the organization an annual income of \$480 million off of oil alone (Crane, 2015). In August 2014, reports indicated that ISIS controlled and operated 350 oil wells within Iraq and 60% of Syria's oil fields (Levitt, 2014). It produces crude oil and then sells the oil in the black market. ISIS was sophisticated enough to recognize that they needed trained individuals who understood the oil extraction methods, so they offered jobs and protection to the current oil field operators every time they overtook an oil field (Levitt, 2014). This smuggling and selling of oil to Turkey, Jordan, Syria, and Kurdistan has involved thousands of people and has become very efficient by using already establish black market routes (Levitt, 2014). It also uses a variety of smuggling methods from vehicles to pipelines and even rafts (Levitt, 2014). The extent of the oil financial operation has been vast:

From the Syrian town of Ezmerin, about 500 illegal oil pipelines extend to the Turkish side of the Orontes ("Asi" in Arabic) River. Diesel fuel is pumped from tankers on the Syrian side into private tanks via simple "pump" and "stop" commands over cell phones. These tanks feed pipelines that are buried deep under agricultural fields, crisscross under streets, to reach the back yards of private houses in villages scattered across Hatay Province. Customers arrive at the houses and purchase the oil at a discount price. Around 80-90% of Hacıpasa's villagers are somehow involved in the fuel smuggling operation (Lister, 2014).

External oil sales are not the only method in which ISIS has funded itself, since the establishment of a proto-state ISIS has supplied oil to the territories in which it controls as well. The issue arises in that the oil wells and fields only produce crude oil, however ISIS has

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developed sophisticated methods in which to provide gasoline to its' own 'citizens' (Levitt, 2014). The oil is shipped to nearby states or internal illegitimate refineries and then trafficked back into Iraq or Syria (Crane, 2015). ISIS has "gradually redirected its focus internally, fueling its vehicles and establishing dependence between civilians and its capacity to provide them oil at nearly half the free market price per barrel. This is due to the increasing costs of exporting stolen crude throughout the region" (Levitt, 2014).

Although oil plays a key role in ISIS's financial revenue other criminal activities also produce generous revenue for the organization. These criminal activities can be smaller in scale such as "steal[ing] livestock, sell[ing] foreign fighter passports, tax[ing] minorities and farmers and truckers, run[ing] a sophisticated extortion racket, kidnap[ing] civilians for ransom payments, and much more" (Levitt, 2014). ISIS has also taken over banks in cities such as Mosul and acquired funds by forcing bank patrons to pay a 10% tax on all withdrawals (Levitt, 2014). For Non-Sunni or non-Muslim patrons, the control of the banking system meant they were not allowed to access their funds and were most likely seized (Levitt, 2014). ISIS has also begun to impose taxes on business owners and established a toll-system for roads (Levitt, 2014). By establishing a "Bayt al-Mal" or a form of a treasury department, ISIS has seized property and materials from Christians, Shiites, government employees and other uncooperative groups (Levitt, 2014). ISIS has also established a form of import tax on goods being delivered to their occupied territories (Levitt, 2014). These taxes coupled with kidnap-for-ransom revenues, estimated \$20 million annually, antique artifact sales, human-trafficking and slavery rings continue to provide ISIS with funds in which to support its campaign. It is estimated that in the year 2015, ISIS made a total of \$1.2 billion designating it as the wealthiest terror organization to date (Crane, 2015).

One of the key strengths which has been widely publicized within the internal community has been their recruiting campaign. It is not only assisted in the recruitment of local Sunni Iraqis and Syrians but also created an international recruiting system that has inspired foreign fighters to come assist with their cause. Recruiting foreign fighters is not a new concept or method however, the manner in which they recruited these foreign fighters has caught the international community off guard. The international community has been stunned at the amount of Western foreign fighters migrating to these war-torn areas and join ISIS's forces. ISIS has tapped into media propaganda techniques and uses strategies that directly apply to the Western youth's perspective of fighting 'gloriously for the true form of Islam' (Gates & Podder, 2015). Two major forms of media have truly garnered support from Western youths, the use of social media and ISIS's video sight *Al Hayat* (Gates & Podder, 2015). Their media recruitment campaign is more sophisticated than any other well-known terror group. Their media recruitment team actually provides videos that appeal towards various audiences:

Its media arm *Al Hayat* has been releasing videos showing different sides of the militant group. On the one hand is its face of cold terror such as of children holding decapitated heads; on the other are more Western friendly videos of IS militants posing with Nutella jars to demonstrate familiarity with Western lifestyles. More significant...is that the majority of propaganda products are about IS providing governance, justice, and new construction. The theme of legitimacy is significant (Gates & Podder, 2015).

These videos do not only use familiarities, the perception of justice and structure to capture and motivate Western youth to join their cause, but the use of technology through sophisticated

videos and media. This media capitalizes on the linguistic capabilities of ISIS's media teams, music appealing toward Western youth et cetera (Gates & Podder, 2015). ISIS's recruitment successes will likely be used by different and future terror and insurgent organizations.

Another strength ISIS has capitalized upon is their two-part strategy, which is divided into their military campaign and their political strategy. As discussed above, ISIS's strategic strategy has been to establish military dominance over areas and then declare a caliphate. ISIS has established military dominance through a hybrid warfare strategy (McFate, 2015). This strategy includes using traditional terror tactics, guerilla warfare and conventional styles of fighting. Their fighters are extremely adaptable, resilient and organized. They operate more as an established army than the traditional loose network of terror or insurgent organizations (Lewis, 2014). Their fighters go under extensive training prior to joining forces 'on the front lines,' which gives the fighters a sense of pride and belonging. These fighters all receive initial training in small arms weapons systems and some will go on to receive training in larger weapons systems (Lister, 2014). In general, ISIS has "long implemented policies aimed at professionalizing its members" (Lister, 2014). ISIS has also integrated experienced Iraqi and Syrian former military personnel into their ranks, providing essential top-down leadership, knowledge, and expertise (Lewis, 2014). These experienced military personnel bring a sophisticated and tactically sound approach. Using conventional strategies ISIS was able to seize terrain and acquire much needed weapons systems and resources such as "tanks, armored personnel carriers, field artillery, self-propelled howitzers, and multiple-rocket launchers, as well as an assortment of anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs), anti-aircraft guns, and a small number of man-portable air-defense systems" (Lister, 2014). In utilizing guerilla or insurgent-like tactics, ISIS has been able to "degrade, disrupt, and demonstrate [enemy forces]; to infiltrate, isolate, and mobilize populations" (McFate, 2015). Terror tactics are mainly used in order to create a mood of fear amongst local nationals and opposing security forces (McFate, 2015). Another strength in their military strategy is that ISIS is able to identify and adjust its fight style based upon the enemy it is engaging. It has been able to develop separate military strategies for the different and complex fighting environments of Iraq and Syria (Lister, 2014). ISIS has most famously been known for creating power vacuums and filling them, while imposing brutal treatment of captors and local nationals.

After ISIS has established military dominance over an area they then revert to their political strategy of creating proto-state or in their perspective a caliphate. ISIS carried out a strategy that has exploited the weak central governments of Iraq and Syria and been able to establish 'governance' that appeals to or is forced on the local nationals. In short, they have been able to cater to the needs of the people. It has been able to successfully govern cities such as Mosul and Tikrit in Iraq and Raqqa, al-Bab and Manbij in Syria (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). After establishing military dominance and absolute control over an urban or rural area, ISIS beings to offer the local nationals general public services to include rule of law through ISIS employed police forces, provides effective judicial systems, installs ISIS inspired educational programs, and other public services typical of a legitimate government (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). They also provide humanitarian services, religious guidance, employment, administrative services et cetera (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). In acting as a legitimate government, no matter how strict, they gain credibility amongst the local and international communities as an 'official caliphate'.

Recognizing Strategic Vulnerabilities

There is no doubt that ISIS has risen into the world's most radical and effective terrorist organization at an incredibly rapid pace by exploiting and refining its' strengths however, like any organization ISIS also has vulnerabilities and even strengths that can be exploited into vulnerabilities. Some of these vulnerabilities include ISIS's various military and political susceptibilities. The military and political sectors of ISIS are considered its two centers of gravity (Weber, 2015).

Military and political vulnerabilities often intertwine due to their dependent nature. One vulnerability of ISIS is that it must be able to maintain its military or tactical momentum (Lister, 2014). It is critical that they maintain their credibility, offensive power and control over established territories (Lister, 2014). This is important for their sustainability of a fighting force and recruitment. The continuation of creating and taking advantage of power vacuums will assist ISIS in maintaining this momentum. ISIS also faces regular setbacks throughout their territories with airstrikes from the United States and other coalition partners, which has degraded their personnel, resources, leadership, lines of communication (LoCs) and freedom of movement (FoM). These air strikes led to the depletion of 6,000 fighters and leadership personnel from August 2014 to January 2015. It has also had to combat ground forces such as the Kurdish Peshmerga, Syrian regime forces, Syrian democratic forces, Iraqi security forces (ISF) and other tribal or ethnic factions within the region (McFate, 2015). ISIS's territory consists of areas in northern Iraq and Syria, which has caused it to overstretch its forces (Eisenstadt, 2014). Although they periodically are able to replenish forces with foreign fighters and other allied jihadist groups, this remains a long-term issue (Eisenstadt, 2014).

ISIS is also balancing feeble alliances with groups outside of their organization and foreign fighters from around the globe. ISIS must maintain alliances with:

Tribal militias, Iraqi insurgent groups that do not share its worldview or interests such as the neo-Baathist Jaish al-Tariqa al-Naqsh- bandia (JRTN), Syrian jihadist groups that only recently pledged fealty to it, and foreign fighters who flocked to fight with ISIS when it was a rising force. (Eisenstadt, 2014, p. 5)

This in itself is a significant challenge. One of the main struggles state leaders have within the Middle East is bridging the gap between the various tribal and ethnic groups within the region. ISIS has been fairly successful in 'uniting' certain tribal and ethnic groups either through coercion or voluntarily (Eisenstadt, 2014). However, historically these types of loose alliances are short lived. Foreign fighters pose a non-traditional challenge to cohesion because some of these foreign fighters are migrating from the developed Western states and are used to a different way of life, such as more sophisticated commodities and life-styles. These individuals also bring about new ideas and ways of thought that could potentially be a threat to the ISIS military sector. Dissention among ranks and desertion could pose potential issues.

ISIS's logistics and sustainment strategy is also a vulnerability. Although the alternative supply routes (ASR) ISIS could utilize are vast (over 100,000 miles of unpaved local roads) denying the use of quick efficient paved highways and other main supply routes (MSR) could have implications on their logistics capabilities and proficiency (Wallace & Keller, 2015). ASRs are often unpredictable and are often severely affected by the weather conditions (Wallace & Keller, 2015). Also heavy fighting vehicles are often unsuitable for ASRs, this means providing

up-armored vehicles as a protection detail for lightweight logistical vehicles will be difficult. It is likely ISIS also relies on hired local nationals to assist in their logistical needs, by maintaining control over MSRs, groups fighting ISIS will be likely be able to drive up the cost and effect the reliability of these hired local nationals. The chances of severely damaging or destroying ISIS's logistical methods are extremely slim however, by driving up cost and creating doubt and frustration in dependability among its' forces is the goal.

ISIS also has many enemies, not only does it face ISIS opposition forces and militias in Iraq and Syria, but it has to plan for and develop effective methods for dealing with airstrikes and other disruptive tactics from Russia, the United States and other coalition forces (McFate, 2015). By giving local opposition groups the appropriate training and resources, it is likely they will create instability through disruption (McFate, 2015). If local national groups within Syria and Iraq feel as if they do not have the capabilities to challenge ISIS militarily, it is likely they will surrender to ISIS's rule over their territory.

The second center of gravity, the political sector of ISIS, also presents weaknesses that can be exploited upon by the international community. One of their major strengths is also one of their most exploitable vulnerabilities. The establishment of their so-called caliphate has presented the international community with various opportunities. ISIS has proclaimed that they have the "duty to govern both the religious and political lives of Muslims," to do this they must have the proper resources and personnel (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). If the international community were to work in order to delegitimize their caliphate this could lead to the local nationals in Syria and Iraq to reject the notion that ISIS as the 'right' to have full control over their religious and political matters. This is accomplished by recognizing that with ISIS's establishment of a caliphate they have essentially claimed a proto-state, in doing so ISIS is no longer just a terror organization. They are responsible for the structural and financial responsibilities of 'statehood.' ISIS now has to be able to support the administrative duties of a governing body and the service oriented responsibilities (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). Governing bodies are responsible for administrative duties to include "managing religious outreach and enforcement, courts and punishments, educational programming, and public relations" (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). Service-oriented governance includes police forces, providing water and electricity, humanitarian aid, et cetera. (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). Both administrative and service oriented governance requires skilled personnel and financial resources. In ISIS's pursuit of establishing a social structure they often times dispose of any type of resistance, which often times includes ridding the conquered societies of individuals with such skills (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). For example, in Syria:

There are indications that lack of technical capability may be creating damaging and unanticipated consequences. ISIS's use of the dam to ensure electricity in its areas of control has caused water levels in the adjacent Lake Assad to drop precipitously, threatening drinking water supplies for areas of Aleppo and Raqqa provinces (C Caris & Reynolds, 2014).

A lack of drinking water is a serious concern for a group that claims to be able to operate as a proto-state and have political rights over an area stretching over 300 miles (Caris & Reynolds, 2014). These types of services and other institutions that are being dismantled and then operated by inexperienced personnel is an example of an apparent vulnerability that should be exploited.

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The financial responsibility of operating not only an army-like fighting force but a proto-state is another vulnerability. These financial responsibilities range from funding institutions, paying salaries of fighters and ‘government’ employees, to providing food and other types of essential resources (Levitt, 2014). As these costs continue to accumulate ISIS cannot afford to have its revenue streams depleted, causing government services to be reduced, which in turn would reduce its legitimacy. Airstrikes conducted by coalition forces have already begun to diminish criminal activities that generate revenue (Levitt, 2014). If coalition forces were able to reduce forms of revenue by increasing the difficulty and denying forms of oil and criminal revenue it could decrease their military and political capabilities. This could reduce their acceptability and support amongst local nationals, foreign fighters, and other insurgent and tribal groups.

Policy Recommendations

The international community has a challenging task to confront. Ignoring the organization has allowed it to become the powerful entity it is today, causing mass genocide and millions of refugees migrating to surrounding states and Europe. It is critical for the international community to consider that diminishing and defeating ISIS needs to be a long-term strategy. In deciding upon a strategy the United States and coalition forces should recognize that a long-term strategy will be required and be dedicated to the concept that physical force and state building could last for decades. Although U.S. leadership may want to distance themselves from the Middle East, this type of long term strategy is paramount for success.

A main aspect of a strategic strategy to defeat ISIS is that the international community should stop thinking of ISIS as just a terror or insurgent organization and develop a strategy that would defeat the army and proto-state that ISIS has created (Lewis, 2014). This strategy should include aspects of counter-terrorism and counter-insurgent tactics however; the main focus should be centered on its sophisticated military organization and its ability to produce political factions.

Focusing on delegitimizing the organization will assist in destroying it from the inside out, all while being prepared to replace it with a legitimate central and local government. Converging three main targets will assist in this endeavor. By crippling ISIS’s military momentum and capabilities that are paramount for its overall success will likely result in “internal uprisings and external attacks” (Eisenstadt, 2014). Tackling ISIS’s financial and economic revenue will also assist in their demise. If their main revenue streams are disrupted the chances of civil discontent and disgruntled fighters becomes more prevalent (Eisenstadt, 2014).

The international community in conjunction with the Middle Eastern societies must assist in altering the mindset of the Iraqi and Syrian societies. The people of Iraq and Syria must begin to recognize that a caliphate under ISIS is not a legitimate governing authority and that their significance will not last (Eisenstadt, 2014). The international community can learn from their time spent fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, they can utilize the same strategy the Taliban uses on the people of Afghanistan. The Taliban has a saying, ‘they [Coalition forces] have the watch but we [the Taliban] have the time,’ meaning that the Coalition forces may be in country now assisting the Kabul government however, they will eventually leave and the Afghan people will then have to answer to the Taliban. This is the same strategic message that the international community needs to assert into the ISIS narrative, this could ultimately “induce allies to defect or turn on the group; deter prospective foreign fighters from joining it; and embolden subject

populations to rise up against its overstretched forces” (Eisenstadt, 2014). The psychological strategy will have to be different for Syria and Iraq due to the differing environments that brought along the rise and acceptance of ISIS.

The continuation of targeting ISIS’s personnel in key leadership positions is a critical component to the overall strategy. By targeting key leadership particularly ones with specialized skillsets will assist in increasing vulnerabilities that can be exploited by local ground forces and international actors (Lister, 2014). The overall strategy should attempt to focus on making this a fight fought by the Middle Eastern Muslim community with the international community contributing to the intelligence, surveillance, air support, and training and equipment of local forces (Lister, 2014). This is important because the active presence of Western forces will provide propaganda and recruitment tools for the ISIS cause, ultimately empowering their call to defend the ‘caliphate’.

Countering the media propaganda and recruitment tools is also essential to diminishing ISIS’s overall effectiveness. A great source of their strength comes from the ability to recruit foreign fighters, which enables them to replenish their forces and provide specialized skillsets. Exploiting this strength could lead to dramatic results. Alberto Fernandez (2015) of the Middle East Media Research Institute offers a four-pronged solution to the issue:

We need to view the problem of the Islamic State as a political problem with a media dimension, not the other way around. All too often we think that these are public relations or messaging issues.... It takes a network to fight a network. Despite some steps to ramp up the volume of our counter-propaganda efforts, we still lack the volume necessary to be able to compete in this space... There is a wealth of credible voices of people who have firsthand knowledge of ISIS violence that have not been fully tapped... On content, there is too much emphasis on the search for the magic bullet. What counter-propagandists really need is multifaceted content similar to the multifaceted content that the Islamic State produces. This could include sarcasm, fact-based approaches, ideological approaches, and others (Fernandez, 2015).

The international community must be able to tap into the ideological mindset of the people in who are attracted to ISIS’s message (Fernandez, 2015). Also, by exploiting the harsh realities and limited life expectancy of ISIS’s so-called caliphate, the international community may be able to stunt the foreign fighter’s resolve to join the extremist organization.

The Way Forward

All the above strategies will be executed in vain if the international community is unable to maintain stable governments in Iraq and Syria. Charles Lister of the Brookings Doha Center states, “IS feeds on instability and perceptions of victimization, repression, and humiliation. By removing such conditions, IS would soon find itself a fish out of water” (Lister, 2014). The international community must recognize and convince Russia that the Assad regime in Syria is not the answer to a consolidated central authority in Syria and thus divert to a different governing body that will eliminate the ‘resistance vs. the oppressive regime’ mindset that ISIS capitalizes upon (Lister, 2014). Iraq’s continued government corruption, sectarian divide, unequal treatment and misrepresentation of the various ethnic and tribal groups has led to significant instability (Lister, 2014). Garnishing Sunni support within the government and ensuring all ethnic, religious and tribal groups will have equal representation and protected rights will be paramount (Lister, 2014). These strategies present an enormous long-term tasking however if the local communities

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partnered with the support of the international community dedicate the right amount of pressure and resolve ISIS's false claim to establishing a caliphate will begin to crumble.

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