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ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group

Why Counterterrorism Won't Stop the Latest Jihadist Threat

Audrey Kurth Cronin

After 9/11, many within the U.S. national security establishment worried that, following decades of preparation for confronting conventional enemies, Washington was unready for the challenge posed by an unconventional adversary such as al Qaeda. So over the next decade, the United States built an elaborate bureaucratic structure to fight the jihadist organization, adapting its military and its intelligence and law enforcement agencies to the tasks of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency.

Now, however, a different group, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which also calls itself the Islamic State, has supplanted al Qaeda as the jihadist threat of greatest concern. ISIS' ideology, rhetoric, and long-term goals are similar to al Qaeda's, and the two groups were once formally allied. So many observers assume that the current challenge is simply to refocus Washington's now-formidable counterterrorism apparatus on a new target.

But ISIS is not al Qaeda. It is not an outgrowth or a part of the older radical Islamist organization, nor does it represent the next phase in its evolution. Although al Qaeda remains dangerous—especially its affiliates in North Africa and Yemen—ISIS is its successor. ISIS represents the post-al Qaeda jihadist threat.

In a nationally televised speech last September explaining his plan to “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIS, U.S. President Barack Obama

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drew a straight line between the group and al Qaeda and claimed that ISIS is “a terrorist organization, pure and simple.” This was mistaken; ISIS hardly fits that description, and indeed, although it uses terrorism as a tactic, it is not really a terrorist organization at all. Terrorist networks, such as al Qaeda, generally have only dozens or hundreds of members, attack civilians, do not hold territory, and cannot directly confront military forces. ISIS, on the other hand, boasts some 30,000 fighters, holds territory in both Iraq and Syria, maintains extensive military capabilities, controls lines of communication, commands infrastructure, funds itself, and engages in sophisticated military operations. If ISIS is purely and simply anything, it is a pseudo-state led by a conventional army. And that is why the counterterrorism and counter-insurgency strategies that greatly diminished the threat from al Qaeda will not work against ISIS.

Washington has been slow to adapt its policies in Iraq and Syria to the true nature of the threat from ISIS. In Syria, U.S. counterterrorism has mostly prioritized the bombing of al Qaeda affiliates, which has given an edge to ISIS and has also provided the Assad regime with the opportunity to crush U.S.-allied moderate Syrian rebels. In Iraq, Washington continues to rely on a form of counterinsurgency, depending on the central government in Baghdad to regain its lost legitimacy, unite the country, and build indigenous forces to defeat ISIS. These approaches were developed to meet a different threat, and they have been overtaken by events. What’s needed now is a strategy of “offensive containment”: a combination of limited military tactics and a broad diplomatic strategy to halt ISIS’ expansion, isolate the group, and degrade its capabilities.

DIFFERENT STROKES

The differences between al Qaeda and ISIS are partly rooted in their histories. Al Qaeda came into being in the aftermath of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Its leaders’ worldviews and strategic thinking were shaped by the ten-year war against Soviet occupation, when thousands of Muslim militants, including Osama bin Laden, converged on the country. As the organization coalesced, it took the form of a global network focused on carrying out spectacular attacks against Western or Western-allied targets, with the goal of rallying Muslims to join a global confrontation with secular powers near and far.

ISIS came into being thanks to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. In its earliest incarnation, it was just one of a number of Sunni extremist

groups fighting U.S. forces and attacking Shiite civilians in an attempt to foment a sectarian civil war. At that time, it was called al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), and its leader, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, had pledged allegiance to bin Laden. Zarqawi was killed by a U.S. air strike in 2006, and soon after, AQI was nearly wiped out when Sunni tribes decided to partner with the Americans to confront the jihadists. But the defeat was temporary; AQI renewed itself inside U.S.-run prisons in Iraq, where insurgents and terrorist operatives connected and formed networks—and where the group's current chief and self-proclaimed caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, first distinguished himself as a leader.

In 2011, as a revolt against the Assad regime in Syria expanded into a full-blown civil war, the group took advantage of the chaos, seizing territory in Syria's northeast, establishing a base of operations, and rebranding itself as ISIS. In Iraq, the group continued to capitalize on the weakness of the central state and to exploit the country's sectarian strife, which intensified after U.S. combat forces withdrew. With the Americans gone, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki pursued a hard-line pro-Shiite agenda, further alienating Sunni Arabs throughout the country. ISIS now counts among its members Iraqi Sunni tribal leaders, former anti-U.S. insurgents, and even secular former Iraqi military officers who seek to regain the power and security they enjoyed during the Saddam Hussein era.

The strategies that greatly diminished the threat from al Qaeda will not work against ISIS.

The group's territorial conquest in Iraq came as a shock. When ISIS captured Fallujah and Ramadi in January 2014, most analysts predicted that the U.S.-trained Iraqi security forces would contain the threat. But in June, amid mass desertions from the Iraqi army, ISIS moved toward Baghdad, capturing Mosul, Tikrit, al-Qaim, and numerous other Iraqi towns. By the end of the month, ISIS had renamed itself the Islamic State and had proclaimed the territory under its control to be a new caliphate. Meanwhile, according to U.S. intelligence estimates, some 15,000 foreign fighters from 80 countries flocked to the region to join ISIS, at the rate of around 1,000 per month. Although most of these recruits came from Muslim-majority countries, such as Tunisia and Saudi Arabia, some also hailed from Australia, China, Russia, and western European countries. ISIS has even managed to attract some

American teenagers, boys and girls alike, from ordinary middle-class homes in Denver, Minneapolis, and the suburbs of Chicago.

As ISIS has grown, its goals and intentions have become clearer. Al Qaeda conceived of itself as the vanguard of a global insurgency mobilizing Muslim communities against secular rule. ISIS, in contrast, seeks to control territory and create a “pure” Sunni Islamist state governed by a brutal interpretation of sharia; to immediately obliterate the political borders of the Middle East that were created by Western powers in the twentieth century; and to position itself as the sole political, religious, and military authority over all of the world’s Muslims.

NOT THE USUAL SUSPECTS

Since ISIS’ origins and goals differ markedly from al Qaeda’s, the two groups operate in completely different ways. That is why a U.S. counterterrorism strategy custom-made to fight al Qaeda does not fit the struggle against ISIS.

In the post-9/11 era, the United States has built up a trillion-dollar infrastructure of intelligence, law enforcement, and military operations aimed at al Qaeda and its affiliates. According to a 2010 investigation by *The Washington Post*, some 263 U.S. government organizations were created or reorganized in response to the 9/11 attacks, including the Department of Homeland Security, the National Counterterrorism Center, and the Transportation Security Administration. Each year, U.S. intelligence agencies produce some 50,000 reports on terrorism. Fifty-one U.S. federal organizations and military commands track the flow of money to and from terrorist networks. This structure has helped make terrorist attacks on U.S. soil exceedingly rare. In that sense, the system has worked. But it is not well suited for dealing with ISIS, which presents a different sort of challenge.

Consider first the tremendous U.S. military and intelligence campaign to capture or kill al Qaeda’s core leadership through drone strikes and Special Forces raids. Some 75 percent of the leaders of the core al Qaeda group have been killed by raids and armed drones, a technology well suited to the task of going after targets hiding in rural areas, where the risk of accidentally killing civilians is lower.

Such tactics, however, don’t hold much promise for combating ISIS. The group’s fighters and leaders cluster in urban areas, where they are well integrated into civilian populations and usually surrounded by buildings, making drone strikes and raids much harder to carry out. And

simply killing ISIS' leaders would not cripple the organization. They govern a functioning pseudo-state with a complex administrative structure. At the top of the military command is the emirate, which consists of Baghdadi and two deputies, both of whom formerly served as generals in the Saddam-era Iraqi army: Abu Ali al-Anbari, who controls ISIS' operations in Syria, and Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, who controls operations in Iraq. ISIS' civilian bureaucracy is supervised by 12 administrators who govern territories in Iraq and Syria, overseeing councils that handle matters such as finances, media, and religious affairs. Although it is hardly the model government depicted in ISIS' propaganda videos, this pseudo-state would carry on quite ably without Baghdadi or his closest lieutenants.

ISIS also poses a daunting challenge to traditional U.S. counterterrorism tactics that take aim at jihadist financing, propaganda, and recruitment. Cutting off al Qaeda's funding has been one of U.S. counterterrorism's most impressive success stories. Soon after the 9/11 attacks, the FBI and the CIA began to coordinate closely on financial intelligence, and they were soon joined by the Department of Defense. FBI agents embedded with U.S. military units during the 2003 invasion of Iraq and debriefed suspected terrorists detained at the U.S. facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. In 2004, the U.S. Treasury Department established the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, which has cut deeply into al Qaeda's ability to profit from money laundering and receive funds under the cover of charitable giving.

A global network for countering terrorist financing has also emerged, backed by the UN, the EU, and hundreds of cooperating governments. The result has been a serious squeeze on al Qaeda's financing; by 2011, the Treasury Department reported that al Qaeda was "struggling to secure steady financing to plan and execute terrorist attacks."

But such tools contribute little to the fight against ISIS, because ISIS does not need outside funding. Holding territory has allowed the group to build a self-sustaining financial model unthinkable for most terrorist groups. Beginning in 2012, ISIS gradually took over key oil assets in eastern Syria; it now controls an estimated 60 percent of the country's oil production capacity. Meanwhile, during its push into Iraq last summer, ISIS also seized seven oil-producing operations in that country. The group manages to sell some of this oil on the black market in Iraq and Syria—including, according to some reports, to the Assad regime itself.

ISIS' sales pitch to recruits is conquest in all its forms, including the sexual kind.

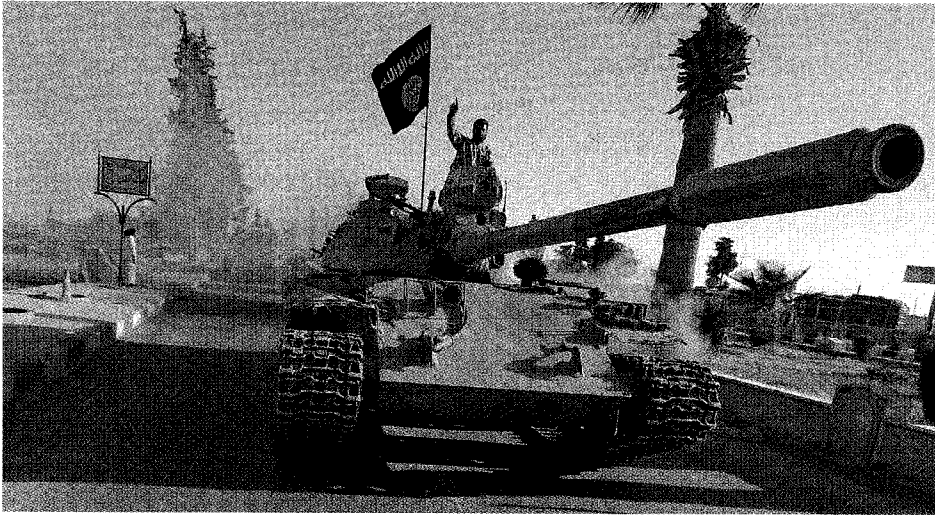
ISIS also smuggles oil out of Iraq and Syria into Jordan and Turkey, where it finds plenty of buyers happy to pay below-market prices for illicit crude. All told, ISIS' revenue from oil is estimated to be between \$1 million and \$3 million per day.

And oil is only one element in the group's financial portfolio. Last June, when ISIS seized control of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, it looted the provincial central bank and other smaller banks and plundered antiquities to sell on the black market. It steals jewelry, cars, machinery, and livestock from conquered residents. The group also controls major transportation arteries in western Iraq, allowing it to tax the movement of goods and charge tolls. It even earns revenue from cotton and wheat grown in Raqqa, the breadbasket of Syria.

Of course, like terrorist groups, ISIS also takes hostages, demanding tens of millions of dollars in ransom payments. But more important to the group's finances is a wide-ranging extortion racket that targets owners and producers in ISIS territory, taxing everything from small family farms to large enterprises such as cell-phone service providers, water delivery companies, and electric utilities. The enterprise is so complex that the U.S. Treasury has declined to estimate ISIS' total assets and revenues, but ISIS is clearly a highly diversified enterprise whose wealth dwarfs that of any terrorist organization. And there is little evidence that Washington has succeeded in reducing the group's coffers.

SEX AND THE SINGLE JIHADIST

Another aspect of U.S. counterterrorism that has worked well against al Qaeda is the effort to delegitimize the group by publicizing its targeting errors and violent excesses—or by helping U.S. allies do so. Al Qaeda's attacks frequently kill Muslims, and the group's leaders are highly sensitive to the risk this poses to their image as the vanguard of a mass Muslim movement. Attacks in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey in 2003; Spain in 2004; and Jordan and the United Kingdom in 2005 all resulted in Muslim casualties that outraged members of Islamic communities everywhere and reduced support for al Qaeda across the Muslim world. The group has steadily lost popular support since around 2007; today, al Qaeda is widely reviled in the Muslim world. The Pew Research Center surveyed nearly 9,000 Muslims in 11 countries in 2013 and found a high median level of disapproval of al Qaeda: 57 percent. In many countries, the number was far higher: 96 percent of Muslims polled in Lebanon,



On a roll: an ISIS fighter in Raqqa, Syria, June 2014

81 percent in Jordan, 73 percent in Turkey, and 69 percent in Egypt held an unfavorable view of al Qaeda.

ISIS, however, seems impervious to the risk of a backlash. In proclaiming himself the caliph, Baghdadi made a bold (if absurd) claim to religious authority. But ISIS' core message is about raw power and revenge, not legitimacy. Its brutality—videotaped beheadings, mass executions—is designed to intimidate foes and suppress dissent. Revulsion among Muslims at such cruelty might eventually undermine ISIS. But for the time being, Washington's focus on ISIS' savagery only helps the group augment its aura of strength.

For similar reasons, it has proved difficult for the United States and its partners to combat the recruitment efforts that have attracted so many young Muslims to ISIS' ranks. The core al Qaeda group attracted followers with religious arguments and a pseudo-scholarly message of altruism for the sake of the *ummah*, the global Muslim community. Bin Laden and his longtime second-in-command and successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, carefully constructed an image of religious legitimacy and piety. In their propaganda videos, the men appeared as ascetic warriors, sitting on the ground in caves, studying in libraries, or taking refuge in remote camps. Although some of al Qaeda's affiliates have better recruiting pitches, the core group cast the establishment of a caliphate as a long-term, almost utopian goal: educating and mobilizing the *ummah* came first. In al Qaeda, there is no place for alcohol or women. In this sense, al Qaeda's image is deeply unsexy; indeed, for the young al Qaeda recruit, sex itself comes only after marriage—or martyrdom.

Even for the angriest young Muslim man, this might be a bit of a hard sell. Al Qaeda's leaders' attempts to depict themselves as moral—even moralistic—figures have limited their appeal. Successful deradicalization programs in places such as Indonesia and Singapore have zeroed in on the mismatch between what al Qaeda offers and what most young people are really interested in, encouraging militants to reintegrate into society, where their more prosaic hopes and desires might be fulfilled more readily.

ISIS, in contrast, offers a very different message for young men, and sometimes women. The group attracts followers yearning for not only religious righteousness but also adventure, personal power, and a sense of self and community. And, of course, some people just want to kill—and ISIS welcomes them, too. The group's brutal violence attracts attention, demonstrates dominance, and draws people to the action.

ISIS operates in urban settings and offers recruits immediate opportunities to fight. It advertises by distributing exhilarating podcasts produced by individual fighters on the frontlines. The group also procures sexual partners for its male recruits; some of these women volunteer for this role, but most of them are coerced or even enslaved. The group barely bothers to justify this behavior in religious terms; its sales pitch is conquest in all its forms, including the sexual kind. And it has already established a self-styled caliphate, with Baghdadi as the caliph, thus making present (if only in a limited way, for now) what al Qaeda generally held out as something more akin to a utopian future.

In short, ISIS offers short-term, primitive gratification. It does not radicalize people in ways that can be countered by appeals to logic. Teenagers are attracted to the group without even understanding what it is, and older fighters just want to be associated with ISIS' success. Compared with fighting al Qaeda's relatively austere message, Washington has found it much harder to counter ISIS' more visceral appeal, perhaps for a very simple reason: a desire for power, agency, and instant results also pervades American culture.

2015 ≠ 2006

Counterterrorism wasn't the only element of national security practice that Washington rediscovered and reinvigorated after 9/11; counterinsurgency also enjoyed a renaissance. As chaos erupted in Iraq in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion and occupation of 2003, the U.S. military grudgingly starting thinking about counterinsurgency, a

subject that had fallen out of favor in the national security establishment after the Vietnam War. The most successful application of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine was the 2007 “surge” in Iraq, overseen by General David Petraeus. In 2006, as violence peaked in Sunni-dominated Anbar Province, U.S. officials concluded that the United States was losing the war. In response, President George W. Bush decided to send an additional 20,000 U.S. troops to Iraq. General John Allen, then serving as deputy commander of the multinational forces in Anbar, cultivated relationships with local Sunni tribes and nurtured the so-called Sunni Awakening, in which some 40 Sunni tribes or subtribes essentially switched sides and decided to fight with the newly augmented U.S. forces against AQI. By the summer of 2008, the number of insurgent attacks had fallen by more than 80 percent.

Looking at the extent of ISIS’ recent gains in Sunni areas of Iraq, which have undone much of the progress made in the surge, some have argued that Washington should respond with a second application of the Iraq war’s counterinsurgency strategy. And the White House seems at least partly persuaded by this line of thinking: last year, Obama asked Allen to act as a special envoy for building an anti-ISIS coalition in the region. There is a certain logic to this approach, since ISIS draws support from many of the same insurgent groups that the surge and the Sunni Awakening neutralized—groups that have reemerged as threats thanks to the vacuum created by the withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2011 and Maliki’s sectarian rule in Baghdad.

But vast differences exist between the situation today and the one that Washington faced in 2006, and the logic of U.S. counterinsurgency does not suit the struggle against ISIS. The United States cannot win the hearts and minds of Iraq’s Sunni Arabs, because the Maliki government has already lost them. The Shiite-dominated Iraqi government has so badly undercut its own political legitimacy that it might be impossible to restore it. Moreover, the United States no longer occupies Iraq. Washington can send in more troops, but it cannot lend legitimacy to a government it no longer controls. ISIS is less an insurgent group fighting against an established government than one party in a conventional civil war between a breakaway territory and a weak central state.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER?

The United States has relied on counterinsurgency strategy not only to reverse Iraq’s slide into state failure but also to serve as a model for

how to combat the wider jihadist movement. Al Qaeda expanded by persuading Muslim militant groups all over the world to turn their more narrowly targeted nationalist campaigns into nodes in al Qaeda's global jihad—and, sometimes, to convert themselves into al Qaeda affiliates. But there was little commonality in the visions pursued by Chechen, Filipino, Indonesian, Kashmiri, Palestinian, and Uighur militants, all of whom bin Laden tried to draw into al Qaeda's tent, and al Qaeda often had trouble fully reconciling its own goals with the interests of its far-flung affiliates.

That created a vulnerability, and the United States and its allies sought to exploit it. Governments in Indonesia and the Philippines won dramatic victories against al Qaeda affiliates in their countries by combining counterterrorism operations with relationship building in local communities, instituting deradicalization programs, providing religious training in prisons, using rehabilitated former terrorist operatives as government spokespeople, and sometimes negotiating over local grievances.

Some observers have called for Washington to apply the same strategy to ISIS by attempting to expose the fault lines between the group's secular former Iraqi army officers, Sunni tribal leaders, and Sunni resistance fighters, on the one hand, and its veteran jihadists, on the other. But it's too late for that approach to work. ISIS is now led by well-trained, capable former Iraqi military leaders who know U.S. techniques and habits because Washington helped train them. And after routing Iraqi army units and taking their U.S.-supplied equipment, ISIS is now armed with American tanks, artillery, armored Humvees, and mine-resistant vehicles.

Perhaps ISIS' harsh religious fanaticism will eventually prove too much for their secular former Baathist allies. But for now, the Saddam-era officers are far from reluctant warriors for ISIS: rather, they are leading the charge. In their hands, ISIS has developed a sophisticated light-infantry army, brandishing American weapons.

Of course, this opens up a third possible approach to ISIS, besides counterterrorism and counterinsurgency: a full-on conventional war against the group, waged with the goal of completely destroying it. Such a war would be folly. After experiencing more than a decade of continuous war, the American public simply would not support the long-term occupation and intense fighting that would be required to obliterate ISIS. The pursuit of a full-fledged military campaign would exhaust U.S. resources and offer little hope of obtaining the objective. Wars pursued at odds with political reality cannot be won.

CONTAINING THE THREAT

The sobering fact is that the United States has no good military options in its fight against ISIS. Neither counterterrorism, nor counterinsurgency, nor conventional warfare is likely to afford Washington a clear-cut victory against the group. For the time being, at least, the policy that best matches ends and means and that has the best chance of securing U.S. interests is one of offensive containment: combining a limited military campaign with a major diplomatic and economic effort to weaken ISIS and align the interests of the many countries that are threatened by the group's advance.

ISIS is not merely an American problem. The wars in Iraq and Syria involve not only regional players but also major global actors, such as Russia, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states. Washington must stop behaving as if it can fix the region's problems with military force and instead resurrect its role as a diplomatic superpower.

Of course, U.S. military force would be an important part of an offensive containment policy. Air strikes can pin ISIS down, and cutting off its supply of technology, weapons, and ammunition by choking off smuggling routes would further weaken the group. Meanwhile, the United States should continue to advise and support the Iraqi military, assist regional forces such as the Kurdish Pesh Merga, and provide humanitarian assistance to civilians fleeing ISIS' territory. Washington should also expand its assistance to neighboring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, which are struggling to contend with the massive flow of refugees from Syria. But putting more U.S. troops on the ground would be counterproductive, entangling the United States in an unwinnable war that could go on for decades. The United States cannot rebuild the Iraqi state or determine the outcome of the Syrian civil war. Frustrating as it might be to some, when it comes to military action, Washington should stick to a realistic course that recognizes the limitations of U.S. military force as a long-term solution.

The Obama administration's recently convened "summit on countering violent extremism"—which brought world leaders to Washington to discuss how to combat radical jihadism—was a valuable exercise. But although it highlighted the existing threat posed by al Qaeda's regional affiliates, it also reinforced the idea that ISIS is primarily a counterterrorism challenge. In fact, ISIS poses a much greater risk: it seeks to challenge the current international order, and, unlike the greatly diminished core al Qaeda organization, it is coming closer to actually

achieving that goal. The United States cannot single-handedly defend the region and the world from an aggressive revisionist theocratic state—nor should it. The major powers must develop a common diplomatic, economic, and military approach to ensure that this pseudo-state is tightly contained and treated as a global pariah. The good news is that no government supports ISIS; the group has managed to make itself an enemy of every state in the region—and, indeed, the world. To exploit that fact, Washington should pursue a more aggressive, top-level diplomatic agenda with major powers and regional players, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Russia, and even China, as well as Iraq's and Syria's neighbors, to design a unified response to ISIS.

That response must go beyond making a mutual commitment to prevent the radicalization and recruitment of would-be jihadists and beyond the regional military coalition that the United States has built. The major powers and regional players must agree to stiffen the international arms embargo currently imposed on ISIS, enact more vigorous sanctions against the group, conduct joint border patrols, provide more aid for displaced persons and refugees, and strengthen UN peacekeeping missions in countries that border Iraq and Syria. Although some of these tools overlap with counterterrorism, they should be put in the service of a strategy for fighting an enemy more akin to a state actor: ISIS is not a nuclear power, but the group represents a threat to international stability equivalent to that posed by North Korea. It should be treated no less seriously.

Given that political posturing over U.S. foreign policy will only intensify as the 2016 U.S. presidential election approaches, the White House would likely face numerous attacks on a containment approach that would satisfy neither the hawkish nor the anti-interventionist camp within the U.S. national security establishment. In the face of such criticism, the United States must stay committed to fighting ISIS over the long term in a manner that matches ends with means, calibrating and improving U.S. efforts to contain the group by moving past outmoded forms of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency while also resisting pressure to cross the threshold into full-fledged war. Over time, the successful containment of ISIS might open up better policy options. But for the foreseeable future, containment is the best policy that the United States can pursue. 🌐