CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE STATE OF TERROR

ISIS traces its lineage back to the founding of al Qaeda in 1988, but the heirs to Abu Musab al Zarqawi have wrought a creation that feels both old and new. It is a millenarian group whose goal is to "return Islam to an imaginary ideal of original purity,"[1] while creating a worldwide caliphate. Like all fundamentalist movements, it is an inherently *modern* movement. While they see themselves as turning back time to practice a truer, purer version of their religion, ISIS is reinterpreting its religion in an "innovative and radical way," to use Karen Armstrong's description of fundamentalism,[2] and exploiting every opening it can find. ISIS aims to cleanse the world of all who disagree with its ideology.

But ideology is not all of its appeal. "Some are flocking to ISIS not because of its ideology, but also because it represents to them a rallying force against establishments that have failed them, or against the west," Marwan Muasher explains.[3]

There have been many millenarian groups like ISIS throughout history, although ISIS trumps most for wealth and violence in the

world today. While its military has had successes in Iraq and Syria, it is quite small compared to the world's real powers. No nation in the world has recognized it as a state.

ISIS flaunts its cruelty, and that literally shameless practice is perhaps its most important innovation. Its public display of barbarism lends a sense of urgency to the challenge it presents and allows it to consume a disproportionate amount of the world's attention.

President Obama has laid out a mission for an international coalition to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS. "We can't erase every trace of evil from the world," Obama said, emphasizing that the effort would "not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil."[4]

The coalition's policy, for now, is limited to air strikes paired with a train-and-equip mission for Iraqi forces and the increasingly ephemeral "moderate Syrian rebels." In our view, the mission described by the president cannot be accomplished with the limitations he has set out. Less than a week after President Obama spoke, General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, hinted that he might feel the need to recommend ground forces.[5]

Even ground forces would likely not be enough to completely destroy ISIS. Absent a military invasion that would somehow—improbably, magically—transform both Iraq and Syria into truly viable, pluralistic states in which Sunnis and Shi'a both feel secure, ISIS would likely remain, at least as a terrorist group, for many years to come.

Beyond the necessity to oversee *political* change in both Iraq and Syria, a tall order indeed, the international impact of ISIS must also be considered, as it inspires oaths of loyalty and acts of violence in nearly every corner of the globe. As with its military might, ISIS's potential to wreak terrorism has been limited until now, although the alignment of regional terror groups such as Jund al Khalifah in Algeria and Ansar Bayt al Maqdis in Egypt raise serious concerns going forward.

The broader problem is that jihadism has become a millenarian movement[6] with mass appeal, in some ways similar to the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and '70s, although its goals and the values it represents are far different.

Today's radicals are expressing their dissatisfaction with the status quo by making war, not love. They are seduced by Thanatos rather than Eros. They "love death as much as you [in the West] love life," in Osama bin Laden's famous and often-paraphrased words. In this dark new world, children are seen to reenact beheadings with their toys, seduced by a familiar drama of the good guys killing the bad guys in order to save the world. Twitter users adopt the black flag by the tens of thousands. And people who barely know anything about Islam or Iraq are inspired to emulate ISIS's brutal beheadings.

ISIS has established itself as a new paradigm, one that is more brutal, more sectarian, and more apocalyptic in its thinking than the groups that preceded it. ISIS is the crack cocaine of violent extremism, all of the elements that make it so alluring and addictive purified into a crystallized form.

ISIS's goals are impossible, ludicrous, but that does not mean it can be easily destroyed. Our policies must look to the possible, which means containing and hopefully eliminating its military threat and choking off its export of ideas.

Circumstances will almost certainly have changed in between the writing of these words and their publication.

But certainly the history of ISIS and al Qaeda before it show that overwhelming military force is not a solution to hybrid organizations that straddle the line between terrorism and insurgency. Our hammer strikes on al Qaeda spread its splinters around the world. Whatever approach we take in Iraq and Syria must be focused on containment and constriction, rather than simply smashing ISIS into ever more virulent bits.

We can speak more authoritatively about efforts to counter ISIS as an extremist group and ideology. Here we have specific sugges-

tions that are likely to remain relevant despite whatever happens on the military front.

ISIS's military successes are formidable. But the international community has dealt with far worse. ISIS does not represent an existential threat to any Western country. Perhaps the most important way to counter ISIS's efforts to terrify us is to govern our reactions, making sure our policies and political responses are proportionate to the threat ISIS represents.

We asked Steven Pinker, who has written extensively on violence in society, to compare the atrocities of ISIS to those of the past. He wrote in an email:

> In terms of the sheer number of victims, they are nowhere near the Nazis (six million Jews alone, to say nothing of the exterminated gypsies, homosexuals, Poles and other Slavs, plus the tens of millions of deaths caused by their invasions and bombings). Mao and Stalin have also been credited with tens of millions of deaths. In the 20th century alone, we also have Pol Pot, Imperial Japan, the Turks in Armenia, the Pakistanis in Bangladesh, and the Indonesians during the Year of Living Dangerously.[7]

None of this minimizes the impact of ISIS. They kill their enemies and minorities who offend them with deliberate and brazen cruelty. They sell women and children into slavery and subject them to abominable sexual abuse. They kill anyone who opposes them and anyone who refuses to accept their bizarre system of belief, which has been rejected as morally wrong by jihadist clerics we once considered the worst of the worst.

Neither its leaders nor its bloodthirsty adherents see the slightest problem in publicizing and celebrating their atrocities. Some of this is calculated, at least at the leadership level, to frighten potential victims and to attract new psychopathic recruits. But this violence is now pervasively ingrained in the society ISIS is trying to build, with

disturbing ramifications for the innocent children growing up in its charnel-house "caliphate."

Our horror and revulsion are appropriate responses to this regime of atrocities, and we can and should do what is in our power to help ISIS's victims, but we should measure our actions to avoid spreading its ideology and influence.

ISIS evokes disproportionate dread. As we have shown, the "availability" of ISIS's crimes, together with its evil, makes us prone to exaggerate the risk, and prone to react rather than strategize.

Political leaders and policy makers are particularly susceptible to ad hoc policy making with little regard to competing interests, in large measure because ISIS is so good at manipulating our perceptions.[8] Decision makers are pressured by a bias toward action, the understandable desire to respond swiftly and visibly to threats. Our political system and security bureaucracies incentivize theatrical action over caution and consideration of unintended consequences and the long term.[9] "Action is consolatory," Joseph Conrad tells us in *Nostromo*. "It is the enemy of thought and the friend of flattering illusions."

Any effort to make the world a better place can have the perverse effect of creating new risks—just as an aspirin can aggravate a stomach ulcer.[10]

We need not look as far back as the 2003 invasion of Iraq for a lesson in perverse effects. The 2011 intervention in Libya provides a more recent example. There were profoundly compelling humanitarian reasons to support the popular rebellion against Moammar Gadhafi. But it is nearly impossible to argue that either Iraqis or Libyans are better off than they were before our interventions. These military actions, which seemed imperative at the time, introduced a new risk, and an explosion of jihadism has engulfed both countries. In both places, ISIS has staked its claim to territories and mounted fighting forces.

The only thing worse than a brutal dictator is no state at all.

The rise of ISIS is, to some extent, the unintended consequence of Western intervention in Iraq. Coalition forces removed a brutal dictator from power, but they also broke the Iraqi state. The West lacked the patience, the will, and the wisdom to build a new, inclusive one. What remained were ruins.

If there is a final nail in the coffin of a full-scale military intervention to defeat ISIS, it is the incongruity of targeting the jihadists while Bashar al Assad remains in power. Assad's regime has tortured thousands of political prisoners to death. He has bombed hospitals and schools. An average of 5,000 Syrian refugees are fleeing every day, totaling more than 3 million registered refugees, most of them in neighboring countries. Jordan is overwhelmed by the refugee burden, and it is clearly incumbent on other nations to shoulder more of the burden. An additional 6.5 million people are displaced inside Syria.[11]

Arguably, the Western-led intervention against ISIS has already aided Assad. With the rebels fully engaged in infighting, Assad's forces have hit the same targets bombed by the coalition.[12] U.S. strikes against Jabhat al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham have resulted in more infighting among rebel factions and further marginalization of the secular groups.[13] As Charles Lister of the Brookings Institution wrote in December 2014 after interviewing dozens of rebel faction leaders:

> For the Syrian opposition, the Assad regime and ISIS are two sides of the same coin, but with Assad being "the head of the snake" and ISIS merely "the tail." The U.S.-led coalition's failure to target the regime is therefore perceived as tantamount to a hostile act against the revolution. Moreover, while surprising to outsiders, the al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra is still to this day perceived by many as an invaluable actor in the fight against Damascus and as such, the strikes on its positions are seen by many as evidence of U.S. interests being contrary to the revolution. Although this perception may be subtly changing, with one Syrian Salafist commander admitting that "Nusra is going down the wrong path," the strike on a headquarters of Syrian group Ahrar al-Sham late on November 5—confirmed to me by multiple Syrian and international sources—consolidated this impression that U.S. interests have diverged from those of Syria's revolution.[14]

Even if Western voters could be convinced to support a full-scale invasion to remove Assad, what would happen in the ensuing vacuum? The cautionary tales of Iraq and Libya loom large. In the words of Lieutenant General Daniel P. Bolger (ret.), who served as a senior commander in Iraq:

> The surge in Iraq did not "win" anything. It bought time. It allowed us to kill some more bad guys and feel better about ourselves. But in the end, shackled to a corrupt, sectarian government in Baghdad and hobbled by our fellow Americans' unwillingness to commit to a fight lasting decades, the surge just forestalled today's stalemate. Like a handful of aspirin gobbled by a fevered patient, the surge cooled the symptoms. But the underlying disease didn't go away. The remnants of Al Qaeda in Iraq and the Sunni insurgents we battled for more than eight years simply re-emerged this year as the Islamic State, also known as ISIS. . . .
>
> We did not understand the enemy, a guerrilla network embedded in a quarrelsome, suspicious civilian population. We didn't understand our own forces, which are built for rapid, decisive conventional operations, not lingering, ill-defined counterinsurgencies. We're made for Desert Storm, not Vietnam. As a general, I got it wrong. . . .
>
> Today we are hearing some, including those in uniform, argue for a robust ground offensive against the Islamic State

> in Iraq. Air attacks aren't enough, we're told. Our Kurdish and Iraqi Army allies are weak and incompetent. Only another surge can win the fight against this dire threat. Really? If insanity is defined as doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results, I think we're there.[15]

General Bolger argues that we would have needed to occupy Iraq for three decades to create a viable state, echoing similar arguments made at the time by both Jim Webb and then Secretary of State Powell.[16] The problem is that if we're not prepared for a thirty-year occupation, we cannot create a viable state in Syria, and even that level of commitment comes with no guarantee of success. And if there is anything we ought to have learned from our mistakes in both Iraq and Libya, a failed state is the worst of all possible outcomes.

On August 14, 2014, Haider al Abadi took over from Nouri al Maliki as prime minister of Iraq. He faces a daunting task in stemming the chaos and healing a society profoundly riven by ethnic and religious strife, a fire that rekindled under Maliki and has been stoked continually since by ISIS.

We wish him well, but we do not—and should not—necessarily expect that the post–World War II boundaries of the Middle East will remain intact. The devolution of powers to the regions, with a limited central government, may be, as Leslie Gelb has long argued, the only policy glue that will prevent the outright breakup of Iraq.[17] Gelb has proposed that Sunni, Kurdish, and Shi'ite regions each be responsible for their own domestic laws and internal security. To some extent, this is a fait accompli for the Kurds.

"The Middle East is clearly in one of those pivotal moments," said General David Petraeus in July. "We're in a period of history where the organizing principles, the lines on the map drawn by British and French diplomats early last century, are being erased."[18]

How can we stop this carnage, without inadvertently assisting ISIS, Assad, or both? If a military operation only serves to create more insurgents than it takes out, it is not a useful operation. If we cannot practically impose a political and military solution on the region, we can at least learn from our past mistakes.

Instead of smashing ISIS in the same way we approached al Qaeda, Clint Watts of the Foreign Policy Research Institute proposes, we should consider "letting them rot," in some ways the modern equivalent of a medieval siege.[19] The rot may already be setting in. Reports in December indicated that ISIS's capitals in Iraq and Syria, Mosul and Raqqa respectively, are suffering under dramatically deteriorated living conditions.[20]

Rather than trying to displace ISIS with an external force, we should consider efforts to cut off its ability to move fighters, propaganda, and money in and out of the regions it controls, weakening its ability to use brute force and extreme violence to keep the local population in check. It would also force ISIS to fail based on its own actions instead of being displaced by outsiders, which would do much over the long run to discredit future efforts at jihadist nation building. Such a strategy would have to be probed for its own pitfalls and weighed against the moral conundrums it presents, especially as it pertains to the human costs that ISIS could impose on the population in the areas it controls. Targeted military action may be able to inhibit ISIS's ability to carry out genocide with impunity, but it will not entirely remove that ability. Our military approach will unavoidably need to evolve along with the situation on the ground.

THE EXTREMIST MIND

Fundamentalists see religious texts as inerrant guides to life. But even for those who see scripture as the literal word of God, the people who read it and interpret it are human and fallible, a concept fundamentalists are often unable to conceptualize as it applies to themselves, although they happily apply it to others.

This is not particular to ISIS or to jihadists; it applies to many

violent fundamentalists across a range of ideologies, whom we have spoken with and studied. Readers bring their prejudices and pain to religious texts.

Salafism, like all fundamentalisms, is a response to the pain of modernity. Karen Armstrong, a former nun, has studied fundamentalism across different religions. She observes:

> Fundamentalist movements in all faiths . . . reveal a deep disappointment and disenchantment with the modern experiment, which has not fulfilled all that it promised. They also express real fear. Every single fundamentalist movement that I have studied is convinced that the secular establishment is determined to wipe religion out.[21]

What seems to be most appealing about violent fundamentalist groups—whatever combination of reasons an individual may cite for joining—is the simplification of life and thought. Good and evil are brought out in stark relief. Life is transformed through action. Martyrdom—the supreme act of heroism and worship—provides the ultimate relief from life's dilemmas, especially for individuals who feel deeply alienated and confused, humiliated, or desperate.

Although ISIS, like many fundamentalist groups, claims to be practicing the religion in its purest, most original form, this represents a longing, not a reality.

Peter Suedfeld, a psychologist and researcher, has studied the role of complexity in conflict, including how it plays into extremist narratives. His work and that of others supports our own observation that violent extremist messaging and narratives are less complex than similar messages from nonviolent movements, stripping narratives down to their bare essentials with little qualification or elaboration. (His research compared al Qaeda and AQAP messaging to that of nonviolent Islamists.)[22]

Integrative complexity, defined by Suedfeld as being able to examine problems from different perspectives and make cognitive connections drawing on those different perspectives, is not the same thing as intelligence. Extremists are sometimes exceptionally intelligent. Rather, it applies to flexibility of thought and the ability to see things from someone else's point of view. Studies have found that integrative complexity and empathy are closely correlated, with empathy being the emotional equivalent of the cognitive process.[23] Research by Jose Liht and Sara Savage of the University of Cambridge suggests that it is possible to promote integrative complexity among people vulnerable to extremist radicalization.[24]

This suggests two possible avenues for countering the appeal of ISIS and groups like it. First, we can attempt to continually reinforce messages that flesh out the nuance and complexity of the situations and conditions that extremists use to recruit, undermining the incorrect thesis that the problems faced by communities vulnerable to radicalization are easily reduced to absolutes.

In practice, this means refusing to characterize our conflict with ISIS in stark, ideological terms, an uphill battle in the current media and political climate, which tends to incentivize simple explanations. It is further complicated when ISIS theatricalizes dreaded risks such as beheadings to evoke a stripped-down primal response. In many ways, *The Management of Savagery* outlines a specific psychological campaign designed to provoke enemies into the same simplistic thinking that dominates jihadist thought—al Naji refers to the process as "polarization," and that is why those who argue that ISIS's public displays of brutality will backfire are wrong (up to a point). The object of ISIS's extreme displays of violence is to polarize viewers into sharply divided camps of good and evil, not to rally the general public around its actions.

The second prescription follows from the first. Our policies must not lend credence and support to ISIS's simplistic and apocalyptic worldview. When ISIS began beheading Westerners on video in September 2014, it did so with the intention of prodding the United

States into an ever-deeper engagement in Iraq, consistent with the blueprint in *The Management of Savagery*. ISIS made its intentions even clearer with the November video announcing the execution of hostage Abdul-Rahman (Peter) Kassig.

"We bury the first crusader in Dabiq, eagerly awaiting the remainder of your armies to arrive," said "Jihadi John," the anonymous executioner, in the conclusion of that video.[25] It was a transparent ploy to goad the West into a military confrontation in Dabiq, in fulfillment of a key apocalyptic prophecy to which ISIS has alluded again and again. If we take the bait, we arm ISIS with evidence that the end of the world—the ultimate moment of simplification—is indeed at hand. Aggressive military action by Shi'a militias, whether Iraqi or Iranian, also contributes to the apocalyptic narrative and plays into ISIS's desire for a simple, Manichean divide between good and evil, actualizing its narrative of an all-consuming battle between true believers and apostates.

One arena where we can fight the battle for nuance, however, is on the messaging front, the beating heart of ISIS's campaign to reduce the world's complexities to fit its black-and-white narrative. ISIS has devoted unprecedented resources to its messaging, and the West has thus far failed to craft a cohesive and comprehensive response.

MESSAGE DISTRIBUTION

For the first decade of its life, al Qaeda was publicity-shy. For the first five years of its existence, barely a handful of people in the U.S. government even knew its name.

ISIS, in contrast, is a publicity whore. While it is extremely important to keep its propaganda and social media activities in the proper perspective—no one was ever killed by a tweet—it's clear that ISIS considers messaging one of the most important fronts in its war with the world, and it's also the primary method by which ISIS extends its influence outside its physical domain. Western efforts to

counter ISIS must account for both the content and distribution of its message.

As the discussion of social media in Chapters 6 and 7 suggests, there is a robust debate about how to handle terrorist use of social media in general. The problem lies at the center of an uneasy intersection of constituencies—corporations, governments, citizens, and extralegal organizations.

All media is social, but mass social media is a relatively new development in society. Throughout the twentieth century, there was a sharp distinction in the use of communications technology—platforms for broadcasting to large audiences were mostly monopolized by governments and corporations, while peer-to-peer communications infrastructure such as the postal service or telephone lines came with relatively clear expectations about privacy. Platforms that fell between these poles—such as anti-Semitic ham radio broadcasts[26]—had only a limited reach.

Today, social media platforms straddle the line between broadcasting like a television station and communicating peer-to-peer as if by phone. In most countries, neither the laws nor the expectations of the people have fully assimilated the difference.

Users of social media often expect that the same privacy and freedom they enjoy in their living rooms will extend to conversations they broadcast publicly over social media. Governments, generally, deal with social media using laws designed for telephone carriers, which usually exempt corporations from responsibility for how customers use their platforms—as opposed to a television station or even a newspaper, both of which face certain legal liabilities for content they broadcast.

The complexities and future challenges of this intersection go well beyond extremism, but they are particularly acute in that arena, in large part thanks to the aggressive ways in which ISIS has exploited gray areas and cutting-edge techniques for distribution.

The most obvious way that this plays out in the ISIS context is

suppression, namely the suspension of social media accounts that distribute extremist content. Debates about how to deal with extremists on social media suffer from a chronic framing problem. Advocates of free speech see it as a censorship issue, as do some social media companies.

But most Western definitions of free speech do not include the right to unrestricted use of broadcasting platforms. There was little controversy in 2006 when the U.S. government designated Hezbollah's Beirut-based Al-Manar television station as a terrorist entity.[27] If al Qaeda Central set up a newspaper office in Manhattan, few would step forward to argue it should be allowed to run its presses.

But when ISIS broadcasts unsolicited beheading videos to thousands from Syria using the infrastructure of a company based in San Francisco, some free speech advocates object to any effort to suppress that activity—whether led by government or by social media companies themselves.[28]

As noted in Chapters 5 and 7, the same objections are rarely voiced when it comes to other crimes, such as posting child pornography on YouTube or hiring contract killers on Craigslist. While it is certainly true that ISIS is engaging in a form of political speech, its content also exceeds the bounds of the contract every user agrees to when he or she signs up for the service. Each social media platform sets terms of service for its users. When a company denies a user access to its platform for violating those terms, it's not exactly censorship. Or is it? Everyone participating in new technologies is engaged in a process of exploring these questions and defining the debate.

With concessions to the complexity of all of these considerations, it seems to us uncontroversial that ISIS's social media activity should—at a minimum—be subject to the same restrictions as any other antisocial user, especially when it commits violations that would put a nonterrorist user in danger of suspension, such as deploying spambots or threatening violence. While we believe additional study is necessary to fully evaluate the impact of such

suppression techniques, the early data is very encouraging and ISIS supporters online certainly believe that suspensions degrade their ability to accomplish their terroristic goals.

That said, it is not so easy to implement a policy of suppression. Social media platforms are run by multinational corporations, not by any individual government, and they must navigate a bewildering morass of laws and regional customs in determining both their legal responsibilities and their ethical stands.

The problem of devising a consistent response is also complicated by a lack of transparency from both governments and companies, with the United States and Twitter as highly visible offenders. It is clear from Twitter's transparency reports that some accounts are suspended (or allowed to remain online) due to secret government requests. But Twitter's steadfast refusal to discuss details of its suspension polices—a tactic likely indicating its desire to make suspension decisions on an ad hoc basis—is also an obstacle to transparency and to open airing of the issues involved.

Despite these complications, ISIS has chosen to fight much of its battle with the West on social media. Through a combination of public infrastructure and private companies, the West effectively owns this battlefield, and our failure to control ISIS's messaging is a direct result of our failure to understand and act on that fact. Never before has there been a war where one side controlled the operating environment. Our power over the Internet is the equivalent of being able to control the weather in a ground war—it is not a complete solution, but it should offer an overwhelming advantage if used correctly.

There is a legitimate intelligence interest in allowing extremists to use social media up to a point, and equally legitimate concerns about allowing them to openly radicalize new followers without interference. It is not difficult to see that some balance between these competing interests is desirable. The best outcome for policy makers is an environment that hinders extremists' efforts without forcing

them to abandon social media entirely. The current environment on Twitter is arguably approaching that ideal, which allows Internet service providers to accommodate some of their also-legitimate concerns about censorship and free speech.

The hindrance model discourages casual engagement with extremism on social media by increasing the cost of participation and reducing the reach of radicalizers. This yields benefits both in the realm of countering violent extremism, by shrinking the pool of available recruits, and in intelligence work, by removing some of the noise that is created by people who are only lightly engaged with ISIS's ideology.

We recommend that a conference be dedicated to airing these issues publicly, with participants from both the public and private sector, with an eye toward establishing some consistent, reasonable practices and clearly defining areas that require more study or the resolution of more complicated questions.

HOW TO DEAL WITH ISIS'S MESSAGE CONTENT

Governments around the world have invested considerable funds under the heading of countering violent extremism (CVE), which can be loosely defined as the use of tools other than killing and incarceration to combat terrorist and extremist groups.

These initiatives take a wide variety of forms—too wide, as most practitioners would agree. After September 11, vast pools of money became available for CVE, which resulted in many people repurposing their pet projects under that heading.

On top of that, well-intentioned efforts at community building have been generously funded as CVE despite a near-total lack of evidence that they actually prevent violent extremism in any meaningful way—town halls and soccer leagues, as the joke in the practitioner community goes. Similar dynamics apply on the grand stage of world politics, where nation-building exercises such as foreign aid, jobs programs, education initiatives, and democratic reforms are taken on faith as ways to inoculate countries and regions against violent extremism. The fact that Germany and the United Kingdom each appear to have provided more foreign fighters to ISIS than Somalia should call some of those assumptions into question.

While there is arguably little downside in trying to do good works for communities and nations, there is a risk that promoting such projects as CVE will result in a future consensus that CVE as a general idea does not and cannot work, or worse, that it is simply a budgetary boondoggle for funding pet projects.

There are many challenges in demonstrating that "positive" CVE initiatives work, but we can see very clearly the tools that ISIS uses to radicalize potential recruits and recruit those who are already radicalized. Rather than spending our resources on uncertain and potentially wasteful wagers on nation building, the more obvious course is to thoroughly catalog what ISIS is doing to achieve its goals and disrupt both its distribution, as discussed above, and the integrity of its messaging content.

The State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications has worked to do this on Twitter by mocking and discrediting ISIS messaging and challenging ISIS supporters directly, both in Arabic and English. The initiative has received decidedly mixed reviews from many analysts.[29] We believe it is a step in the right direction, albeit one that can be refined and improved.

The ISIS propaganda machine is a calculated affair. It has five major goals, all of which involve an effort to simplify the complexity of the real world into a cartoonish battle between good and evil:

- To project an image of strength and victory.
- To excite those with violent tendencies by pairing extreme violence with a moral justification in the form of its alleged utopian society.

- To manipulate the perceptions of ordinary citizens in its enemies' lands to incite demand for military action, while at the same time planting doubt that such action can succeed.
- To place the blame for any conflict that does result on the aggression of Western governments and the incitement of "Zionists."
- To recast any military action against ISIS as an action against Muslims in general, specifically by highlighting civilian casualties.

Each of these goals is vulnerable to a messaging counteroffensive, but some Western messaging reinforces ISIS's goals—such as news stories repeatedly describing ISIS videos as "terrifying" or overstated descriptions of the threat the organization presents. Such statements are an effort to combat ISIS's message with a similarly (not equally) simplified narrative, and they ultimately serve to reinforce ISIS's goal of framing its place in the world as part of a cosmic battle between pure good and pure evil.

Therefore a first step in countering ISIS is to put it in perspective. We should not downplay its threat below a realistic level—that only sets up future hysteria by creating unrealistic expectations. But neither should we inflate it.

ISIS relies on its projection of strength and the illusion of utopian domestic tranquility. Even under the coalition assault, it has labored to maintain its aura of invincibility and defiance. Changing conditions on the ground could cause ISIS to shift its message focus, which would offer a powerful opportunity for countermessaging. But regardless of whether that happens, the West should use every tool available to counter ISIS's stage-managed illusions with the harsh reality.

When Western policy makers discuss "degrading" ISIS, it should be in the context of forcing ISIS to make visible concessions in order to counter military pressure. Strikes designed to degrade the group's real internal strength are good, but our targeting priorities should also aim to expose vulnerabilities.

While we can make some progress amplifying the stories of defectors and refugees from areas ISIS controls, we can make even more by fully exploiting aerial and electronic surveillance and remote imaging to show what really happens in the belly of the beast.

We should pay particular attention to documenting war crimes and atrocities against Sunni Muslims in regions controlled by ISIS. It is patently obvious that ISIS has no qualms about advertising its war crimes against certain classes of people—Shi'a Muslims primarily, and religious minorities such as the Yazidis.

To simply highlight ISIS's barbarity is inadequate to undercut its messaging goals; in many cases, it accomplishes them. There is no doubt that ISIS wants to send a message about its harsh treatment of enemies. Amplifying the very messages the group wishes may resonate with an audience that already opposes ISIS, but it may further energize those who are vulnerable to its radicalizing influence.

While ISIS does not completely suppress information about its massacres against uncooperative Sunni tribes in the region, neither does it highlight them. And such stories have impact. In August, global jihadists on social media were enraged by an ISIS massacre of hundreds of Sunni tribesmen. By documenting such crimes, we can make a significant impact on how ISIS is perceived by those most susceptible to its ideology.[30]

We can also degrade the perception of ISIS's strength and its claims of victory by revealing its failures, particularly within its borders, such as incidents in which local people rise up against its control, failure of infrastructure, corruption, poverty, or other forms of domestic disintegration. The sources-and-methods trade-off will certainly favor disclosure in at least some of these cases.

Finally, we can offset ISIS messaging priorities by refusing to play into its apocalyptic narrative. As seen in Chapter 10, ISIS wants to enact specific prophecies regarding the end times, such as a victo-

rious confrontation with the "crusaders" in the town of Dabiq. Our policies and military actions should not rise to the bait. For both military and messaging purposes, it is foolhardy to show up at the exact place and time that an enemy most desires. Whatever ambush lies in wait at Dabiq, let it rot there unfulfilled.

AGAINST ISIS OR FOR SOMETHING?

Finally, we would raise the question of what we are fighting for.

In the years since September 11, the West in general and the United States in particular have embraced a "war on terrorism" without stated limits. In the name of that war, or as an unintended consequence of its policies, we have vastly increased surveillance authorities, militarized domestic police forces, and used air strikes and drones to dispatch lethal force virtually anywhere that al Qaeda operates. Many of these actions have been taken in response to fear.

Osama bin Laden once said, "All that we have to do is to send two mujahideen to the furthest point east to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al Qaeda, in order to make the generals race there."[31] ISIS has exploited this tendency, in part following the blueprint in *The Management of Savagery* and in part to serve its apocalyptic dream of a confrontation with the "Crusaders" in Dabiq.

We must find better ways to balance our security against common sense and widely accepted ethical principles. That means refusing to rush into war every time we are invited by someone waving a black flag, but it also means taking a closer look at our strategies and tactics, and asking how they can better reflect our values. In the conflict with ISIS, messaging and image are half the battle, and we do ourselves no favors when we refuse to discuss the negative consequences of our actions.

We must be involved in a visible process of continually evaluating and improving the way we conduct war, asking if our responses

are not only proportionate and economically responsible, but ethical. For instance, the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Clint Watts has tried to tackle this challenge as it pertains to drones, arguing for a judicial process similar to that currently used by the FISA court, an idea we endorse.[32]

In December 2014, the release of a Senate report on the use of torture by the United States after September 11 provoked a national debate on the morality of our tactics to fight terrorism. Beyond the argument over the results produced by such techniques lies a fundamental question of values and our standing in the world. The use of torture helps validate jihadist claims about the immorality and hypocrisy of the West. We must not fight violent extremism by becoming the brutal enemy that jihadists want. While painful, the process of publicly disclosing and confronting such incidents is, as David Rothkopf argues in *Foreign Policy*, "very American"[33] in its transparency, which, in our view, is something to embrace.

We should be seen, constantly, as balancing the scales of justice and individual freedom rather than letting the weight of groups like al Qaeda and ISIS constantly drag us toward an irrevocable mandate for more action, more compromise, and less concern for innocent people caught in the crossfire.

"The Second Coming," a poem by W. B. Yeats, is often quoted (maybe too often), because it feels so relevant to many modern situations. But its apocalyptic tone and cutting observations could have been written for the challenge of ISIS.

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.

The dilemma of Syria and Iraq finds full-throated expression in the poet's words, written as a comment on wars and politics nearly one hundred years ago.

Perhaps these problems are universal in history, relevant again for each generation. Or perhaps they are iterative, situations repeating and refining until the reality of the world is distilled to the razor-sharp essence that the best poetry provides.

It is hard to imagine a terrible avatar of passionate intensity more purified than ISIS. More than even al Qaeda, the first terror of the twenty-first century, ISIS exists as an outlet for the worst—the most base and horrific impulses of humanity, dressed in fanatic pretexts of religiosity that have been gutted of all nuance and complexity.

And yet, if we lay claim to the role of "best," then Yeats condemns us as well, and rightly so. It is difficult to detect a trace of conviction in the world's attitude toward the Syrian civil war and the events that followed in Iraq. Why do we oppose ISIS and not Assad? There are pragmatic reasons, among them the explicit threat ISIS poses to Western allies and interests in the region, as opposed to the less overt risks to Western allies associated with Assad. But it is difficult to explain the dichotomy between our approaches to each of these villains on the basis of a clear moral imperative. Syria poses a profound dilemma, more so than Rwanda or Bosnia. Our moral impulse is to act on behalf of the Syrian people. But an intervention that simply removes Assad, as the Libyans removed Gadhafi, creates new and different problems for the Syrian people, and these new problems may be even more intractable. Strengthening ISIS would be just one of the possible unintended consequences, but likely the most dangerous—both for the Syrian people and the region.

In the past, the United States has gone terribly awry in its efforts to promote electoral democracy around the world. ISIS is only the latest example of the failure of democracy promotion, although it may be the starkest.

One of the goals for the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the war on terrorism more broadly was to spread democracy, in the belief that "replacing hatred and resentment with democracy and hope" would "deny the militants future recruits," in President Bush's words.[34] Democracy promotion—and the claim that it was a critical component of the war on terrorism—became a theme of his presidency. But people in the Middle East were, and remain, deeply skeptical that this was his goal or a U.S. goal more broadly.[35]

Thomas Carothers, a leading expert on democracy, characterized the policy dilemma this way: The imperative to degrade terrorist capacities tempts policy makers to put aside democratic scruples and seek closer ties with autocracies willing to join the war on terrorism.

On the other hand, some policy makers have come to believe that it is precisely the lack of democracy that breeds Islamic extremism in the first place.[36] But these policy makers are wrong in imagining that promoting electoral democracy is a panacea against terrorism. Many studies have shown that it clearly is not. Economist Alberto Abadie found that countries with intermediate levels of political freedom are even more vulnerable than those with the highest or lowest levels, which suggests that the transition from authoritarian rule is a particularly dangerous period.[37]

Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder warned in 2007, "When authoritarian regimes collapse and countries begin the process of democratization, politicians of all stripes have an incentive to play the nationalist card."[38] This is precisely what happened in Iraq: After the collapse of Saddam's regime, due to their majority, Shi'a groups had the upper hand. Sunnis felt abandoned and resentful, and were able to mount a fierce insurgency. The elements that led to the violence had not been rectified when U.S. troops left.

Long before the war on terrorism, Fareed Zakaria warned that constitutional liberalism is not about the procedures of *selecting* a government, but the government's goals. "It refers to the tradition, deep in Western history, that seeks to protect an individual's au-

tonomy and dignity against coercion, whatever the source—state, church, or society."[39] Constitutional liberalism argues that human beings have certain "inalienable" rights, and that governments must accept limitations on their own power.[40]

Electoral democracy, which can lead to domination by the most populous ethnic groups, has to be held in check by something like a bill of rights that protects minorities, allows religious freedom, and guarantees freedom of the press. This is the long-term goal for Arab countries, Marwin Muasher argues.[41]

King Abdullah of Jordan, who has shown himself to be extraordinarily courageous, argues that fighting ISIS will require the Muslim world to work together. He calls it a "generational fight" and "a third world war by other means." In the long term, he said, the fight is ideological. As threatening as ISIS is to the West, more than anything else it is an existential threat to Sunni Islam. "This is a Muslim problem. We need to take ownership of this. We need to stand up and say what is right and what is wrong," he said.[42]

Perhaps most important, we must embrace the idea that what we seek is continual progress toward these goals rather than their institution by fiat. Insistence on the latter is the way of dictators, the way of ISIS, of all extremism, and its hypocrisy is self-evident. The West has spent decades trying to impose structures of politics and governance in the Middle East, and the results sadly speak for themselves.

This is work that will never be finished; it is a mission to span generations. It requires patience and attention to detail. It requires humility. We in the West must continually ask if we are living up to our own values of human rights and the importance of self-determination, and we must correct our course if we go astray. Like al Qaeda before it, ISIS derives far more strength from our response to its provocation than from the twisted values it promotes.

APPENDIX*

Jihadi Salafism is not a monolithic ideology. Despite our sense that movements like al Qaeda and ISIS share a single agenda, there is incredible diversity among such militant groups. On many issues, they simply do not agree: they embrace different religious beliefs and practices, they adopt different standards of conduct in war, and they pursue different strategic objectives. Importantly, these differences often have deep roots and long histories. As a result, making sense of ISIS requires looking at both the past and the present. It requires understanding some of the early history and core components of Islam, tracing the evolution of jihadi Salafism in the twentieth century, and exploring the issues that continue to divide these groups today.

ISLAM: A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY

MUHAMMAD AS A MESSENGER; HIJRA FROM MECCA TO MEDINA

Islamic tradition holds that Muhammad was born in Mecca around 570 CE. Orphaned as a young child, he was raised by his paternal uncle and belonged to the powerful Quraysh tribe. He had a relatively unremarkable childhood and early adulthood, but around the age of forty he began to have visions in which he received a series of messages from God. Though

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