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ISLAMIC STATE: A FEEBLE NEO-STATE?

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Exercise Solo Flight

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ISLAMIC STATE: A FEEBLE NEO-STATE?

Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Da'ish, or as it is simply referred to, the Islamic State (IS), is a Salafist¹ militant group that has control over territories in parts of Iraq and Syria, as well as limited territories within Libya and Nigeria. The group proclaims itself to be a worldwide *caliphate*,² with Abu Bakr al Baghdadi being named its caliph. The group has made its mark by not only claiming religious, political and military authority over Muslims worldwide, but also by the brutal killing of innocents and gruesome attacks across the world including Algeria, Paris, and Brussels.

IS has evolved by taking advantage of the security vacuum created by the sectarian strife in Iraq and the civil war against the Assad regime in Syria. IS seeks to create a pure Sunni Islamic state governed by a brutal interpretation of sharia law and by redefining the political borders of the Middle East.³ Changes in the IS autonym indicate ambition to create a state. IS has emerged as a robust independent entity within its occupied territories and a strong military power, having its own funds generation mechanism. The *Caliphate* provides a government-like structure, implementing sharia law. The propaganda videos and liberal use of social media enhances its information power. The present fight against ISIS is based on the pretext of it emerging as self-sustaining, and as the richest terrorist group. Its elements of power, however,

¹ A Salafist is a school of Sunni Islam that condemns theological innovation and advocates strict adherence to shari'a and to the social structures existing in the earliest days of Islam.

² A *Caliphate* (Khilafa) is the rule or rein of a *Caliph* (Khalif), a word which simply means a successor-primarily of the Prophet Muhammad.

³ Audrey Kurth Cronin. "*ISIS is not a terrorist group: why counterterrorism won't stop the latest Jihadist threat*". *Foreign Affairs* 94.2 (Mar/Apr 2015): 87-98.
<http://search.proquest.com/science/docview/1658669066/F541C9007755444APQ/3?accountid=16571>

indicate otherwise. This creates an urge to conduct an in-depth analysis of IS's state ambition and its elements of power.

This paper demonstrates that IS is not a non-state actor; it is more of a neo-state in the making. The IS's elements of power indicate its limited capability to sustain making it a feeble neo-state. The first part of the paper proves that IS is a neo-state, lacking international recognition. In the second part, the paper discusses IS's elements of power and demonstrates its deficiencies making it a feeble neo-state. The paper will not discuss the efficacy of the fight against IS because of its wide scope.

ISIS - A Neo-state?

ISIS traces its roots to the group Al Qaeda in Iraq, which after the death of its founder Abu Musab al Zarqawi created an umbrella organization, the Islamic States of Iraq (ISI). The influx of US troops in 2003 and the creation of *Sahwa* (awakening) councils by Sunni Arab tribesmen weakened ISIs hold.⁴ In 2010, Baghdadi a former US detainee began rebuilding ISI capability and by April 2013, announced the merger of his forces in Iraq and Syria and the creation of ISIS. The group's territorial conquest and its control under the caliphate speaks of its ambition to create a 'pure' Sunni Islamic state, obliterating the political borders of the Middle East created by western powers in twentieth century.⁵

'States', in the Westphalia international system were the primary actors, with borders providing an official barrier to political interference from outside. The Westphalia system

⁴ W Andrew Terrill. "Understanding the strengths and vulnerabilities of ISIS". Parameters 44.3 (Autumn 2014): 14-15.
<http://search.proquest.com/science/docview/1628380479/1819C88DF7C946A9PQ/6?accountid=16571>

⁵ Audrey Kurth Cronin. "ISIS is not a terrorist group: why counterterrorism won't stop the latest Jihadist threat". Foreign Affairs 94.2 (Mar/Apr 2015): 87-98.
<http://search.proquest.com/science/docview/1658669066/F541C9007755444APQ/3?accountid=16571>

defines ‘state’ as a political legal unit that has an identifiable population, defined borders recognized by other states, and a government which possesses sovereignty.⁶ The head of the state is defined as a person who symbolically represents the *state* and its people. Applying the above definition of states to IS, we may conclude that IS’s population in Iraq and Syria or other parts of world, are Sunni Muslims who pledge alliance to the *caliphate*. Influxes of foreign fighters, members of other terrorist organizations supporting ISIS ideology, and the local population of occupied or captured territory (whether voluntarily or through coercion) collectively form its population.

The second condition, defined territorial borders, is argued to be one of the major differences between Al Qaeda and ISIS.⁷ In June 2014, an IS spokesperson issued a statement and a map indicating the plans to expand the caliphate throughout the Middle East, North Africa, large parts of Western Asia and some parts of Europe.⁸ The capture and control of the territory in Iraq and Syria and establishment of the caliphate fulfills the requirement of territorial identification. The condition of international recognition is debatable as the international community in general, and Arab nations in particular, do not recognize the formation of the state. To avoid recognizing it as a state the Islamic State is addressed by Arab nations and the

⁶ James Scott, Ralph Cater and Cooper Drury. “*International Relations*”. Cengage Learning, USA, 2016, 23.

⁷ Audrey Kurth Cronin. “*ISIS is not a terrorist group: why counterterrorism won't stop the latest Jihadist threat*”. *Foreign Affairs* 94.2 (Mar/Apr 2015): 87-98.
<http://search.proquest.com/science/docview/1658669066/F541C9007755444APQ/3?accountid=16571>

⁸ John Hall, “*The ISIS map of the world: Militants outline chilling five-year plan for global domination as they declare formation of caliphate - and change their name to the Islamic State*”. Mail online, 30 June 2014. Accessed on 22 April 2016. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2674736/ISIS-militants-declare-formation-caliphate-Syria-Iraq-demand-Muslims-world-swear-allegiance.html>

international community as Da'ish.⁹ It can be argued that the conscious decision to call it Da'ish instead of Islamic State is an innate fear of the growing influence of IS as a state.

The third characteristic, sovereignty, means that the state should have its own self-governing body (regardless of the form of government) with its own head of government.¹⁰ It can be argued that IS has an established governing body with Abu Bakar al Baghdadi as the head of the government. The establishment of courts, moral policing and the imposing of the Sharia law to maintain law and order are indicators of sovereignty being established. In addition to a sovereign government, a state should have a capital city that is the seat of the government.¹¹ The announcement of Raqqa as the de-facto capital of IS fulfills this requirement.¹² Moreover, the *caliphate* takes the responsibility for national security and protects the area under command from enemy attack. IS also has plans to have its own currency, the Islamic Dinar. The design of the same was released by IS, and it will begin production as soon they locate a mint and choose the precious metal for the coins.¹³ The formation of IS can be compared to Taiwan, where it is a self-governing body and may be relatively sovereign within its own borders but lacks diplomatic

⁹ United States. Congress. House. Committee on Armed Services. “2015 Guide to Operation Inherent Resolve : information and commentary on America's war against the Islamic State, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, terrorists in Iraq and Syria, al-Baghdadi, Levant, al-Qaeda in Syria Guide to Operation Inherent Resolve.” Progressive Management, 2015;, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid*,23.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² Zachary Laub, “The Islamic State”, Council for Foreign Relations. 22 March 2016. Accessed on 10 April 2016. <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state/p14811>

¹³ Gwynne Dyer. “Don't panic : ISIS, terror and today's Middle East”. Toronto : Random House Canada, 2015,149-150

recognition by some other states.¹⁴ Parallels can also be drawn between IS and Israel's concept of a nation state with an ethno-religious ideology, rather than a solely ethnic basis.¹⁵ With only 160 out of 193 members of the UN giving official recognition to Israel, it may be argued that this boosts IS's ambition of forming a state without, or with limited, recognition.

As discussed in preceding paragraphs, one may conclude that the establishment of the *caliphate*, implementation of Sharia Law under its controlled territory in Iraq and Syria, along with the local population, and limited radicalized Muslim diaspora supporting the ideology, IS satisfies the condition for being termed as a *neo-state*. The element of international recognition of the IS-controlled territory is still missing, but as seen in the case of Taiwan or in the case of Israel it can be argued that its relevance is debatable. IS differs from modern states in the means used to achieve the desired geographical and political construct (i.e. terrorism rather than revolution).¹⁶ Juxtaposing Israel's formation by pushing out the Palestinians and IS's atrocities against other religious identities for formation of the state, one may argue that it is a revolution and not acts of terrorism. Having seen IS as a neo-state actor, the paper will now analyze its instruments of powers according to the diplomatic, informational, military and economy (DIME) model.

Instruments of National Power

Diplomatic Power

¹⁴ James Scott, Ralph Cater and Cooper Drury. "*International Relations*". Cengage Learning, USA, 2016, 30.

¹⁵ Loretta Napoleoni, "*The Islamist phoenix : the Islamic State and the redrawing of the Middle East*". New York : Seven Stories Press, 2014., 107

¹⁶ Ibid, 108.

The diplomatic instrument of power represents the power of persuasion. This includes negotiations pursued through international institutions like the United Nations and African Union, and state-to-state bilateral relations. These relations produce treaties, international agreements and declaratory policy statements, aimed at influencing others and are underwritten by other elements of power.¹⁷ Diplomacy is considered an interaction between states attempting to achieve their foreign policy objectives.¹⁸

IS's foreign policy objectives can be summed up as the ability to sustain its established caliphate. This neo-state in the past has capitalized on Sunni disenfranchisement in both Iraq and Syria. The ISIS ambition of establishing caliphate with no geographical limits is evident by its seizure of territory in Libya between the cities of Tripoli and Benghazi.¹⁹ The fact that militant groups in Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia and the Philippines have sworn allegiance to Baghdadi, further indicates achievements towards its foreign policy objective.²⁰

This *neo-state* is not expecting to represent at the United Nations or to send ambassadors to other nations, but it is looking for official recognition.²¹ Since, no other country will recognize this *neo-state*, IS is concerned about making the regime look credible as a state in the eyes of other Muslims. IS is providing rudimentary social security through education, health and medical

¹⁷ Robert Worley. "*Orchestrating the Instruments of Power: A Critical Examination of the U.S. National Security System.*" Accessed on 02 April 2016. <http://orchestratingpower.org/>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Zachary Laub, "*The Islamic State*", Council for Foreign Relations. 22 March 2016. Accessed on 10 April 2016. <http://www.cfr.org/iraq/islamic-state/p14811>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Gwynne Dyer. "*Don't panic : ISIS, terror and today's Middle East*". Toronto : Random House Canada, 2015,149-150.

services, and has established civilian institutions; strengthening its legitimacy and diplomatic power. Moreover, the spread of the prophecy about *Dabiq* and the *Day of Judgment* (that will come after the Muslims defeat Rome at al-A'maq or Dabiq),²² can be contended as an attempt to legitimize IS violent actions, consolidate diaspora of similar ideology across the world, and to create conditions that would draw *Infidels* in the area of judgment.

IS's ideological barriers under the *caliphate*, towards democratic voting, engaging in permanent treaties and recognizing international institutions like the UN will prevent IS from entering into any friendly relations with other nations.²³ This would isolate ISIS from other states and reduce its power to pursue and negotiate. In other words, ISIS's diplomatic power would be limited to like-minded groups and the regions around its occupied territory, where it can influence other states through its violence and ideology. Its diplomatic influence in the region will be dictated by the ability of its other elements of power.

Information Power

The element of information power is described as the ability to collect and/or disseminate information on/of foreign audiences.²⁴ The expansion of ISIS influence cannot only be credited to brute force, but also to its propaganda, use of social media and cyber technology to recruit fighters and intimidate its enemies. IS has demonstrated incredibly strong information power.

²² Williams Faizi Mc Cants. "*The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, strategy and domestic vision of Islamic State*". St Martin Press, New York, 2015, 99-105.

²³ Graeme Wood.. "*What ISIS really Wants*". Vol. 315. Boston: Atlantic Media, Inc, 2015., 78.

²⁴ Robert Worley. "*Orchestrating the Instruments of Power: A Critical Examination of the U.S. National Security System*." Accessed on 02 April 2016. <http://orchestratingpower.org/>

Al Baghdadi and his followers understand the importance of virtual life and sophisticated communication analysis, and have exploited social media to spread frightening prophecies.²⁵ From the beginning, IS has implemented a carefully-crafted mythology to present Al Baghdadi and his followers as a stronger force. This has indeed attracted a number of experienced fighters from Bosnia and Chechnya and other smaller terrorist groups to join IS, increasing its military might.²⁶ Its propaganda machine, both inside and outside the occupied territory is active and spreading myths about its strength and success. An example is the use of propaganda vans, manned by a Belgian father and son duo in Raqqa, distributing leaflets, CDs, and literature; playing videos and music; and answering questions ranging from social services to job hunting, etc.²⁷

IS's communication strategy attempts to persuade innocent Muslims that battling to restore the *caliphate* is a religious duty. The group employs Twitter, Facebook, Instagram etc. to influence adversaries, friends and journalist alike. Once the IS video showing the beheading of American journalist James Foley was taken down from Facebook and Twitter, restoration of the video by IS's propaganda team on diaspora-hosted sites is a testimony to the robust information power.²⁸ The warmer images of IS soldiers eating Snickers bars and nurturing kittens with a

²⁵ Loretta Napoleoni, *The Islamist phoenix : the Islamic State and the redrawing of the Middle East*. New York : Seven Stories Press, 2014., 61.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 62.

²⁷ Vice News. "Documentary:-The Islamic State(full length)". 26, December 2014. Accessed on 15 April 2016. <https://news.vice.com/video/the-islamic-state-full-length>

²⁸ Jessica Stern, *ISIS : The State of Terror*" New York, N.Y. : Ecco Press, 2015., 168-170.

historical resemblance to *Abu Huraira*, a companion of *Prophet Muhammad* known for being fond of cats, promotes IS's image of a strictly Islamic yet people-centric organization.²⁹

The Arabic language twitter app called *The Dawn of Glad Timings*, or just *Dawn*, is the most successful medium to keep abreast with the latest news about jihadi groups. IS has also employed tactics of latching onto the world events like the 2014 World Cup with hash tags (eg. #Brazil 2014, #ENG, # France etc.), expecting people to click on the links and to get proselytized.³⁰ Counter propaganda videos of the targeting of IS fighters, are projected as atrocities against the religion and can be argued that it further fuels the IS propaganda. In other words, IS's information campaign is very well thought through and crafted to enhance its less expensive yet crucial element of power, that is information power.

Military Power

Military power is described as the ability to conduct military operations and is often considered to be the default choice when the other instruments are weak.³¹ A military operation represents both the hard (coercion) power and soft (attractive) power,³² which is very much true in the case of ISIS. The military instrument of power is resource intensive and weakens the economic instrument of power, although military power can be exercised to gain economic benefits as well.

²⁹ James P Farwell. "*The Media strategy of ISIS*". *Survival*; November 2014, Vol. 56 Issue: Number 6 p49-55. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eoh&AN=34275705&site=ehost-live>

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Robert Worley. "*Orchestrating the Instruments of Power: A Critical Examination of the U.S. National Security System.*" Accessed on 02 April 2016. <http://orchestratingpower.org/>

³² *Ibid.*

For any military power to be established there is a requirement for men and equipment. The security vacuum created after the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq in December 2011 led to the formation of ISIS, with minor terrorist groups amalgamating under their umbrella. According to James Clapper, US Director for National Intelligence in February 2015, the estimated numbers of IS fighters range between 20,000 to 30,000 in Iraq and Syria.³³ There has been a substantial attrition in its ranks since the coalition air strikes. To mitigate the downfall, IS has turned to conscription in certain territories. In October 2015, Nicholas Rasmussen, Director of National Counter Terrorism Centre in his speech to the US Congress, brought out that significant numbers of IS fighters are neither Iraqi nor Syrian, but are from all over the world including at least 5,000 westerners and approximately 250 from the US, totaling up to 28,000 foreign fighters.³⁴

The equipment held by IS was generally captured over the same period. Starting from the equipment brought by the defected Iraqi Army and ex- Baathist after the 2003 invasion, to the equipment captured by IS from Syrian rebels and government forces, to the latest equipment captured by overrunning the US-trained Iraqi Army. ISIS has accumulated tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery pieces and many other war-waging stores, making it into a well-armed group.³⁵ The interdependency between economic power and military power can be seen in ISIS, with military power assisting in holding territory and the conduct of criminal activities to raise funds. These funds are then used to equip and make the military power more robust.

³³ BBC News. “*What Is Islamic State*”, BBC News. 02 December 2015. Accessed on 26 April 2016. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29052144>.

³⁴ *Ibid*

³⁵ Zachary Cohen, “*Amnesty report: ISIS armed with U.S. Weapons*”. CNN News, 09 December 2015. Accessed on 15 April 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/08/politics/amnesty-international-isis-weapons-u-s/>.

IS is well equipped to conduct operations in mid-intensity to low-intensity warfare. The use of suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices, conventional fire and movement tactics, coupled with the psychological image of supremacy and ruthlessness has been responsible for significant territorial gains. Losses sustained due to airstrikes and offensive operations of Kurdistan forces are tainting the image of military supremacy.³⁶ It can be argued that this is countered by conducting terrorist attacks in places like Brussels and Paris, sending a message of taking revenge (information power), demonstrating their reach (military power) and also inciting the *Infidels* to come to their chosen land for the *Day of Judgment*. In other words, IS has a considerable amount of military power to operate in mid intensity war and to exercise control over the occupied territory.

Economics Power

The economic instrument of power leverages national wealth to influence others and includes export controls and trade policies that define market access. A narrow definition of economic power includes economic sanctions and foreign aid.³⁷ The economic powers of IS possess different resources from those of other terrorist organizations and states. IS obtains a major chunk of its revenue through criminal activities in Syria and Iraq and derives only a small share of its funds from deep-pocket donors, reducing the effect of economic sanctions through ceasing of international financial transactions. This isolationist approach to the global financial system makes IS economically more vulnerable and weak.

³⁶ The Gaurdian, "*Peshmerga forces enter Sinjar in fight against ISIS*". 13 November 2015. Accessed on 20 April 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/13/peshmerga-forces-sinjar-isis-oust-gunfire-kurdish>

³⁷ Robert Worley, "*Orchestrating the Instruments of Power: A Critical Examination of the U.S. National Security System*." Accessed on 02 April 2016. <http://orchestratingpower.org/>

The written testimony of David Scohen, Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence with the US Department of Treasury, given to the House Committee on financial services on 13 Nov 2014, identified that there are five major sources of IS funding. First, IS has secured significant revenue through selling oil extracted from fields in Syria and Iraq to Turkey. IS has established a deeply-rooted black market in the area around its captured territory and is estimated to earn \$1 million a day from the oil sales. The second key revenue source is demanding ransoms for release of the innocent kidnapped civilians. The testimony estimates \$20 million in ransom collection only in 2014. The third source is extortion, which is done as protection extortion, illegal taxation, giving permission to conduct businesses or permission to those seeking to live in the territory. Fourth, IS also raises revenue from robbing banks, selling antiques, livestock, and crops. Finally, although only a small portion, it also receives funding from wealthy donors.³⁸ All these methods of revenue generation have made IS emerge as the richest terrorist organization, when compared to traditionally-defined terrorist organizations. It is anticipated that if financing is squeezed in Iraq and Syria, IS will look outward for financial support. Moreover, if the relationship between IS and Jabhat al Nusra (JaN) (a splinter group of IS operating in Syria with ideological resemblance to Al Qaeda) improves, IS could integrate JaNs external funding network into its own revenue scheme.³⁹

This IS wealth growth has created a budget surplus, which enables its military to wage war on two fronts and against multi government and non-state armed groups.⁴⁰ The US-led

³⁸ United States. Congress. House. Committee on Armed Services. "2015 Guide to Operation Inherent Resolve : information and commentary on America's war against the Islamic State, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh, terrorists in Iraq and Syria, al-Baghdadi, Levant, al-Qaeda in Syria Guide to Operation Inherent Resolve." Progressive Management, 2015.65-66.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 58.

coalition targeting of IS's financial setup, using airstrikes to reduce IS's ability to extract, refine and transport oil, have forced IS to look for alternatives. As per reports, ISIS is conducting fishing in hundreds of lakes north of Baghdad to generate millions of dollars a month. Moreover, new revenues are generated by car dealerships and the running of abandoned factories which were previously run by the Iraqi government.⁴¹ These diverse means collectively have partially helped ISIS to offset the losses incurred due to the loss of oil income.

Overall, ISIS lacks a robust economic base and the budget surplus created over the years is estimated not to last forever unless IS exploits the external donor card or modifies its revenue resources. This gap in wealth and diverse methods of wealth generation further support the claim of IS being a neo-state. It can be argued that IS's significant expenses towards maintaining its *caliphate* and military supremacy cannot be sustained with the existing economic infrastructure. IS as a neo-state, lacking international recognition and with its existing caliphate's ideological isolation, will remain diplomatically weak. The economic and military power of the IS are interdependent and will sustain external pressures until the time IS is able to find new and innovative sources of revenue to feed the system. IS's information power is well crafted and is the biggest strength of this neo-state, largely complementing other elements of its powers. In other words, IS can be termed as a feeble neo-state without international recognition.

Conclusion

⁴⁰ Patrick B Johnston. "Countering ISIL's Financing". Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT419.html>

⁴¹ NDTV Online news. "ISIS Turns To Selling Fish, Cars To Offset Oil Losses: Report". Ndtv, 29 April 2016. Accessed on 29 April 2016. <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/isis-turns-to-selling-fish-to-offset-oil-losses-report-1400638>

The Islamic State's military victories in Iraq and Syria provided territorial control to the proclaimed neo-state. The establishment of a *Caliphate* has brought allegiances from groups across Africa and Asia. Radicalized Sunni Muslims (though limited), pledging allegiances to the *Caliphate*, have augmented its population. However, IS's hope of gaining international recognition of its occupied territory is a distant dream, but, as brought out in this paper it may not be critical for its ambition to establish a neo-state. Exercising sovereignty by implementation of Sharia law and rudimentary government services complements the argument of IS being coined as a neo-state as per the Westphalia system. The regional dynamics will definitely play a key role in defining it as a state and can be a subject of future studies and research.

IS exhibits limited inherent diplomatic power due to an isolationist outlook, ideological barriers emerging from the *Caliphate*, and the lack of international recognition. Its element of information power is well crafted and implemented to augment other instrument of powers. IS's military supremacy in the region is illustrated by its ability to operate in mid-intensity and low-intensity war. Its military power is interrelated to the economic power and they complement each other. IS lacks a robust economic infrastructure to support the *Caliphate* and its existing military supremacy. With fault lines in its limited diplomatic power, fracturing economic and military powers, IS will struggle to be a self-sustaining neo-state and thus can be termed as a feeble neo-state.

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