The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria:
Profile and Strategic Assessment*

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Introduction

The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), otherwise known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), is a terrorist organization operating mainly in the Middle East and seeking to establish a worldwide caliphate. Capturing international attention through the conquest of swathes of territories in Iraq and Syria, as well as the viciousness of its tactics, ISIS has received numerous pledges of allegiance, including some groups from the Philippines, i.e. the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) and the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF). In light of these developments, the aim of this two-part policy brief is to discuss how the rise of ISIS may impact Philippine national security. Specifically, these two articles seek to discuss the following: first, the capabilities of ISIS; second, the potential security challenges to the country posed by ISIS; and third, some policy considerations in Philippine counter-terrorism efforts vis-à-vis the ascendance of ISIS as an international terrorist threat.

The danger posed by ISIS shall be analyzed through the Dynamic Terrorist Threat model, which scrutinizes the two types of capabilities in evaluating threats from terrorist groups.[1] Capabilities, which pertain to the tools terror groups use in their activities, can be classified into two: (1) *organizational* tools which are utilized for *"activities that sustain the group's existence as a cohesive entity;"* and (2) *operational* tools which are employed for *"activities*

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* **This policy brief is the first in the two-part series on the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria and its security implications on the Philippines.**

that allow terrorists to conduct a series of successful attacks." Organizational tools include leadership, guiding and motivating ideology, publicity, and recruitment tools. *Operational* tools, on the other hand, are composed of command control mechanisms, weapons, training, operational space, operational security, intelligence, and funding. This study will analyze both types of capabilities.

This first installment of the two-part policy brief examines the capabilities of ISIS as a terrorist group. The second installment, which is also anchored on the aforementioned theoretical framework, builds on the findings of comprehensive analysis of the first installment in order to assess whether ISIS actually poses a direct threat to the Philippines.

ISIS Profile

Born as Ibrahim Awad Ibrahim al-Badri, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi is at the helm of the ISIS leadership. A holder of a doctorate degree in Islamic Studies, Baghdadi is also the symbolic figure of the ISIS group and thus commands charismatic legitimacy and attracts and inspires its members through the group's ideology.

At the heart of a terrorist organization lies an ideology, which refers to *"the consensus of grievances and objectives that the group is trying to achieve through violence."*[2] This ideology, in turn, serves the purpose of unifying members, motivating action, and linking the organization to the alienated grassroots in which name the terror group is

supposedly fighting. The politico-religious ideology of ISIS is concerned with the establishment of a worldwide caliphate propelled by a sectarian conflict between Shiites and Sunnis, as well as the war against non-believers of Islam. In an attempt to rally the entire Islamic community behind the ideological aims of ISIS, Baghdadi, the group's leader, has claimed that the world is now divided into two camps: (1) the camp of Muslims; and (2) the camp of non-believers. Baghdadi stressed that these non-believers— apparently referring to the US, Russia, the Jews, the West, and their allies—*"were able to weaken and humiliate the Muslims, dominate them in every region, plunder their wealth and resources, and rob them of their rights. They accomplished this by attacking and occupying their land, [and] placing their treacherous agents in power to rule the Muslims with an iron fist"* after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, claimed to be the last caliphate, in the aftermath of the First World War.[3]

At the domestic level, Baghdadi appeals to the Sunni minority by taking advantage of the Sunni-Shiite divide, with ISIS as the supposed champion of the Sunnis against the discriminatory policies of the Shiite-led government in Iraq.[4] From this perspective, Baghdadi justified the use of terrorism by arguing that *"[t]errorism is to worship Allah as He ordered you. Terrorism is to refuse humiliation, subjugation, and subordination….Terrorism is for the Muslim to live as a Muslim, honorable with might and freedom. Terrorism is to insist upon [the] rights [of Muslims] and not giving up on them."* Unlike al-Qaeda, however, ISIS has focused its current operations on the "near enemy"—i.e. the secular and pro-Western states of the Middle East.[5] Attacking the "far enemy," referring to the US and the West, is viewed by ISIS as its secondary goal. To further concretize its ideological pursuit, ISIS has released its so-called "Five-Year Conquest Plan," which highlights the territories to be included in its caliphate, to wit: Iberian Peninsula, Eastern Europe, Balkan states, Northern half of Africa, Middle East, India, and certain areas of the central Asian states and portions of the western flank of China.[6]

As a self-proclaimed caliphate, ISIS also initiated a sophisticated publicity and recruitment campaign by using the latest communication and information technology at its disposal, foremost of which is social media. ISIS propagates fear as a message addressed to the international public, especially the citizens of states fighting ISIS. In order to spread its message of terror, ISIS has created its propaganda arm known as the "Al Hayat Media."[7] Situated in an unknown location, this media wing of the organization utilizes different social media outlets. It must be noted, however, that while the central message of fear and power projection is framed by ISIS leadership, its dissemination is being undertaken not only by Al Hayat Media but also by their followers and sympathizers.

ISIS is consciously harnessing the capacity of social media to influence its users and quickly spread its propaganda materials, which include photos and videos that show the brutal killings of its victims. Moreover, ISIS social media campaign is also directed to potential supporters or sympathizers. Target audience may already have had sentiments similar to that of ISIS and, as such, would use ISIS materials to further radicalize themselves. In this context, ISIS has unleashed a recruitment drive in different social media platforms. The quality and method of the recruitment drive also suggest that ISIS is targeting a particular audience—the relatively young people probably between 15 and 30 years of age.[8] This represents a generational gap in the jihadist movement. Whereas Al Qaeda is composed mostly of men who are veterans of the Afghan War and are somewhat less keen on accepting foreign recruits (especially from the West), ISIS fighters are relatively young and more predisposed to embrace foreigners into their ranks.[9] Aside from using the internet, ISIS also recruits members through personal contact and persuasion, as well as enforced drafting.

In the realm of operations, ISIS has established a command and control system defined as *"the mechanism that terrorist groups use to plan, coordinate, and execute their attacks."*[10] At the apex of the command and control system is Baghdadi, who is also the commander-in-chief of the group. However, since ISIS is projecting itself as a "state," it has created mechanisms which mirror the formal structures of a government, such as ministries and provinces. It must be noted that ISIS was able to launch relatively successful attacks—culminating in the take-over of huge swathe of lands in Iraq and Syria—through its command and control structure

largely because its leaders are former military officers from the disbanded Iraqi military, particularly the elite Republican Guard, of the late strongman Saddam Hussein.[11]

A command and control structure will be rendered useless without a stockpile of effective weaponry. In a published report in November 2014, the **United Nations Security Council** (UNSC) noted that ISIS is *"very well-armed [group], primarily as a result of operating in a conflict zone awash with conventional [and sophisticated] weapons,"* which were seized from the Government of Iraq which, in turn, came largely from the US.[12] The top UN security body also mentioned that the group uses improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

With membership estimated around 20,000 to more than 30,000, ISIS trains its new recruits in various training camps located within its controlled territories. Aside from orientation on the version of Islam that ISIS is preaching, the recruits undergo several weeks of military training, focused on the use of pistols, assault rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, and other sophisticated weaponry.[13] After the completion of religious and military training, the new members are typically assigned to guard duty and patrolling before being deployment to combat missions. The operational space of ISIS fighters and their counterparts in its predecessor organizations had mainly been in Iraq and Syria, until late 2014. Since then, however, ISIS has already established presence in certain areas in Libya and Egypt. ISIS has also made use of certain mechanisms to ensure some degree of success in operational security and intelligence gathering.

Apart from its weaponry and manpower, ISIS has also another vital asset necessary to achieve its worldwide ambition: funding. The UNSC has noted that ISIS may currently be the wealthiest terrorist organization in the world.[14] Its funding comes from four major sources: (1) oil; (2) extortion and theft; (3) kidnap for ransom; and (4) donations. Operating in countries with rich energy resources, ISIS is believed to be producing approximately 47,000 barrels of oil per day. Sold through various smuggling networks and middlemen, ISIS oil is estimated to yield a daily profit of about 846,000 to 1,645,000 US dollars. ISIS also finances its operations through extortion,

especially in the areas where it has established control. Because ISIS claims itself to be a "state," it calls its extortion activities as "taxation" on operations of businesses.[15]

Strategic Assessment

Based on the foregoing discussions, it can be said the ISIS is a terrorist group that has amassed a significant amount of wealth, coupled with a coherent organization, and armed by relatively sophisticated weaponry and propaganda machinery. Following the Dynamic Terrorist Threat Model, there can be no doubt that ISIS poses a direct and grave threat to some areas in the Middle East, and, to a lesser extent, certain places in North Africa. Indeed, the dangers posed by ISIS spring from two fundamental sources: its ideology and its territorial successes. Unlike al-Qaeda, ISIS has articulated a very clear ideological vision of what it seeks to achieve in a specific time frame. More importantly, ISIS has developed a grand geopolitical ambition, which it has skillfully communicated through a powerful narrative that weaves political history with religion. Although appealing to an international audience, ISIS also enjoys a certain degree of support at the grassroots level largely because, as noted earlier, it took advantage of sectarian divide that had engulfed the nations it now controls.

The international and domestic dimensions of ISIS' ideology have two implications. First, its worldwide goal has attracted individual foreigners, as well as other terrorist groups in different countries, to join its ranks, increasing its manpower and broadening its global reach. Indeed, the self-proclaimed caliph, Baghdadi, has called on all of his fighters to "rescue" Muslims worldwide, including those in the Philippines, who have been embroiled in ethno-political and socio-economic conflicts. Second, the populist overtone of its domestic ideology could elicit a certain degree of local support. Indeed, ISIS presently thrives in areas where the state had failed to restore peace and order, as well as promote economic development, i.e. Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Egypt.

Ideology alone, however, is not sufficient to inspire individuals and groups to establish links with ISIS. Equally important is its record of successful

operations. With its swift capture of territories, ISIS is now perceived to have displaced al-Qaeda as the leader of the global jihadist movement—a feat which bestowed the former some semblance of legitimacy over those who share its ideology.[16] This success, moreover, inspired foreigners to join ISIS. As noted earlier, the younger generation of fighters—lured by images of ISIS success which is being broadcast through social media—are taking up arms to fight for the radical ideology being espoused by the terror group. These operations may have the following repercussions: First, the foreign fighters may return to their countries of origin from where they could launch terrorist attacks against both domestic and foreign targets. Evidently, this is the fear of many, especially Western governments, because the fighters remain citizens of their respective countries and may easily return there because of their passports. Second, ISIS-led military operations may eventually redraw the geopolitical map of the Middle East, and may also pose grave risk to the strategic resources found in the region.

Juxtaposed with its ideology, current ISIS operations suggest that it will likely remain confined in the Middle East and, to a lesser extent, in some portions of North Africa. Although ISIS made sweeping gains in 2014, the US-led international coalition has beefed up efforts to defeat the self-proclaimed caliphate. Aside from conducting air strikes, the international community has also pursued to amputate the financial arm of the terror group through a host of economic sanctions. Moreover, as the UNSC has noted, ISIS may not have the technical skills and wherewithal to sustain its weaponry and therefore may last only up to two years. Given this vulnerability, ISIS still has a long way to go before capturing larger territories specified in its strategic plan. Less than a year after releasing its lofty five-year conquest design, the territories that ISIS has seized are currently under attack from coalition forces. Despite its ambitious goals, ISIS is still preoccupied in defending its territorial gains, which constitute only a miniscule fraction of the larger region that the group seeks to dominate based on its five-year conquest plan.

Conclusion

In summary, this article examined the organizational and operational tools of ISIS. Effectively harnessing both tools, ISIS was able to swiftly carve its own territories and attract many supporters from various countries through its politico-religious ideology and its success in its operational space. However, ISIS operations will likely be confined in the Middle East and North Africa because, among other reasons, it is currently under siege by a US-led coalition and it has yet to fully realize its stated strategic objectives.

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Endnotes

[1] Cragin, Kim. & Daly, Sara. *The Dynamic Terrorist Threat: An Assessment of Group Motivations and Capabilities in a Changing World*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. 2004., p. 25.

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