

NON-MILITARY PERSPECTIVES ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAQ

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“Non-Military Perspectives on Recent Developments in Iraq”
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INTRODUCTION

Since 2014, Iraq's stability has been compromised by challenges of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) insurgency, political upheaval, and daunting economic and humanitarian crises. Iraq's trajectory and the development of these crises will have implications for global energy security, stability of the Middle East region, and security of the NATO nations. This is due to Iraq's position as the second largest oil producer in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) after Saudi Arabia, holding the world's fourth largest proven oil reserves, and as a renewed source of terrorist threats. According to Anthony Cordesman, "Iraq as a major oil exporter and critical potential balance to Iran is far more important than Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Somalia" ([Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2017](#)).

In an effort to shed more light on Iraq's possible future trajectory, this paper explores non-military perspectives on recent developments, challenges, and prospects in Iraq across different areas, from security to political and socio-economic domains. It then discusses the impact of these developments on NATO nations' strategic interests in Iraq and in the broader Middle East, concluding with a compilation of expert recommendations.

Research demonstrates that while Iraq faces serious challenges, there are reasons for cautious optimism about Iraqi stability if certain conditions are met. Although many of the factors that will determine whether Iraq will remain on a stable enough path are unpredictable and unfolding, political reconciliation and sustained international support will be critical determinants of stability in Iraq. Finally, while ISIS in Iraq remains a serious danger, it is not an existential threat to NATO nations. In fact, many of the NATO member's strategic core interests in the region, including securing the uninterrupted free flow of oil and gas to world markets, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, containing terrorism, and controlling movement of refugees remain in relatively good shape.

SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS AND PROSPECTS

In mid-2014, ISIS insurgents seized nearly one-third of Iraq's territory, plunging the country into a profound political and security crisis ([Kagan et al., 2016](#)). ISIS shocked the world when it seized Mosul, the country's second-largest city, in June 2014 and then swept across much of the country's Sunni Arab heartland, destroying a section of the border between Syria and Iraq, and proclaiming a self-declared caliphate.

Just three years earlier, in 2011, al-Qaeda in Iraq, a precursor to ISIS, was nearly decimated by the U.S. led coalition and Iraqi Sunnis who revolted brutal jihadists. However, a combination of factors, including the onset of the 2011 civil war in neighbouring Syria, former Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki's authoritarian policies against Sunnis, and the U.S. led coalition withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 created a volatile environment in which ISIS - an offshoot of al-Qaeda in Iraq - could thrive ([Stansfield, 2016](#)).

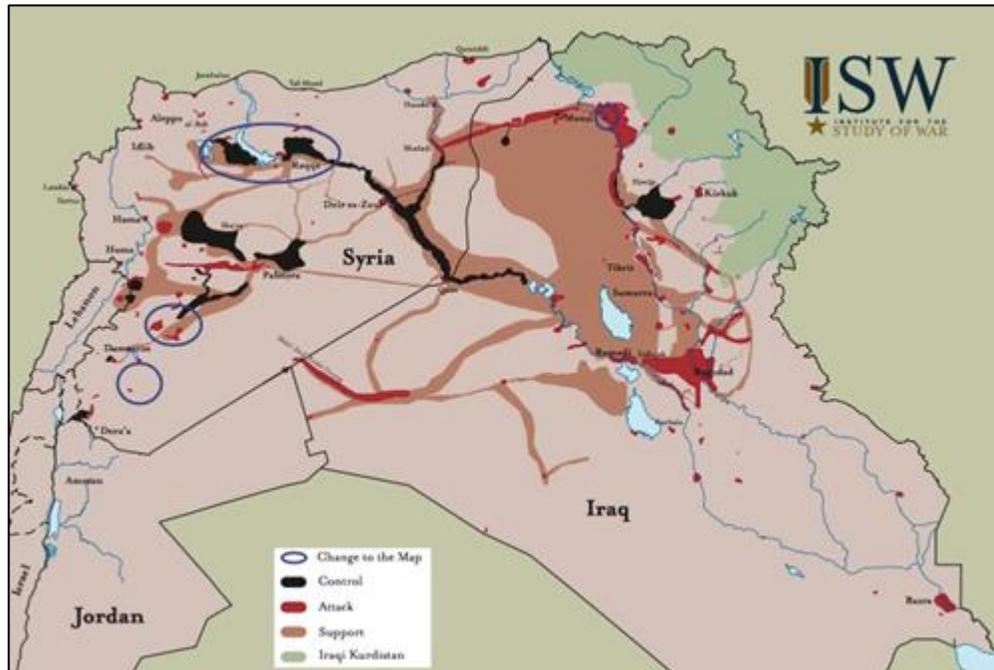
From 2011 to 2014, ISIS used the conflict in Syria to regroup and reorganize before bursting out of Syria, ultimately advancing to the outskirts of Baghdad in early 2014 ([Jones, Dobbins, 2017](#)).

After years of sectarian discrimination of Iraqi Sunnis by the Maliki-led Shia-dominated government, many Sunnis in cities, such as Mosul, and other predominantly Sunni areas, initially supported ISIS and perceived it as the lesser of two evils when compared to Baghdad’s systematic repression. These Sunnis blamed the rise of ISIS on Maliki’s “mass arrests, arbitrary detention, and the killing of Sunni protesters” as well as corruption and an insufficient provision of basic public services ([Ferguson, 2016](#)). More than eighty Iraqi Sunni tribes aided ISIS ([Stern and Berger, 2016](#)). At the same time, the Iraqi military performed dismally in response to the initial ISIS expansion in 2014. This is in part because Shiite-dominated Iraqi military forces had little interest in defending local Sunnis, “many of whom viewed them with hostility and contempt” ([Weiss and Hassan, 2015](#)).

Recent Developments

Since mid-2015, ISIS has been in an unambiguous decline in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi government, Shia militias, Sunni and Kurdish fighters, backed by a U.S. led coalition have liberated most of the Iraqi territory.² By spring 2017, much of Mosul, ISIS’ last urban stronghold in Iraq, has been recaptured by the Iraqi forces and the coalition (Figure 1).

Figure 1. ISIS Sanctuary: May 10, 2017



² The global coalition against ISIS was formed in September 2014 and has 68 members.

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<p>CONTROL ZONE: An area where ISIS exerts physical/psychological pressure to assure that individuals/groups respond as directed.</p> <p>ATTACK ZONE: An area where ISIS conducts offensive maneuvers.</p> <p>SUPPORT ZONE: An area free of significant action against ISIS and which permits logistics and administrative support of ISIS's forces.</p>

Source: Alexandra Gutowski and Jessa Rose Dury-Agri, Institute for the Study of War, 2017.

Many project that the 'Battle for Mosul' will largely mark the end of ISIS's territorial control in Iraq ([al-Khoei, 2017](#)). As of May 2017, the group held less than 7% of the country – down from an estimated 40% in 2014. However, according to expert cited “this [7%] is only counting the populated areas. They actually still hold 18% of it” ([Kittleson, 2017](#)). Defeating the Islamic State in Mosul does not mean the end of struggle against the group. Even if defeated in Iraq, as long as they also have havens across the border in Syria—such as in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor—“they can always return” ([Salem and Slim, 2017](#)).

Prospects of ISIS' Shrinking Geographical Footprint

While ISIS's decisive defeat remains a remote prospect as the Syrian war next door continues, their defeat in Mosul is significant because it “will mean the end of their experiment in religious rule in Iraq and a great blow to their prestige and appeal” ([Salem and Slim, 2017](#)). More importantly, the full recapture of Mosul, the *de facto* capital of the "caliphate" that ISIS proclaimed in 2014, “would end the groups' dreams of a cross-border state” ([Aljazeera, 2017](#)). In contrast to al-Qaeda, territorial control is the *raison d'être* for ISIS with the goal of establishing a loose Islamic caliphate that extends from Africa through the Middle East, South Asia, and parts of the Pacific ([Jones, 2015](#)). A sharp decrease in a number of foreign fighters and local groups joining ISIS, and a decline in propaganda volume indicate ISIS has diminished appeal ([International Crisis Group, 2017](#)).

However, experts warn that greater challenges will follow Mosul's capture ([Schweitzer, 2017](#)). How its aftermath is managed will be key to Iraqi longer-term stability. In the words of an Iraqi senior official, the country will either “start a new chapter of political discourse and improvement, or it will implode into a new state of civil conflict” ([al-Khoei, 2017](#)). The main security challenge will be to prevent new internal conflict among and within Iraq's Sunni, Shia and Kurd power factions over the control of the city and other liberated areas once a common enemy is expelled. Many see Ninewa, Iraq's most ethnically diverse province and home to Mosul, as the test case for whether competing political visions for a new local order can be reconciled peacefully ([Financial Time, 2017](#)). On a positive note, non-military experts and U.S. commanders alike assess the current level of cooperation, and coordination among Iraq's various fighting factions as “unprecedented,” which signals that free-for-all power grab in liberated areas is not inevitable ([Ferguson, 2016](#)).

Analysts also warn against repeating mistakes made after the 2006-07 Arab Sunni Awakening when the Iraq's Sunni tribes helped the U.S. led coalition defeat ISIS's precursor, al-Qaeda in Iraq. Military gains were not translated into a sustainable political order as “the Awakening movement was

subsequently handed over to and promptly betrayed by the government of [former Iraqi Prime Minister] Nouri al-Maliki” ([International Crisis Group, 2017](#)). On one hand, the situation today is more difficult given significantly diminished U.S. military presence and political leverage Iran’s increased influence in Iraqi politics, and a legacy of distrust in the Sunni community derived from the betrayed Awakening movement.

To prevent another round of sectarian conflict and revenge that would allow ISIS to re-emerge, stabilization will not only require rebuilding liberated areas, “but also making sure that international aid does not create new division by favouring some groups over others, and arranging joint security arrangements and local governance” ([Guehenno, 2016](#)). This is critical because the current conflict was caused more by a struggle to compete for power and resources in a post-2003 Iraq characterized by weak institutions and power vacuums, than by a centuries-old feud among Sunnis, Shias, and Kurds ([World Bank, 2017](#)).

Another challenge is that as ISIS’s territorial caliphate crumbles, the group will evolve and as it loses its ground, it may resort to more terrorist attacks in the region and the West “potentially making it a more dangerous and unpredictable enemy in the months to come” ([RAND, 2015](#)). The history of insurgent groups shows that most groups increase terrorist activity with loss of territory, as demonstrated by the al Qaeda-affiliated group al-Shabab in Somalia in 2010 and by al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2005 and 2006 as it lost territory in western Iraq ([Jones, 2015](#)). Terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman posits that once the Islamic State is stateless, the group will return “to what it does best – agile attacks, mobility and surprise” with the remnants of ISIS forming an underground resistance. ISIS’s decline may also present an opportunity for al-Qaeda in Iraq, Syria, and beyond as some militants may see al-Qaeda “as the only option for continuing their struggle” ([The Cipher Brief, 2016](#); [CNN, 2017](#)).³

Finally, many of the Middle East’s major geopolitical struggles are being played out in Iraq. Iraq’s future security and political landscape will be shaped by positions taken by regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and others who will “undoubtedly continue to seize opportunities to secure their regional interests by playing local actors off against one another” ([al-Khoei et al., 2017](#)). Consequently, the region’s power contentions, especially the Saudi-Iran rivalry, which has fuelled sectarianism on both sides of the Sunni-Shiite divide in Iraq and in the broader region, will also have to be managed ([Hiltermann, 2016](#)). However, despite geopolitical tensions and competitions that have contributed to Iraq’s instability, key regional actors such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and others have a shared interest in keeping Iraq’s external borders intact ([Natali 2017](#)).

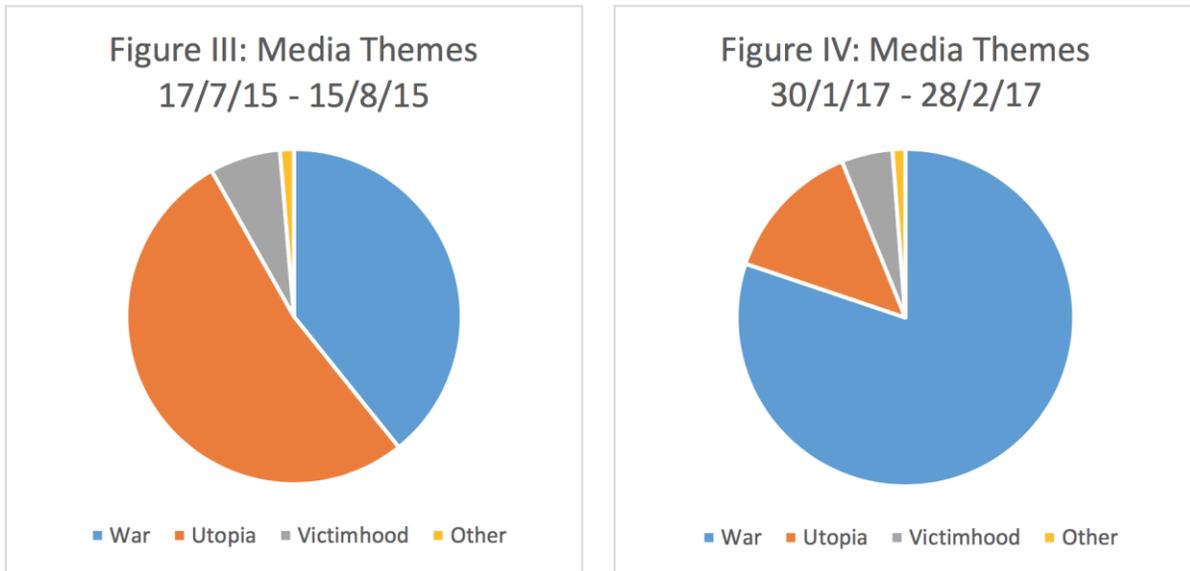
ISIS’ Expansion on the Digital Front

ISIS’s propaganda is another often overlooked indicator of the of the ISIS decline, according to the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR). The ICSR’s analysis shows that at the beginning of 2017, the group is producing nearly 50% less propaganda than during its zenith ([Winter,](#)

³ ISIS traces its origins to an al-Qaeda franchise in Iraq (AQI).

2017). As the group’s territorial control, leadership, and manpower decreased over the course of 2016 and early 2017, ISIS was also forced to recalibrate its propaganda narrative to warfare-themed media and away from governance and utopia-themed messages that underpinned the ISIS’s ideological allure (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Change in ISIS Media Themes over Time



Source: Charlie Winter, “The ISIS Propaganda Decline,” ICSR, March 23, 2017.

However, as ISIS is expelled from key cities, the group may evolve from a territorial to a greater ideological threat through information warfare. The ICSR translation and analysis of a 55-page document published by ISIS in 2016 suggests that propaganda will become an important strategy for survival after the group no longer controls a territorially contiguous area of land. ICSR experts caution that, in fact, propaganda “will become even more important than it is now, as a way of referring back to the golden age” (Winter, 2017). The group will likely escalate its media weapon as “another means of sustaining morale around the world [and] to keep themselves relevant and a sense of momentum,” in hopes to continue to radicalize followers and inspire terror attacks long after the group’s self-declared caliphate has been destroyed (Winter, 2017).

The translated report further reveals that ISIS views propaganda production and dissemination as “media weapons [that can] actually be more potent than atomic bombs,” and at times “even more important than military jihad” (ICSR, 2017). Specifically, the ISIS calls on its media operatives: “...you should know and be convinced of the following fact, [that] the media is a jihad in the way of Allah [and that] you, with your media work, are therefore a mujahid in the way of Allah” (ICSR, 2017).

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ICSR expert Charlie Winter concludes that it is “wrong to imagine a ‘post-Islamic State’ world at this time [as] the caliphate idea will exist long beyond its proto-state due to the vast propaganda” ([Independent, 2017](#)). The ISIS’s most ardent followers “will simply retreat into the virtual world, where they will use the vast archive of propaganda assembled by the group over past few years to keep themselves buoyant with nostalgia” ([Independent, 2017](#)).

Despite some notable efforts since 9/11, there is a consensus among analysts that the rest of the world continues to be outmatched on the digital battlefield as the West’s approach has been largely lacking, and so has the response from Muslim countries. According to Farah Pandith, senior fellow at Harvard’s University and the Council on Foreign Relations there is “not one NGO exists in the world today with the ability to match ISIS’s social media machinery” ([Bloomberg, 2015](#)). NGOs and other non-governmental entities are best positioned to counter ISIS’s advanced media campaign because governments tend to lack credibility. As Pandith points out, the effort to combat extremism is similar to the war on poverty or global warming in the sense that it should not be viewed as solely a government-driven effort ([Bloomberg, 2015](#)). Actions against ISIS’s ideological warfare must be also led by NGOs, philanthropists, and the private sector, especially tech companies “who can help fund and train counter-extremists in data analytics and the effective use of social media” ([Bloomberg, 2015](#); [Pandith, 2016](#)).

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS AND PROSPECTS

As critical military operations against ISIS in Iraq approach the end, the more difficult task of stabilization, reconstruction, and establishing a new political order will begin. In recent years “we have learned to our cost that counter-terrorism without stabilization simply does not work... without a sustained international effort to address the political and economic grievances that gave rise to ISIS a new wave of extremism and conflict will surely follow” ([al-Khoei et al., 2017](#)).

The struggle against ISIS will be only the first of a series of political contests between domestic and regional powers for control in, and influence over, territory in Iraq. ISIS provided a common enemy for Iraqis of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Its defeat in Mosul will shift domestic focus to the unresolved underlying issues that weakened the Iraqi state and enabled ISIS to rise in the first place. Thus, after ISIS and the military campaign, analysts call for a “diplomatic surge” in Iraq to help Iraqi political class to address long overdue concerns raised by the country’s different communities ([Middle East Institute, 2017](#)).

According to some, “there is no consensus about what the state should look like” and what the social contract should be for Iraqi Shias, Sunnis, and Kurds ([Council on Foreign Relations, 2016](#)). Sunnis are in chaos, displaced by war and lacking political leadership. Meanwhile, within the Shia camp competition over control of the state has intensified. Provincial and parliamentary elections set for 2017 and 2018 are viewed as key to determining the distribution of power within the next government.

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Despite the aforementioned challenges, several developments point to a political way forward. The Middle East Institute and European Council on Foreign Relations scholars, among others, note at least six reasons for optimism:

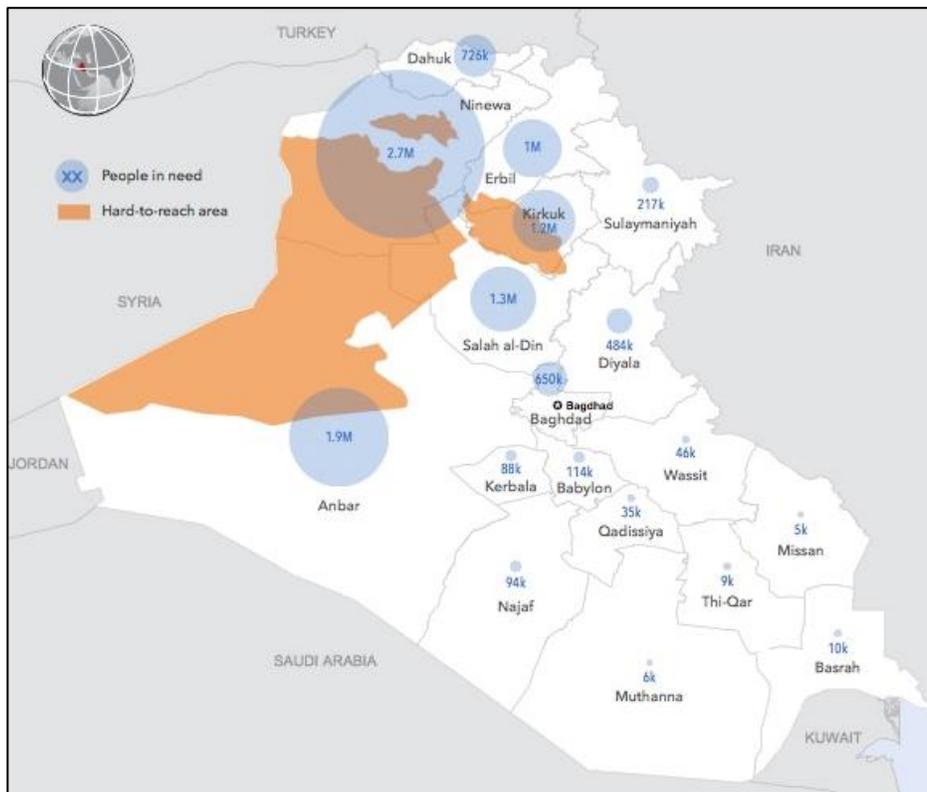
- First, as mentioned before, many assess that the collective struggle against ISIS has led to unprecedented cooperation and a sense of common purpose among Iraq's various competing factions ([Vox.com, 2016](#))
- Second, in contrast to Nouri al-Maliki, who alienated many Iraqi Sunnis and Kurds through systematic discrimination, current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi appears to be "a pragmatist and nationalist who understands the necessity of bringing Iraq's Arab Sunnis into the new order and finding a negotiated way forward with the Kurds" ([Salem and Slim, 2017](#)).
- Third, the Shia political class—except Maliki—has become more pragmatic, acknowledging mistakes in their dealings with Iraqi Sunnis post-2003. Shiite leaders have made two proposals for national reconciliation with Sunnis and call for the United Nations to play a convening and mediating role in this process. Salem and Slim caution that Maliki could be a potential spoiler for this momentum as he prefers greater Iranian involvement in Iraq and positions himself to regain the premiership. His re-election would likely be "the end to all on-going efforts at Sunni-Shiite reconciliation" ([Salem and Slim, 2017](#)).
- Fourth, the Sunni community recognizes that recent mistreatment has been caused by Sunni ISIS, not by the Shia or NATO countries. Senior Sunni figures today acknowledge that some Sunnis initially perceived ISIS as the lesser of two evils compared to Maliki's government oppression and that there was an initial marriage of convenience. The Middle East Institute scholars project that provincial elections in September 2017 have the potential to bring new leaders to the fore, especially some of the provincial governors who have been effective in delivering services and have been working with the central government to rally Sunni participation in the fight against ISIS ([Middle East Institute, 2017](#)).
- Fifth, the Arab region appears inclined to work with Iraq and Prime Minister Abadi. Saudi-Iraqities have been on rise as demonstrated by Adel al-Jubeir's trip to Iraq in February 2017, in what was the first Saudi foreign minister to visit Baghdad since 1990 ([Deutsche Welle, 2017](#)). In addition, Saudi King Salman met with Abadi in Amman, Saudi Arabia has written off Iraq's debts and discussed the resumption of Riyadh-Baghdad flights ([Middle East Monitor, 2017](#)). Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has also called for closer cooperation with, and support for Iraq ([al-Monitor, 2017](#)).
- Finally, in contrast to the past, other experts point to the increasing consensus within Iraqi political blocks around decentralization of power away from Baghdad. The current Iraqi leadership believes that "decentralization would strengthen the country and not weaken it" and should become the main element of any post-ISIS political plan ([al-Khoei et al., 2017](#)). However, since the Sunni-dominated west has no proven oil resources, any decentralization effort would need to ensure a stable and equitable resource sharing ([World Bank, 2017](#)).

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS AND PROSPECTS

The struggle against ISIS has resulted in a major humanitarian, social, and development crisis. Compounding the ISIS-related crisis, the sharp decline in global oil prices resulting in diminished oil export revenues has seriously affected the Iraqi economy and its ability to deal with increased security and humanitarian expenditures.

The humanitarian crisis in Iraq “remains one of the largest and most volatile in the world,” with the pace of displacement over the past three years being nearly without precedent ([World Health Organization, 2017](#)). 11 million Iraqis are in need of some form of humanitarian assistance, 4 million are internally displaced, and about 250,000 Syrian refugees have fled to Iraq ([UN OCHA, 2017](#)). In Mosul alone, up to 1.5 million people are estimated to require some form of humanitarian assistance, with nearly half a million people being displaced since the start of military operations to retake Mosul in October 2016.

Figure 3. Iraq’s Humanitarian Needs - March 2017



Source: “Iraq: 2017 Humanitarian Needs,” UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2017.

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Humanitarian organizations note that while an “impressive national effort” involving the government, civil society, and communities has been gathered, the humanitarian needs outweigh available resources and capacity ([UN OCHA, 2017](#)). In 2017, nearly 146 humanitarian organizations have provided aid to over 11 million people across all the Iraqi 18 governorates.

Beyond the immediate humanitarian help, questions loom surrounding the long-term plans for stabilization and reconstruction. Due to intense damage in Iraqi cities, the price tag of stabilization and national reconstruction needs will be enormous ([IPI Global Observatory, 2017](#)). Public infrastructure and housing have been destroyed in at least half of all retaken areas with essential services available only in some districts ([UN OCHA, 2017](#)).

Iraq’s leaders will need to develop a strategy for restoring essential services and infrastructure to liberated populations, because “liberation without reconstruction creates conditions for renewed instability” ([Schweitzer, 2017](#)). Due to the ongoing financial crisis, the Iraqi government lacks the resources to confront the challenge of reconstruction alone. The sharp drop in global oil prices below \$50 per barrel in mid-2015, down from over \$100 per barrel a year earlier, seriously affected the Iraqi economy that is almost exclusively dependent on oil revenues. Revenues from oil exports amount to 43% of the country’s GDP, 99% of its exports, 90% of its government revenue. In 2016, oil’s market price “was only [around] half that needed for the Iraqi budget to break even” ([Global Risk Insight, 2016](#)).

In July 2016, former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry convened a conference that raised \$2.1 billion in pledges—75% of which will go to “demining and stabilization efforts” ([World Street Journal, 2016](#)). However, much more will be needed to restore an acceptable level of safety and essential services. The U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson stressed that after providing three-quarters of the military resources to dislodge ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the U.S. will look to others to fund a bulk of an estimated \$2 billion needed for stabilization and reconstruction in 2017 alone ([Washington Post, 2017](#)). Securing financial assistance from the nations that have a vital stake in the stability of Iraq will be essential. Some of these nations include the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) neighbours that view a stable Iraq as an effective counterbalance to Iran, as well as China, India, South Korea, and other major importers of Iraqi oil.

On a positive note, 90% of Iraqi oil production comes from the southern part of the country unaffected by the ISIS insurgency. Given a gradual recovery in oil prices, an increase in oil production and a diminishing ISIS threat, the World Bank projects that Iraq’s economy will grow at a sustained 7.2% in 2017. It is then expected to hover at around 5% by 2020—mainly due to increased oil production, structural reforms, and the implementation of a \$5.34 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund to ensure debt sustainability ([World Bank, 2016](#)).

For a long-term stability beyond initial stabilization efforts, Iraq will have to focus on structural governance and development issues to be able to provide basic services and jobs for its fast-growing young population. Nearly 50% of Iraq’s population is under 19 years old and labor force participation

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remains low in Iraq, especially for women and the youth ([UNDP, 2016](#)). Around 40% of young Iraqi men and over 90% of young women were out of the labour force in 2016. At the same time, the Fragile States Index, Bertelsmann Transformation Index, and World Governance Indicators all rank Iraq as performing poorly on measures of the basic administrative capacities required for effective governance. Iraq's economy was already seeing supply side strains in public service delivery prior to the crisis and the country continually scores among the worst in corruption indicators. According to the World Bank Enterprise Survey, electricity shortages in Iraq are among the main constraints to private sector development ([World Bank, 2011](#)). Power outages and the alleged mismanagement of public utilities also resulted in large-scale protests in summer 2015.

Despite these challenges, experts point to Iraq's rich diversity and wealth presenting numerous opportunities for the Iraqi future. Iraq has considerable agricultural resources and with its holy Shia cities and historical heritage, the country continues to attract millions of tourists ([World Bank, 2017](#)). Until the collapse in oil prices and spike in violence, Iraq had been successful in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI) in oil, construction sectors, transport, energy, and real estate. Between 2004 and 2013, the country had attracted a tenfold or \$6 billion increase in FDI, an inflow similar to much larger economies such as Egypt ([World Bank, 2016](#)). This FDI magnitude indicates that Iraq "is capable of attracting large amounts of foreign capital as well as skills, technology, and international business networks" ([World Bank, 2016](#)).

IMPLICATIONS TO NATO'S CORE STRATEGIC INTERESTS

This section discusses the implications of the recent security, political and economic developments in Iraq in the context of the NATO nations' core strategic interests in the Middle East. These interests include securing the uninterrupted free flow of oil and gas to world markets, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, containing terrorism, and controlling movement of refugees. On the surface, it appears that these core interests are in great trouble. The headlines reinforce such concerns and illuminate all of the chaos and instability in the Middle East; however, despite the struggle against ISIS, "one should be wary of extrapolating long-run trends from short-term cycles" ([Nye, 2012](#)). The longer-term trends and holistic 360-degree view around the region indicate that the first two core interests are in "reasonably good shape" while the third and fourth are volatile but cautiously improving ([Salem, 2017](#)).

Oil Security

Few goals are more important for the global economy than ensuring the free flow of oil, and, to a lesser extent, liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the Persian Gulf. In fact, past American and global recessions have been preceded or accelerated by an increase in oil prices, often as a result of Persian Gulf instability, including the 1973 oil embargo, the 1979 Iranian revolution, and the 1980 outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war, among others ([Oskarsson, 2014](#); [Yetiv, 2015](#)). To be sure, the security of Persian Gulf oil and a need for oil investment in the region is poised to become even more important in the future as the world dependence on oil and LNG is projected to increase in decades ahead. Since the

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Persian Gulf holds the greatest proven reserves of oil projected to last around 75 years at current rates of production ([EIA, 2017](#)), this region will continue serving as the principal source of supply to meet rising demand over the next two decades.

Two critical dimensions in the Persian Gulf affect global oil security: the free flow of oil from the Gulf region and adequate investment into oil exploration and development. Developments in Iraq have not had a negative impact on either. Both sustained oil production from the region and investments have continued despite the volatile situation in Iraq and the broader region. In fact, despite all of the political and security issues in Iraq, the country has been successful at increasing oil production and pumps record volumes, about 2 million barrels a day more than what Iraq was producing before the 2003 U.S.-led invasion ([Oilprice, 2016](#)).

The global decline in oil prices, rather than the ISIS-induced instability in Iraq have hurt Iraq's oil revenues – its main economic lifeline. The production has remained at a record high partly because the Iraqi government periodically reinforced security around southern oil facilities as conflict escalated to ensure the international oil investors would not withdraw from the country. There have not been reports of major production outages caused by security issues. That is because much of Iraq's oil facilities are clustered in the southern part of the country away from much of the fighting.

In a broader context, research tracing long-term changes in the international relations of the Persian Gulf demonstrates that despite Iraq's instability, the United States' long-standing capabilities in the Persian Gulf have been key for oil security partly by helping protect the free flow of oil at reasonable prices ([Oskarsson, 2014](#); [Yetiv, 2015](#)). Meanwhile, China and Russia have certainly tried to rival the United States in the Persian Gulf, but that rivalry has been minor in the security arena, even if Moscow has sought greater influence in the broader Middle East. China's growing need for oil has also tempered its propensity to challenge Washington by increasing its stake in regional stability, and Russia's regional ambitions and capabilities have remained tame compared to the Cold War period.

In fact, the rise in China's and Russia's economic interdependence with the regional states including Iraq has benefited global oil security by bringing more oil and gas on the global energy market through mutual investments and, secondly, by increasing their stake in regional stability. Since the Iraq War in 2003, Chinese energy companies have invested some \$10 billion in Iraq's nascent oil industry, with China becoming the destination for around half of Iraq's oil export ([Keck, 2014](#)). According to the International Energy Agency, by 2035, 80% of Iraqi production will go to China, which may further solidify China's stake in regional stability ([Bloomberg, 2014](#)).

Non-proliferation

The instability in Iraq has not had any significantly negative impact on the core interest of non-proliferation in the region. With the exception of Syria, the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to countries in the Middle East, other than Israel, has been stopped, at least for the immediate future ([Salem, 2016](#)). In 2015, Iran agreed to measures that would prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons, at least for the next decade and a half, in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

(JCPOA). After the closing down of nuclear and chemical weapons programs in Iraq, Libya, and Syria,⁴ the agreement with Iran eliminated an imminent threat and stopped a potential proliferation race between Iran, the Arab countries, and Turkey ([Brookings, 2015](#)).

Terrorism

The rise of ISIS in Iraq and a broader Middle East North Africa (MENA) region certainly increased terrorist threats. While issues of terrorism and migration have topped the agenda throughout Europe, remaining a great concern, the situation has shown cautious signs of improving. ISIS has been losing ground in Iraqi and Syrian heartlands. The group's Libyan branch, with closest ties to the Iraqi leadership, has been expelled from the Mediterranean coastal strip it controlled; and Boko Haram that pledged allegiance to ISIS has split and lost much of the territory it held in 2016 ([International Crisis Group, 2017](#)). Although "smaller branches exist from Afghanistan to the Sinai and Yemen to Somalia, the movement has struggled to make major inroads or hold territory elsewhere" ([International Crisis Group, 2017](#)). The START database used in the U.S. State Department's annual country reports on terrorism indicates that "ISIS's reversal in 2016 may well indicate that it may have peaked in 2015-2016, and that other Islamist extremist movements will dominate threat in future years" ([Cordesman, 2017](#); [Global Terrorism Database, 2016](#)).

Second, the terrorist threat to NATO nations emanating from Iraq and the broader region can easily be exaggerated. A study of jihadi plots in Europe between 2011 and mid-2015 revealed that the ISIS attacks were mostly inspirational, with ISIS not mounting the attacks directly ([Hegghammer and Nesser, 2015](#)). As the ISIS brand diminishes with the loss of self-proclaimed territorial caliphate in Iraq, and if NATO member states bolster their counter-ISIS propaganda measures, among others, in cooperation with NGOs and private sector partners, these inspirational attacks may further diminish. However, as noted in the earlier section, to maintain morale as it loses its ground, ISIS may initially resort to more terrorist attacks in the region and the West "potentially making it a more dangerous and unpredictable enemy in the months to come" ([RAND, 2015](#)).

Furthermore, as data shows, there is no real "clash between civilizations," but "clearly a clash within a civilization and that civilization is the Islamic world" as the vast majority of the violence perpetuated by Islamic extremism has consisted of Muslims killing Muslims and has been contained within the MENA countries, the majority of which have some form of strategic partnership with NATO nations

⁴ The regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad agreed to a Russian proposal to give up control of its chemical weapons after the 2013 chemical attack during the Syrian Civil War, however, the use of chemical weapons in April 2017 demonstrates that the country continues to stockpile nerve agents.

and the U.S. in particular ([Cordesman, 2017](#)).⁵ Finally, polls show that the vast majority of Muslims do not support extremism ([Pew Research, 2017](#)).

Refugees and Migration

The conflict in Iraq, Syria, and the broader region has led to the worst migrant crisis since WWII in Europe, with more than a million people arriving in 2015. However, as Iraqi cities seized by ISIS in 2014 continue to be liberated, and as disillusionment with life in Europe grows, thousands of Iraqi refugees who arrived in Europe to look for opportunities have decided to cancel their asylum applications and to return home voluntarily. "... citing family issues and disappointment with life" in Europe as reasons for their departure ([Reuters, 2016](#)). Nearly 80% of the migrants returning home are Iraqis and the numbers of returnees is increasing steadily. The increase in the voluntary return of the Iraqi refugees suggests that as the security situation in Iraq continues to improve, more refugees will prefer to return to their homes.

For instance, in Finland almost two thirds of the asylum seekers were young Iraqi men, "but some are having second thoughts," with around 5,000 of them cancelling their asylum application in 2016 ([Reuters, 2016](#)). In February 2016, a travel agency in Helsinki was selling 15-20 flights from Finland to Baghdad every day. Germany, which took in 1.1 million people in 2015, has also seen small numbers of Iraqi refugees choosing to go home ([Latin Times, 2016](#)). The International Organization for Migration said it helped almost 3,500 Iraqis return home already in 2015 — just a portion of the overall number coming back, as many do so with the assistance of local governments or Iraqi Embassies in European countries. "Since early 2016, requests for more assistance are increasing," reported Thomas Weiss, the organization's chief of mission in Iraq ([New York Times, 2016](#)).

As one Iraqi refugee noted in summer of 2015, Facebook was filled with posts about making the trip to Europe. Now, some Iraqis in Europe are turning to social media to warn their fellow citizens away. One video posted recently shows an Iraqi man saying, "I'm just waiting for my flight to Baghdad, and I will be back soon. I would advise everyone not to take the risk and come to Europe" ([New York Times, 2016](#)). In 2016, the Iraqi government recently sent a delegation to Europe to organize the return of Iraqis, and it may send chartered airplanes to bring them back.

⁵ 12 of 17 countries that have some form of strategic partnership with the U.S. and other NATO members include: Morocco, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman.

CONCLUSION

As this paper demonstrated, a strategy to stabilize Iraq will have to deal with both short- and long-term targets. In the short-term, the international community has to continue to dislodge ISIS territorial control in Iraq and Syria to destroy the terrorist group's brand. This strategy must also enable Iraq to embark on a physical and political stabilization and reconstruction process, which prioritizes the prevention of a free-for-all in liberated areas, mediation among factions, a visible recovery of basic public services, and focus on livelihood. In the short-term, the international community must take proactive measures to counter a potential spike in terrorist attacks and online propaganda in the Middle East and the West because, as research indicates, those are to be expected in the immediate aftermath of ISIS's territorial losses.

However, there is virtually unanimous consensus among non-military experts that containing or even defeating ISIS alone will not "put an end to the broad range of forces that have made a small minority of Islamist extremists a serious threat" to security of Iraq, broader MENA region and West ([CSIS, 2017](#)). Successful attacks on ISIS alone will not automatically translate to political unity, improved governance, economic progress, and other root causes of stability. In the longer term, the only lasting antidote to the presence or return of ISIS, as well as other terrorist groups destabilizing Iraq and the region, is political reconciliation and more equitable division on power, strengthening of governance, economic diversification, and regional order.

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APPENDIX 1 – RECOMMENDATIONS

This section provides a brief snapshot of priority areas for short-term and long-term actions based on the lessons learned from previous experience in Iraq and other similar contexts.

Reconstruction and Governance

- In line with NATO’s federated approach to projecting stability, through exercises and improved coordination, NATO, EU, UN and others should better understand how to work together as mutual force multipliers ([Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016](#)). As Ulgen and Kasapogly argue, the overall impact of NATO’s efforts to project stability by supporting security-sector reform, defense-capability building, and counterterrorism in partner countries will continue to be significantly affected by the relationship between NATO and these non-military organizations that concentrate on other key areas of governance reforms and capacity building ([Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016](#)).
- World Bank recommends focusing on restoring the legitimacy and social trust by implementing emergency rapid programs in Sunni-dominant areas where the trust in state institutions is very low, where Iraqis feel marginalized, and where radicalization was the strongest ([World Bank, 2017](#)).
- In a 2017 United Nations Development Program report, Steven Zyck recommends to prioritize community-driven development and local governance by mobilizing local participatory councils to identify, prioritize, and partly implement small-scale projects ([UNDP, 2017](#)).
- Research on best reconstruction practices and lessons learned advises to prioritize construction skills- building among affected women, men, and youth. Doing so will help Iraqis to rebuild their own home and potentially obtain employment with large contractors eventually involved in rehabilitating infrastructure. A construction boom and a shortage of construction skills can be anticipated when reconstruction takes off. As Paul Collier notes “a priority is thus at an early stage to establish training facilities for basic construction skills and target training on young men who might otherwise be recruits into the reversion to violence.” Collier recommends building construction capacity on a massive scale among refugees, Internationally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and others during a conflict ([UNDP, 2017](#)).
- World Bank recommends targeting reconstruction assistance, particularly related to livelihoods and basic services, where it is considered most likely to prevent spoiler violence and enhance the legitimacy of the state. It also calls for the creation of opportunities for people to come together on local recovery activities to build social cohesion and provide this assistance through and in the name of the state to build legitimacy of the state ([World Bank, 2017](#)).
- Similarly, based on the exploration of non-NATO approaches to projecting stability, Steven Zyck recommends to prioritize programs focused on livelihood and education as those have been

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empirically proven to be most effective in improving local security conditions – and in reducing outward migration rates ([Zyck, 2017](#)).

- A UNDP study advises local and regional organizations should be also prepared to receive international reconstruction support and funds directly from the international community, so that they can contribute to reconstruction. This includes the development of a database of local organizations interested in contributing to the reconstruction process; assessing their capacity; and launching programs to build the capacity of those local actors. Donors and international organizations should also modify their policies to be able to directly support and finance local entities ([UNDP, 2017](#)).
- According to Kenneth Polack, international efforts with Iraq's Sunni Arabs should prioritize three main efforts. First, support Prime Minister Abadi's and Grand Ayatollah Sistani's effort to keep Shia Popular Mobilization militias away from liberated Sunni areas to avoid revenge and mistreatment of Sunni Arabs. Second, create Sunni Arab self-policing in liberated areas as well as encourage and assist with the revitalization of local politics in the liberated Sunni Arab areas ([Brookings Institution, 2016](#)).
- Scholar Denise Natali recommends emphasizing Iraqi state sovereignty and opening support for leaders, including the Abadi government, driven by Iraqi nationalism who seek to bridge ethno-sectarian divides and engage in reform ([Middle East Policy Council, 2017](#)).
- She further advises to focus on territorial units as opposed to ethno-sectarian affiliations. Instead of targeting specific ethnic and religious groups, the international community should focus on strengthening the institutional capabilities of the state, including provincial administrations and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in coordination with federal authorities ([Middle East Policy Council, 2017](#)).

ISIS Terrorism and other Transnational Challenges

- Experts caution against fighting terrorism without diplomacy. As the International Crisis Group points out, managing allies' rivalries, preventing a free-for-all in Iraq, and mediating between Iraqi factions "all are diplomats' work" ([International Crisis Group, 2017](#)).
- To project stability and exercise the federated approach muscle, NATO and its member nations should build and expand a network of connections with more diverse partners, including cities, foundations, private companies, and civil society groups. For instance, in March 2017, the Rockefeller Foundation brought together global mayors, start-up technologists, and the world's highest profile venture capitalists to solve collectively the toughest urban challenges, including terrorism and migration, of the 21st century. Similarly, the Rockefeller Foundation's global 100 Resilient Cities network enables 100 Chief Resilience Officers from cities around the world and over 400 private and non-profit 100RC partners to find and exchange solutions to pressing challenges of the 21st century, including terrorism and migration ([Citylab, 2017](#)).

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- Anthony Cordesman of the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) recommends to prioritize proactive stabilization “to deny space to terror groups and pre-empt the need for the armed forces to fight dozens of unending wars around the world” ([CSIS, 2015](#)). NATO, in collaboration and coordination with the EU, UN and other key actors should focus on preserving the security and strengthening stability of countries MENA region to limit the spread of extremism and uphold broader regional stability. For instance, the U.S. already has strategic partnerships with still stable states including Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. As Cordesman notes, “each of these states faces many of the challenges that led to instability and warfare in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen,” with Egypt and Tunisia already suffering from political and economic crises during Arab Spring ([CSIS, 2015](#)).
- Experts from the Netherlands Institute of International Relations recommend expanding the non-military elements of the campaign against ISIS already underway, including intercepting foreign fighters going to the Middle East from other countries, targeting ISIS’ finances, countering its propaganda; and stabilizing areas once cleared of ISIS ([Clingendael, 2016](#)).

Communication and Propaganda

- Cohen and Goldschmidt recommend increasing production of messages communicating that ISIS is losing. Since the key part of the Islamic State’s recruitment propaganda strategy is creating perception that the group is winning, defeating the group’s message depends in part on creating a perception that it is losing, according to one ex-terrorist explaining how to fight ISIS online ([Cohen and Goldschmidt, 2015](#)).
- Daniel Byman, professor at Georgetown University advises to target the Islamic State’s command and control and disrupt its ability to communicate with its global affiliates the same way as the U.S. effectively did in case of al-Qaeda ([Byman, 2014](#)).
- In the *ISIS: State of Terror*, Stern, and Berger, two U.S. leading experts on terrorism advice to increase efforts to take down jihadists’ online accounts. ISIS must spend time to rebuild lost networks, which makes it more difficult for recruiters to spam and broadcast widely ([Stern and Berger, 2016](#)).
- Nadia Oweidat, senior fellow at New America calls for encouraging the Muslim community to increase their communication efforts to counter ISIS propaganda. As she points out, “a young person who’s seriously considering committing murder in the name of Islam would never pay attention to a tweet or a video from the U.S. government, no matter how expertly crafted.” Therefore, it is necessary to “let others do the talking.” The most effective voices to counter ISIS’s narrative come from partners in Muslim-majority countries ([CNN, 2015](#)).
- Oweidat also recommends that Western nations support individual scholars and intellectuals who have credence in the Muslim world, including Californian Hamza Yusuf; Egyptian Islam al-Behery;

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Iraqi Ayad Jamal al-Din; Saudis Ibrahim al-Buleihi and Turki al-Hamad; and Bahrainian Dhiyaa al-Musawi ([CNN, 2015](#)).

- Finally, she recommends presenting an alternative worldview to the worldview that ISIS disseminates – that the U.S. and West hates Muslims and is trying to destroy Islam. She recommends showing that “Muslims in America are so much better off than in the entire globe” compared to systemic silencing of “those who espouse liberal values like democracy, diversity and freedom of religion” in many Muslim countries. She suggests tweeting about how the U.S. gives scholarships to Arab and Muslim students, and how the U.S. is the largest donor to Syrian refugees ([CNN, 2015](#)).
- Daniel Cohen, coordinator of the military and strategic affairs program and the cyberwarfare program at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, advises to increase the production values and volume to counter ISIS’s use of slick videos to promote its worldview. Just like ISIS, the West needs to be on social media nonstop. “Every region controlled by ISIS has its own production company, and every day they’re publishing,” Cohen said. “People sit around for hours tweeting and re-tweeting and sending messages all around” ([CNN, 2015](#)).
- Experts from the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization call for an increase and expansion of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum’s work, which coordinates efforts by governments, intelligence agencies, and charities in 29 countries and the EU to prevent radicalization. They also call for inclusion of social networks, internet providers, industry and community-based initiatives ([International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2017](#)).
- As Charlie Winter with the ICSR points out, “the Islamic State is where it is today because of strategic, innovative thinking, not just technological advances. The international community must be equally as creative and strategic-minded in its approach towards counter-communications” ([International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2017](#)).
- Since supporters and potential recruits are heterogeneous, Winter further advises to expand a range of channels to counter ISIS’ propaganda and to base counter-strategic communications upon “implicitly positive foundations and avoid targeting the Islamic State alone” ([International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, 2017](#)).

