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Executive Summary:

- ✓ More effective support for the Kurdish and Syrian opposition is necessary to fight the threat of ISIS and to move the Syrian conflict toward a possible solution by helping to unite a fractured political opposition and by changing Iran's calculus on the long-term benefits of supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime.

- ✓ The eventual success of military efforts undertaken by the UK government and its Western and regional partners in rolling back ISIS influence on the ground will facilitate the group's transformation into a transnational movement mirroring al-Qaeda and thus increase the risk of terrorist attacks in the wider Middle East and the West.

- ✓ Any long-term strategy to fight ISIS and other Islamist extremist groups must involve the development of more inclusive religious discourses and the opening of political space for secular liberals and moderate Islamists across the Arab world.

What are the threats represented by ISIL, other militant groups and the Assad regime, politically, ideologically and militarily in Iraq and Syria? How might they evolve?

ISIS

1) ISIS poses a clear threat to the physical integrity of Iraq and Syria. ISIS's claim to establish an 'Islamic Caliphate' covering both countries is at odds with the general Western interest in maintaining existing borders in the region and the specific commitment to the democratically elected government of Iraq. The resulting refugee flows put neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey under increasing pressure with potential ramifications for the national security of these countries.

2) In addition, the deliberate killing of civilians and unarmed prisoners of war, the brutal mistreatment of women, religious minorities, and everybody else who does not follow their narrow interpretation of Islam, as well as the indoctrination of children on their way to becoming child soldiers - all documented by the United Nations and international NGOs (Brannen 2014) - raise questions about the international community's moral obligations to the civilian populations of Iraq and Syria.

3) Regionally, ISIS' rhetorical focus on erasing the borders drawn by the World War I British-French Sykes-Picot agreement prompted some observers to regard ISIS's initial advances along largely Sunni areas as heralding the reshaping of the Middle East according to 'religious dividing lines (rather) than the old imperial conveniences of 100 years ago' (Ashdown 2014). In fact, academic research has claimed that the Middle East's enduring instability directly results from Western attempts at 'deterring or preventing state-building wars from being fought to successful conclusions across existing Middle Eastern boundaries' (Lustick 1997). Of course, it would be wrong to regard ISIS's vision of an 'Islamic Caliphate' which covers (at least) the current states of Syria and Iraq as offering a genuine chance of producing a more stable regional order. If we follow Anderson's notion of nations as 'imagined communities', then ISIS's religious nationalism is as artificial as any other Baathist, Arab nationalist or Islamist political project. While religious and national identities have been instrumentalized in political power struggles in the Middle East and beyond, it would be politically dangerous and strategically ill-advised to fall into the trap of Orientalist essentialism and reduce people to their supposedly primordial cultural and religious attributes. Of course, for many people in the region, categories such as 'Sunni', 'Shia', 'Arab' or 'Persian' have real meaning. But the political implications of such identities are fluid and do not constitute an insurmountable obstacle to preventing people of different faiths and ethnicities from living together. The break-up of Syria and Iraq is not inevitable.

4) In assessing the current or future threat which ISIS poses at the global level, it is worthwhile to contemplate the nature of the group's rationality. Following Abrahms (2004) study of whether the use of terrorist political violence can be considered rational, we need to distinguish between 'procedural' rationality in terms of specific tactics and political messaging and 'substantive' rationality in terms of the overall political aims. If we, first, assume that ISIS's 'procedural rationality' does indeed reflect a larger 'substantive rationality' then its 'state-building' project, as evidenced most recently in the decision to issue its own currency and its hierarchical political structure, might end in a clearly-marked political entity which would react in a rational, and thus largely predictable manner, to the constraints of the international and regional political systems. In fact, ISIS would not be the first political movement which has effectively used the full range of political violence from terrorism against civilian targets, guerrilla attacks on military targets, to the state terror intimidation of

populations under its control in the process of state-building. In addition, the characteristics of an established 'Islamic State' effectively controlled and run by ISIS such as dependence on oil revenues, religious chauvinism that also serves as an inspiration for regional and global terrorist groups and a ruthless political authoritarianism would make it appear rather similar to one or two existing and internationally well-connected Arab countries. In this reading, the gruesome beheadings of Western hostages should be regarded as failed attempts to intimidate Western publics into pressuring their political representatives into withholding or withdrawing their consent for military action. These acts of violence would thus fit into the broader pattern of terrorist attacks actually stiffening, instead of undermining the targeted publics' and policymakers' resolve (Abrahms 2014).

5) If, however, we assume, second, that ISIS's procedural rationality cannot disguise its substantive irrationality, then the abduction and murder of Western civilians would follow the established terrorist strategy of provocation (Kydd/Walter 2006) according to which a politically weak (as measured in public support) non-state actor would provoke a government into over-reacting so that the non-state actor's target audience would view the targeted government as the aggressor and not the terrorist organization which initiated violence. This could reflect ISIS's rational interest in boosting the numbers of its supporters on the way toward achieving the irrational aim of bringing about an apocalyptic showdown between (its version of) 'Islam' and its perceived enemies. While the US/British track record in post-conflict stabilization in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya is not without its critics, a rational examination of the powerful joined impact of superior Western airpower and local fighting forces in the 2001 Afghanistan and the 2011 Libya campaigns should have made ISIS wary of setting in motion exactly the kind of cooperation between the US and UK governments as well as Iraqi and Kurdish forces we have witnessed since August 2014. Provoking a military confrontation with the US at this stage would thus only make sense if ISIS regarded a direct confrontation with the West as inevitable. This interpretation of the beheadings of Western hostages would thus lead to the conclusion that ISIS's ideological outlook might not be too different from al-Qaeda's global, confrontational agenda.

6) Of course, ISIS and al-Qaeda differ in a number of important ways. First and foremost, ISIS has achieved something which Al-Qaeda has never been able to achieve on its own, the control of territory. Lacking a physical base after the ouster of the Taliban regime in 2001, Al-Qaeda had to follow the quintessential terrorist strategy of aiming to 'control the mind' of its (Western) target audiences via the spread of fear whereas ISIS can rely (so far) on its ability to control territory. This also allows ISIS to project to potential recruits from across the Arab world and beyond the chance to live in a 'perfect' 'Islamic' system. Those willing to accept the ISIS narrative can thus see themselves as participating in a religious project of historical significance.

7) The attractiveness of the ISIS brand within the shared pool of potential recruits explains why al-Qaeda can be assumed to be desperate for a 'successful' terrorist attack in the West. Ayman al-Zawahiri is reported to have been rather quick to realize the potential of the Syrian conflict in facilitating the recruitment of Western jihadi volunteers, their indoctrination and military training on the way toward creating a new cohort of battle-hardened terrorists who would be able to succeed the earlier al-Qaeda generation which Western counterterrorism efforts decimated so effectively after 9/11.

8) This seems to have been the purpose behind the establishment of the 'Khorasan' group within the al-Nusra Front which was led by Muhsin al-Fadli. Al-Fadli is described by the US and UN as a close confident of former Al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden as well as a facilitator of the activities of Abu Musab az-Zarqawi, late leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The US government also considers him as having been involved in the 2009 and 2010 attempted terrorist attacks on US airliners. The US government has so far not confirmed whether al-Fadli died in the strikes against the 'Khorasan' group which marked the beginning of the US-led air campaign in Syria in September 2014.

9) At the same time, if ISIS viewed itself as heading for a global confrontation with the US anyway, an ISIS-led or –inspired attack in the West would offer benefits to this group as well. It would demonstrate its global reach amid criticism from other radical Islamists (not just affiliated with al-Qaeda) that ISIS is focusing too much on fighting fellow Muslims and not enough on fighting 'the West' as the main enemy. The onset

of the Western military campaign, in particular, would provide ISIS with the chance to frame such an attack as an act of self-defence which, actually, might have been inspired by a self-serving interest in outbidding al-Qaeda. Indeed, if ISIS were to suffer military losses at a scale that would substantially diminish its geographical grip on Sunni territories in Syria and Iraq, its leaders would have an incentive to maintain global relevance by morphing the organization into the kind of transnational global network pioneered by al-Qaeda. Al-Baghdadi's audio message from 13 November 2014 offered first evidence of a shift in this direction. Not only does al-Baghdadi take note of the pledges of allegiance from radical Islamist groups across the region, he also calls upon his followers to 'erupt volcanoes of jihad everywhere' and assures them that their march will continue until they 'reach Rome'. With the sheers numbers of Arab and Western volunteers involved and ISIS's emphasis on indoctrinating young children the ripple effect of the rise and eventual demise of ISIS could last for generations (Brannen 2014).

Ahrar al-Sham

10) The Ahrar al-Sham group is one of the largest Syrian opposition groups. On the one hand, it claims to pursue a decidedly local agenda which focuses on toppling Bashar al-Assad and setting up an Islamic system of governance within Syria. In this, it competed with ISIS which assassinated Ahhrar al-Sham's leader Abu Khalid al-Suri in a suicide bombing in early 2014. At the same time, Abu Khalid had close personal links to Al-Qaeda members such as Ayman az-Zawahiri dating back to his time in Afghanistan. Media reports even suggested that Al-Zawahiri had named Abu Khalid as his delegate to Syria.

Assad regime

11) The Syrian regime has proven very skilful at exploiting the Western community's reluctance to get involved in another military operation in the Middle East. Lacking any respect for the rights of the Syrian civilian population, it has calibrated its ruthless repression in such a way as to avoid, so far, a direct military confrontation with the West (Leenders 2013). Together with the West's unwillingness to engage more

directly with Syria's moderate opposition, this strategy weakened and almost eliminated any meaningful non-Islamist opposition.

The Government has emphasised that military action is dependent on an internal political solution and a regional solution involving other states. What are the components of this solution, how can the Government work to achieve them and what is the likelihood of success?

Short-term

12) ISIS strength relies quite heavily on its ability to intimidate local populations into supporting the group or at least into refraining from joining forces with ISIS's enemies. This explains the pattern of brutal massacres committed against Sunni villagers and tribes who dared to reject ISIS's presence or style of governing (Sly 2014). The aura of invincibility also serves as an important element of ISIS's global marketing. This is why achieving military successes in high-profile theatres such as Kobane is crucial. With Western boots on the ground out of the question for the foreseeable future, any Western military air campaign has to be accompanied by cooperation with local troops who are not just well-equipped and well-trained enough to make use of the opportunities which successful Western airstrikes create, but who also enjoy the support of the local population. Successful counterinsurgency not only requires the counterinsurgent to portray the ability to protect the local population from the insurgents. The local population must also view the counterinsurgent as respecting and serving their political and economic interests (Galula 1963). This is why the professionalization and diversification of the Iraqi army is of such crucial importance.

13) In Syria, the UK and its allies need to redouble their efforts to support Kurdish and Sunni opposition fighting forces. This would also help protect the Syrian civilian population from simply swapping the Scylla of ISIS atrocities with the Charybdis of Syrian regime repression. More direct support for the Kurdish and Syrian opposition could also help address at least some of the characteristics which make the Syrian conflict likely to last for a long time. First, long-lasting civil wars have been marked by a fractured political landscape. A smaller number of actors on opposing sides and greater political and military capacity of individual groups have been shown to reduce the duration of civil wars (Cunningham et. al. 2009). Here, Western unwillingness to

engage with the Free Syrian Army has meant that it could not unite the opposition in a way that would make its military efforts more effective and increase its ability to implement any possible political agreement (Schulhofer-Wohl 2014).

14) Second, the active involvement of foreign sponsors not only greatly increases the chances of non-actors committing violence against civilians (Saleyhan et.al. 2014), but also helps prolong civil wars (Saleyhan 2007). Here, again, US/UK facilitation of the political consolidation and increased military effectiveness of moderate Syrian opposition and Kurdish fighters could make a difference. If the first two years of the conflict were any indication, then Damascus's sponsors in Russia and Iran are quite willing to contemplate a solution to the conflict which would not necessarily involve Bashar al-Assad if this is seen as serving their interests. If the UK and its allies were able to assist the Kurdish and Sunni opposition in achieving meaningful military success, concerns about Syria turning into Hezbollah's 'Vietnam' could move Tehran toward a rather pragmatic approach concerning Syria's future domestic set-up.

15) For David Cohen (2014), Undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, ISIS is the 'best-funded terrorist organization' the world has ever confronted. This makes it clear that any successful short-term military action against ISIS needs to be complemented with vigorous efforts to undermine or cut off the group's revenue streams. This would entail making it more difficult for ISIS to continue generating up to a reported $1.6 million in daily oil revenues (Lynch 2014), as US airstrikes have already begun to achieve, by attacking or recapturing oil installations under its control. Equally important is increased pressure on those networks that facilitate the smuggling of oil into Turkey.

16) Successful operations against ISIS' oil business would increase its reliance on illicit taxation in territories under its control and on external donors (Lister 2014). It would appear that better trained Iraqi army units as well as the closer coordination with better equipped Kurdish Peshmerga and Free Syrian Army fighters could help achieve the territorial gains necessary to undermine ISIS's income from illicit taxes. This would leave the UK and its allies with the task of exerting diplomatic pressure on Arab Gulf countries to ensure that the new legislation recently introduced by these governments makes an effective contribution to reducing ISIS's income from private donors (Dickinson 2014).

17) The progress in rolling back ISIS's influence is likely to be, at best, gradual. Insights from existing research on the impact of successful decapitation strikes on the rate of

collapse of terrorist organizations (Jordan 2009) would indicate that ISIS is an unlikely candidate for a rapid demise even in the event of a successful targeted killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and other senior figures. The rate of collapse for a terrorist organization suffering a successful decapitation strike between 1945 and 2004 stands at only five out of 116 for religious groups and at only four out of 46 for groups with a membership of more than 10,000. ISIS's main Achilles heel appears to be its relatively young age, with 38 out of 131 groups younger than ten years collapsing after such a strike (Jordan 2009).

18) More important is the engagement of Iraq's and Syria' Sunni tribes following the example of the successful 'Sunni awakening' in the years 2005 and 2006 against al-Qaeda in Iraq, one of ISIS's precursor organizations (Knights 2014). It is a telling sign of the sources of ISIS's strengths and weaknesses that its advances have been most rapid in those Sunni areas which suffer the most from political and economic marginalization (Hubbard 2014). The engagement of Sunni tribes against ISIS would thus have to go hand in hand with assisting the Iraqi government in building a more inclusive political, military and economic structure.

Long-term

19) At the broadest political level, radical Islamism of the ISIS and al-Qaeda types is the result of a century-long fragmentation of the religious sphere (Roy 2004) in the Muslim world in which traditional religious elites have gradually lost influence over how individual Muslim believers view their faith and associated norms. It is thus no coincidence that the Middle East stands out globally as the region with the smallest median number of people expressing confidence in religious elites (40% regionally versus 69% globally) (Pew 2014). This development opened the door for a new range of discourses ranging from liberal Muslim, to moderate Islamist and radical Islamist. While it is not the job of Western policy-makers to decide, on behalf of Muslims, what the 'correct' interpretation of Islam is, the UK and its allies can play a crucial role in helping empower those who represent an enlightened, peaceful interpretation of Islam at ease with the challenges of modernity.

20) This should occur as part of two-pronged policy: First, the UK and its allies need to speak out against the spread of ultra-conservative and reactionary interpretations of

Islam by public and private sources in Saudi Arabia. It is no coincidence that ISIS saw it fit to utilize, without any major changes, religious textbooks currently in use in Saudi Arabia (Marmouri 2014). This is possible in the context of ISIS representing an 'untamed Wahhabism' (Haykel in Kirkpatrick 2014), the official religious doctrine in Saudi Arabia.

21) Second, the UK and its allies need to pressure the government of Egypt, as well as Cairo's allies in Saudi Arabia and in the UAE, into abandoning the ruthless repression of all forms of peaceful political dissent. Making political prisoners out of secular liberals and moderate Islamists closes an important avenue for the development of a more peaceful, cooperative and human rights respecting regional political culture. Nothing seems to validate al-Qaeda's and ISIS's narratives more effectively than the brutal counterrevolutions occurring across the Arab world (Berger 2014). The rhetorical and intelligence support which 'moderate' Arab regimes such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Qatar and Egypt are offering for the fight against ISIS should not distract Western policy-makers from the fact that it was their domestic short-comings, and their inability to excel in anything other than repression, which continue to set the stage for groups like ISIS to emerge (Hamid 2014). Therefore, the rise of ISIS should not be regarded as resulting from some more or less arbitrary drawing of borders over one hundred years ago, but from the failure of Arab leaders to build effective and legitimate government structures within them.

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