

II. The aims, objectives and *modus operandi* of the Islamic State and the international response

IAN DAVIS

Introduction

The Islamic State (IS) is a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that in 2015 controlled large areas of Iraq and Syria, had affiliates and supporters in several other states, and disrupted regional and international security using violence and terrorism.¹ The group directed tens of thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria. A number of terrorist attacks attributed to IS outside those two countries also demonstrated its ability to threaten societies in the wider Middle East, Africa, South Asia and Europe, including in states with advanced intelligence and security services.

In November 2015 IS claimed responsibility for the apparent bombing of a Russian airliner in Egypt, a suicide bomb attack in Beirut and a multi-pronged assault in central Paris, intensifying international debate about how to combat the group. Provoking direct confrontation with hostile powers and targeting populations seem to be core aims of the group as part of what its leaders see as a prophesied civilizational conflict.² The interdependent nature of the conflicts and political crises in Iraq, Syria and other countries where IS fighters operate complicates efforts to address the IS threat, as does the wide range of countries from which it recruits fighters and other kinds of support. This section provides background on the IS group, discusses its goals, operations and affiliates in 2015, and reviews the international policy debates on how best to counter IS.

The rise and growth of the Islamic State

Origins in Iraq and Syria

Many observers trace the roots of IS to changes in Iraq's political structure as a result of the US-led overthrow of President Saddam Hussein's Sunni Arab-dominated government and the rise to power of the majority Shiite Arab population. This fuelled deep Sunni resentment that continues today. In Syria, IS has grown in size and strength on the back of a rebellion by Syria's Sunni Arab majority against the Iranian-backed regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

¹ The Islamic State (IS) is also referred to by its former name—the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)/Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—and the Arabic acronym Daesh (for *Dawlat al-Islamiyah f'al-Iraq wa al-Sham*), which translates as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Syria.

² BBC News, 'Why Islamic State chose town of Dabiq for propaganda', 17 Nov. 2014.

IS's direct ideological and organizational roots lie in the forces assembled and led by the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (a Jordanian) in Iraq in 2002–2006. In 2004, a year after the US-led invasion of Iraq, Zarqawi pledged allegiance to Osama Bin Laden and formed al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which became a major force in the insurgency. Following Zarqawi's death in 2006, AQI created a coalition called the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI).

ISI had been steadily weakened but not eliminated by the time the United States withdrew from Iraq in 2011. The US 'surge' in 2007 played an important part in weakening ISI, but these gains were sacrificed by Iraq's sectarianism, which alienated the Sunni groups that had been supportive of US strategy.³ Ibrahim Awwad Ibrahim al-Badri al-Samarrai, better known as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, a former US detainee, became leader of ISI in 2010. By 2013 a reinvigorated ISI was once again carrying out frequent attacks in Iraq and had joined the rebellion against Assad in Syria, setting up Jabhat al-Nusra (the al-Nusra Front, ANF).

In April 2013, Baghdadi's forces in Iraq and Syria were merged to form the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The leaders of al-Nusra and al-Qaeda rejected this move, but fighters loyal to Baghdadi split from al-Nusra and helped maintain an ISIL presence in Syria. At the beginning of 2013, ISIL had shifted its focus back to Iraq to exploit the political deadlock between the Shia-led government and the minority Sunni Arab community. ISIL first took control of the central city of Falluja and later overran the northern city of Mosul in June 2014.

Declaration of caliphate and rebranding as the Islamic State

At the end of June 2014, after consolidating its hold over many cities and towns in Iraq, ISIL leaders formally declared the establishment of a 'caliphate'—a state governed in accordance with Islamic Sharia law and by a caliph, or 'God's deputy on earth'. References to Iraq and the Levant in the group's name were dropped at this time, and the newly rebranded 'Islamic State' demanded that Muslims across the world swear allegiance to its caliph, Baghdadi, who claims to be descended from the Quraysh tribe—the same tribe as the 'Holy Prophet'.⁴ IS also demanded that other jihadist groups worldwide accept its supreme authority and many did so, including several splinter groups of the rival al-Qaeda network. This gave IS a wide-ranging geographical network—from the Caucasus to Somalia—on which to build.

However, most Islamic scholars and Muslim communities around the world rejected Baghdadi's appointment as caliph or simply the entire

³ Kingsbury, A., 'Why the 2007 surge in Iraq actually failed', *Boston Globe*, 17 Nov. 2014.

⁴ Zelin, A.Y., 'Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi: Islamic State's driving force', BBC News, 31 July 2014.

Table 2.1. Principal Islamic State (IS) affiliates and supporters

| Country | Name | Membership (Estimates) | Operations |
|--------------------------|---|---|--|
| Afghanistan/ Pakistan | Wilayah Khorasan ^a | some 'rebranding' by Afghan Taliban; and an emerging IS presence, 1000–3000 | 'operationally active' in Afghanistan according to United States Department of Defense |
| Egypt | Sinai Province/ Wilayah Sinai | 500–1500 Bedouin Arabs, foreign fighters, Palestinian militants | mostly targeted Egyptian security forces—at least 100 killed in July attacks; claimed responsibility for downing flight 9268 on 31 Oct. 2015 |
| Libya | Wilayah Tarabulus/ Barqa/Fezzan | 500–5000 (among larger numbers of Salafi jihadists) | took control of Sirte in late 2014; other cities (Misrata and Darnah) under threat |
| Nigeria | Wilayah Gharb Afriqiyyah (Boko Haram) | 500–9000 | caused 14 000 deaths in 2015; spread violence to Cameroon, Chad and Niger; threatened civilian, state and international targets |
| Philippines | Abu Sayyaf | 200–400 | made several kidnappings for ransom in 2015 |
| Saudi Arabia | Wilayah Najd/ Haramayn/Hijaz | Unknown, but <1600 suspected IS supporters arrested | carried out several attacks in Saudi Arabia in 2014 including suicide bombings of Shia mosques |
| Yemen | Wilayah al Yemen/ Wilayah Al Bayda/ Wilayah Aden- Abyan/Wilayah Shabwah | | bombed mosques; targeted supporters of the Houthi Movement ^b |

^aDiffers from the al-Qaeda affiliated 'Khorasan Group' identified by US officials as seeking to conduct transnational terrorist attacks.

^bThe Houthi Movement is currently at war with a coalition of predominantly Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia; IS may see this as an opportunity to increase sectarian hatred in Yemen.

Sources: Blanchard, C. M. and Humud, C. E., *The 'Islamic State' and US Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress R43612 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 18 Nov. 2015); 'Islamic State group loyalists eye a presence in Afghanistan', Associated Press, 8 Sep. 2015; BBC Monitoring, 'Sinai Province: Egypt's most dangerous group', 10 Aug. 2015; US Department of Defense, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, Dec. 2015; 'Egypt looks for answers after brutal Sinai attack', BBC News, 2 July 2015; and Global Terrorism Index 2015.

premise of an Islamic State-led caliphate.⁵ In fact, the violent IS ideology of jihadist-Salafism appears to be accepted by only a relatively small, if dangerous, minority of the world's Sunni Muslims.⁶

IS has an apocalyptic vision of its role in prompting a wide-ranging conflict between true Muslims and all those it considers non-believers.⁷ For example, the group considers those that support democratic governance and take part in elections, including Sunni Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, to be idolaters for placing man-made law and political order on a par with, or even above, religious law. Hence, IS welcomes the so-called extinction of the grey zone in a polarized black and white struggle between faith and disbelief.⁸ However, the extent to which the group's professed ideology is universally shared among the complex combination of foreign and local IS forces is open to question.

Affiliates and supporters

The United Nations has estimated that by the end of 2015, 34 non-state armed groups had recognized the IS caliphate and pledged loyalty to Baghdad.⁹ The UN expects that number to increase, and that IS membership will grow in 2016. Groups in Afghanistan, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Yemen have become model '*wilayah*' (states/provinces), describing themselves as constituent members of a broader IS-led caliphate. For example, the north-east Nigeria-based Sunni insurgent terrorist group widely known as Boko Haram (Western education is forbidden) pledged allegiance to IS in March 2015. The implications of such pledges on groups' objectives, tactics and leadership structures seem to vary and are likely to evolve. Some *wilayahs* have their own semi-autonomous local governments that enables local populations to effectively control their economies through Shura councils. Table 2.1 lists the most significant and capable IS affiliates, although detailed, open-source data on several of them is lacking.

IS has also been adept at using digital technology—especially social networking platforms and anonymous interfaces, operating on what is some-

⁵ See e.g. 'Open Letter to Dr Ibrahim Awwad Al-Badri, alias "Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi", and to the fighters and followers of the self-declared "Islamic State"', 19 Sep. 2014.

⁶ For background on Salafism, see Meijer, R. (ed.), *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2009); for a discussion of the broader ideological trends that have fuelled extremism and conflict across the Sunni Muslim world for much of the past 40 years see Bunzel, C., 'From paper state to caliphate: the ideology of the Islamic State', Brookings Institution Center for Middle East Policy, Project on US Relations with the Islamic World, *Analysis Paper* no. 19 (Mar. 2015).

⁷ Chulov, M., 'Why ISIS fights', *The Guardian*, 17 Sep. 2015.

⁸ Freedland, J., 'Let's deny ISIS its binary struggle and celebrate the grey zone', *The Guardian*, 20 Nov. 2015.

⁹ United Nations Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General on the threat posed by ISIL (Da'esh) to international peace and security and the range of United Nations efforts in support of member states in countering the threat, S/2016/92, 29 Jan. 2016. On the expansion of IS into new territories, see also chapter 6, section II, in this volume.

times referred to as the dark web—to spread its ideology throughout the world and recruit foreign fighters, while also providing guidance to those determined to carry out ‘lone wolf’ attacks.¹⁰ Some commentators argue that extreme Islamist movements are also being fuelled by a perception of marginalization and exclusion that transcends IS’s more narrow vision, especially in sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa.¹¹ According to *The Economist*: ‘from Mali and Nigeria to Kenya and Tanzania the story is the same: extremists emerge from and woo Muslim populations on the national periphery who are fed up with decades of neglect, discrimination and mistreatment by their rulers. Jihadists are able to exploit existing religious tensions and latch on to disgruntled Muslim communities’.¹²

The Islamic State’s operations in 2015

Territory controlled by IS in Iraq and Syria

As of the end of 2015, large areas of northern and western Iraq (approximately one-third of the country), and of northern and eastern Syria (nearly half the country) were occupied by IS. These areas include cities and towns, main roads, oil fields and military facilities. The group also has the support of affiliated organizations in several countries and regions (see table 2.1). Territorial gains in 2015, which were limited compared to 2014, have come largely at the expense of Syrian Government forces.¹³ IS fighters expanded their control over central Syria, capturing the city of Palmyra in Homs province, and threatened both pro-Assad and anti-Assad forces in western Syria. The group also lost some territory in northern Syria to a mixture of Kurdish and allied Arab forces backed by airpower provided by the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. In late 2015, under pressure from the USA and its coalition partners, Turkey announced its intention to improve border controls across the area west of the Euphrates River and north-east of Aleppo in an effort to cut off the flow of supplies and foreign fighters to IS.¹⁴

In Iraq, IS fighters seized Ramadi in May 2015, but also suffered losses to its forces in Tikrit, Baiji, Sinjar and surrounding areas. It continued to hold the city of Mosul and large areas of Anbar Province, from which it carried out

¹⁰ Atwan, A. B., *Islamic State: The Digital Caliphate* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 2015); and Finklea, K., *Dark Web*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress R44101 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 7 July 2015).

¹¹ See e.g. Rogers, P., ‘Islamic State and revolts from the margins’, Oxford Research Group, 12 Aug. 2015; and Gall, C., ‘Jihadists deepen collaboration in North Africa’, *New York Times*, 1 Jan. 2016.

¹² *The Economist*, ‘Jihafica’, 18 July 2015, pp. 46–47.

¹³ On IS territorial gains in 2014 see Lund, A., ‘The Syrian and Iraqi civil wars’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2015*, pp. 19–36.

¹⁴ Arango, T., ‘Turkey moves to clamp down on border, long a revolving door’, *New York Times*, 22 Dec. 2015.

attacks on Iraqi security forces and civilians. By the end of the year, however, the Iraqi military was on the verge of recapturing Ramadi and Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi vowed that IS would be ‘terminated’ in Iraq in the year ahead.¹⁵ Over 11 000 Iraqis, mostly civilians, were killed in violence across Iraq in 2015 according to the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI).¹⁶

It is not entirely clear how many people are living under full or partial IS control across Syria and Iraq. In March 2015, the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross put the figure at more than 10 million.¹⁷ IS has perpetrated a catalogue of human rights abuses and violations of international humanitarian law in the areas under its control, including abduction of civilians, acts of torture and ill-treatment, rape and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence. IS has also summarily killed captured government soldiers and members of other armed groups, and used child soldiers.¹⁸

Recruitment of local and foreign fighters

Various US estimates in 2015 suggested that IS had tens of thousands of fighters in Iraq and Syria and thousands based elsewhere, but also that coalition air strikes and ground operations had killed thousands of IS personnel. Thousands of recruits reportedly joined the organization in 2014–15, but casualty-to-replacement ratios are unclear—as is the overall extent and effect of attrition on IS capabilities.¹⁹ Reports also suggest that IS conscripted local people in some of the areas under its control. One US official estimated in November 2015 that the coalition had killed ‘one mid-to-upper-level ISIL leader every two days since May [2015]’.²⁰ In June 2015, US Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken claimed that more than 10 000 IS fighters had been killed.²¹

In addition to local recruits and conscripts, IS was also reinforced throughout the year by flows of foreign fighters. In May 2015 an unnamed senior US State Department official sought to put this unprecedented flow of foreign fighters into context:

¹⁵ Shaheen, K., ‘Iraqi forces close in on Ramadi as ISIS digs in’, *The Guardian*, 28 Dec. 2015; and Shaheen, K., ‘Iraqi PM declares ISIS will be “terminated” in 2016’, *The Guardian*, 29 Dec. 2015.

¹⁶ Middle East Monitor, ‘UN says more than 11 000 Iraqis killed in 2015’, 24 Dec. 2015.

¹⁷ Nebehay, S., ‘Islamic State-controlled parts of Syria, Iraq largely out of reach: Red Cross’, Reuters, 13 Mar. 2015.

¹⁸ Amnesty International, *Taking Stock: The Arming of Islamic State* (Amnesty International: London, 2015).

¹⁹ Austin, L. (Gen.), Commander, US CENTCOM, Testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, 3 Mar. 2015.

²⁰ US Department of Defense, ‘Department of Defense press briefing by Col. Warren via DVIDS from Baghdad, Iraq’, News transcript, 13 Nov. 2015.

²¹ BBC News, ‘Islamic State conflict: 10 000 militants killed in nine months, US’, 3 June 2015.

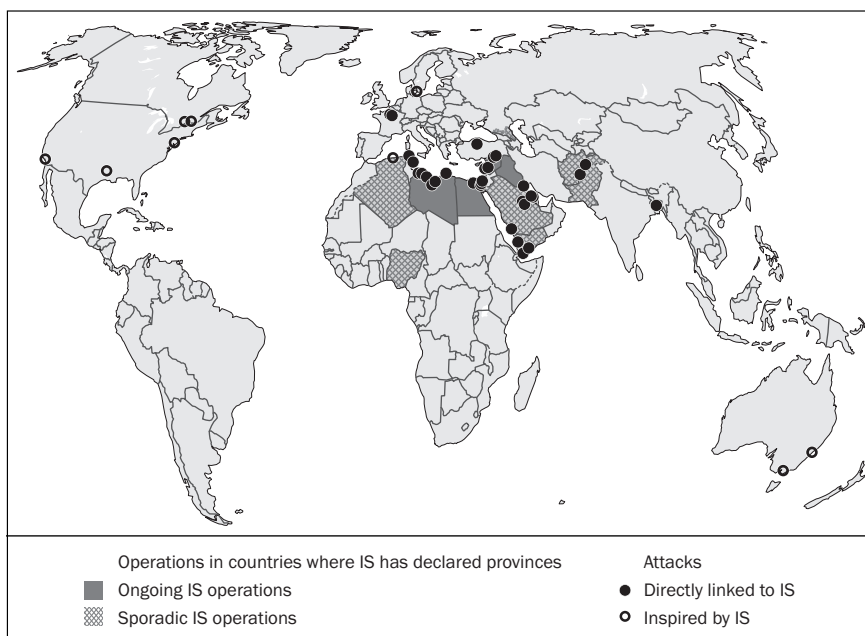


Figure 2.1. Attacks directed by, linked to or inspired by the Islamic State in 2015

Credit: Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <<https://nordpil.se/>>.

Source: Yourish, K., Watkins, D. and Giratikanon, T., 'Recent attacks demonstrate Islamic State's ability to both inspire and coordinate terror', *New York Times*, 7 Dec. 2015.

We have never seen a terrorist organization with 22 000 foreign fighters from 100 countries all around the world. To put it in context—again, the numbers are fuzzy—but it is about double what went into Afghanistan over 10 years in the war against the Soviet Union. Those jihadi fighters were from a handful of countries. These guys are coming from 100 different countries. You combine that with social media, their efforts to inspire homegrown attacks, not even to have fighters come and train but do attacks at home, this is a formidable, enormous threat.²²

In July 2015, the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) estimated that as many as 25 000 individuals from more than 100 countries had travelled to Syria to engage in combat with various groups since 2011, including more than 4500 Europeans—many to join the ranks of IS.²³ According to a recent report by the Soufan Group, the international strategic consultancy group based in New York, IS now has 27 000–31 000 foreign

²² US Department of State, 'Background briefing on Iraq', Office of the spokesperson, Washington, DC, 20 May 2015.

²³ ODNI spokesperson Brian Hale quoted in Starr, B., 'A few dozen Americans in ISIS ranks', CNN, 15 July 2015.

fighters, more than double the estimate published by the group in June 2013.²⁴

IS fighters possess a diverse range of small arms and light weapons, including assault rifles such as the Russian AK series and the US M16 and Bushmaster semi-automatic rifles, in addition to some heavier weaponry, such as man-portable air defence systems, guided anti-tank missiles and armoured fighting vehicles. It is still assumed that most of these arms were captured from government and rebel forces in Iraq and Syria.²⁵ IS fighters have also forged their own improvised weaponry in rudimentary workshops. Examples include mortars and rockets, and improvised explosive devices in the form of hand grenades, car bombs and booby traps.²⁶ There have also been allegations of chemical weapons use by IS.²⁷

Targets outside Iraq and Syria

IS has claimed responsibility for numerous terrorist attacks outside of Iraq and Syria. Almost 1000 civilians were killed between January and December 2015 (see figure 2.1).²⁸ In June 2015, an IS-affiliated Saudi suicide bomber blew himself up in a Kuwaiti mosque, killing more than 20 people and wounding hundreds.²⁹ Transnational IS terrorist attacks increased significantly towards the end of the year, suggesting a new tactic to draw adversaries into a larger-scale and more direct conflict.³⁰ Although it gave no details, an Egyptian affiliate, Sinai Province, claimed that it had downed a Russian passenger plane on 31 October 2015, killing all 224 on board.³¹ IS also claimed responsibility for two explosions in Beirut which killed at least 41 people.³² On 13 November 2015, 130 people were killed in a series of attacks around Paris allegedly coordinated by IS.³³ French President Francois Hollande described the attacks as ‘an act of war’.³⁴ These and other attacks outside of Iraq and Syria are reminiscent of al-Qaeda’s modus oper-

²⁴ Soufan Group, *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq* (Soufan Group: New York, 8 Dec. 2015).

²⁵ Wezeman, P. D., ‘Arms transfers and the use of force against the Islamic State’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2015*, pp.48–50.

²⁶ Amnesty International (note 18).

²⁷ See chapter 18, section III, in this volume.

²⁸ Yourish, A., Watkins, D. and Giratikanon, T., ‘The Islamic State’s rising attacks on civilians around the world’, *New York Times*, 17 Nov. 2015.

²⁹ *The Guardian*, ‘Kuwait mosque attack: suicide bomber identified as Saudi citizen’, 28 June 2015.

³⁰ Schmitt, E., ‘Paris attacks and other assaults seen as evidence of a shift by ISIS’, *New York Times*, 22 Nov. 2015; and Gardner, F., ‘Paris attacks: Islamic State militants change tactics’, *BBC News*, 14 Nov. 2015.

³¹ Gunter, J., ‘Could Islamic State have bombed flight 9268?’, *BBC News*, 5 Nov. 2015.

³² *BBC News*, ‘Lebanon holds day of mourning after deadly Beirut blasts’, 13 Nov. 2015.

³³ Willsher, K., ‘Attack at Paris’s Bataclan: “two or three men began shooting blindly at crowd”’, *The Guardian*, 14 Nov. 2015.

³⁴ *BBC News*, ‘Paris attacks: Hollande blames Islamic State for “act of war”’, 14 Nov. 2015.

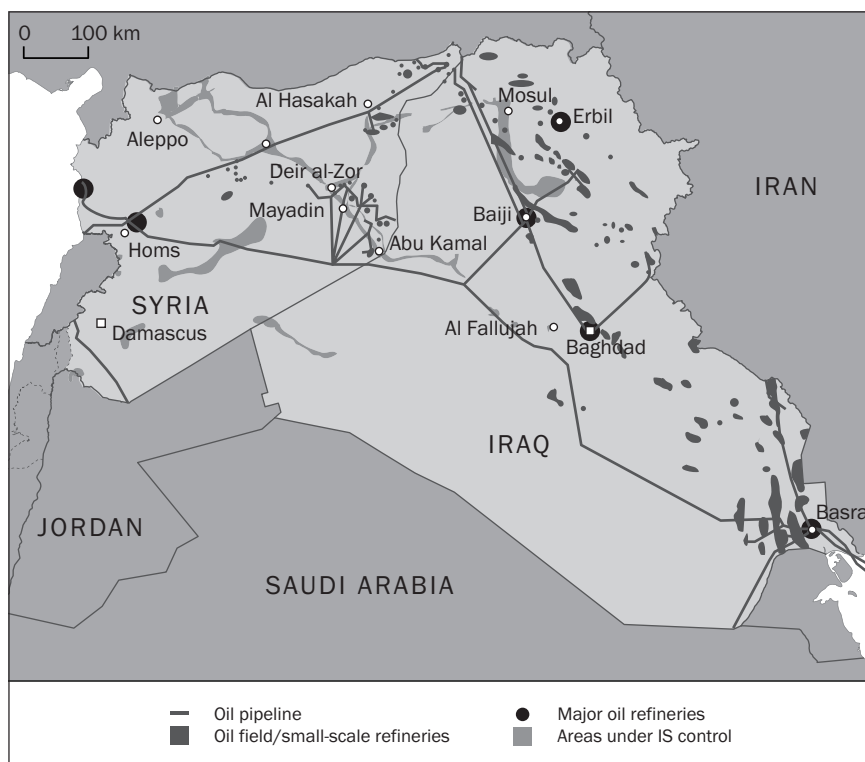


Figure 2.2. Oil resources in Iraq and Syria and Islamic State areas of control, January 2015

Credit: Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <<https://nordpil.se/>>.

Sources: Institute for the Study of War, 'ISIS sanctuary map', 21 Dec. 2015; and 'Islamic State group: crisis in seven charts', BBC News, [n.d].

andi in the early 2000s, aiming for high-casualty attacks that make headlines around the world.

Finance and administration

IS is thought to be the world's wealthiest non-state terrorist/insurgency group.³⁵ Initially, IS relied on affluent private backers and Islamic charities in the Middle East seeking to depose Assad, but the group is now largely self-funded through its control of a variety of public resources and infrastructure in parts of Iraq and Syria.³⁶ According to the US Treasury, IS may have

³⁵ For a discussion of the legal categorization of IS as a non-state actor, see Gogia, V., 'The legal position of the Islamic State in international law', Bachelor Thesis, Faculty of Law, Lund University, Spring 2015.

³⁶ Boghardt, L. P., 'Saudi funding of ISIS', PolicyWatch 2275, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 23 June 2014.

earned as much as \$100 million in 2014 from the sale of crude oil and refined products to local intermediaries, who in turn sold them on in Iran, Turkey and Syria.³⁷ This revenue is thought to have reduced in 2015 as a result of airstrikes on oil-related infrastructure.³⁸ The main oil fields in Syria and Iraq and the areas controlled by IS in January 2015 are shown in figure 2.2.

Ransom payments to kidnappers generated at least \$20 million for IS in 2014, while locally derived revenues from administrative control over the territory it has seized was worth 'several million dollars per month', according to the US Treasury. Another estimate put IS monthly revenues in late 2015 at about \$80 million, of which around 50 per cent was derived from taxation and confiscation, around 43 per cent from oil revenue, and the remainder from drug smuggling, the sale of electricity and donations.³⁹

Religious minorities in IS-controlled territory have to pay a special tax, and the group also profits from looting banks, peddling antiquities and prostitution of women and girls.⁴⁰ Some resources—such as agriculture, and the energy and water utilities—generate limited revenue and require substantial investment and technical expertise. These help IS to present itself as a legitimate government, while also limiting the authority of the Iraqi and Syrian governments. An internal IS manual leaked in December 2015 is said to be the group's blueprint for building a viable state. The document purports to show how IS has set about building such a state in Iraq and Syria, complete with government departments, a treasury and an economic programme for self-sufficiency.⁴¹

International opposition to the Islamic State in complex environments

IS and its regional supporters have flourished mainly in ungoverned or weakly governed areas of countries affected by conflict or political instability. The complex environments in parts of Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Syria, Yemen and the Sinai Peninsula provide IS with resources, recruits and

³⁷ US Department of the Treasury, 'Remarks of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing Jennifer Fowler at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy on US efforts to counter the financing of ISIL', Press release, 2 Feb. 2015.

³⁸ Francis, D. and De Luce, D., 'Hitting the Islamic State's oil isn't enough', *Foreign Policy*, 17 Nov. 2015; and Loveluck, L., 'Austerity bites as Islamic State's oil income hit by US-led bombing campaign', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 Dec. 2015.

³⁹ 'Islamic State monthly revenue totals \$80 million, IHS says', *IHS Jane's*, Press release, 7 Dec. 2015; and Rosenberg, M., Kulish, N. and Myers, S., 'Predatory Islamic State wrings money from those it rules', *New York Times*, 29 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁰ US Department of the Treasury (note 37); and Solomon, E. and Jones, S., 'ISIS Inc.: loot and taxes keep jihadi economy churning', *Financial Times*, 14 Dec. 2015.

⁴¹ Malik, S., 'The ISIS papers: leaked documents show how ISIS is building its state', *The Guardian*, 7 Dec. 2015.

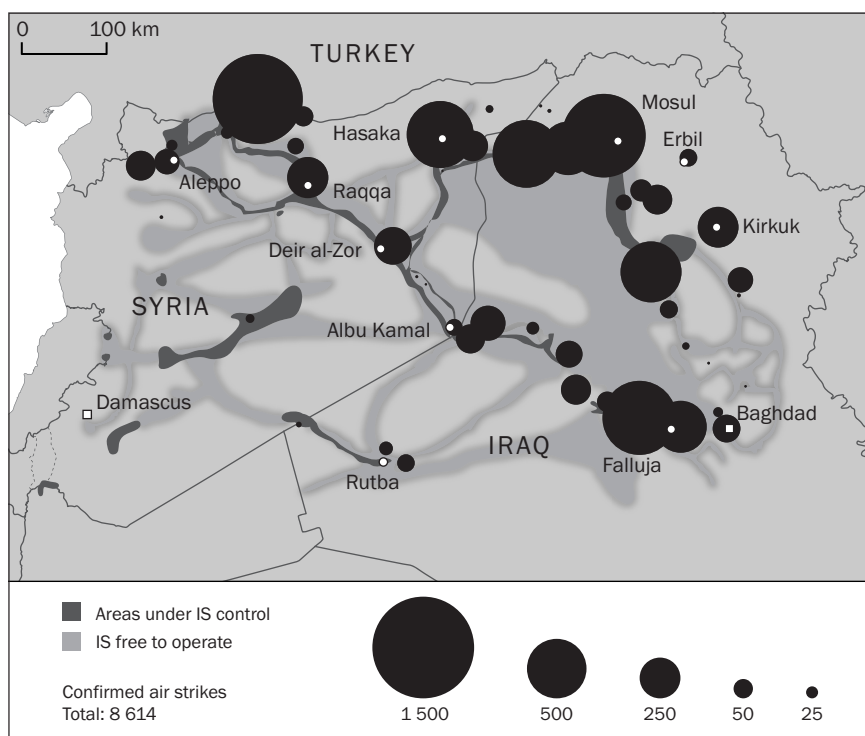


Figure 2.3. Coalition airstrikes against the Islamic State, up to 22 December 2015

Credit: Hugo Ahlenius, Nordpil, <<https://nordpil.se/>>.

Sources: Institute for the Study of War, 'ISIS sanctuary map', 21 Dec. 2015; and 'Islamic State group: crisis in seven charts', BBC News, [n.d].

safe havens.⁴² Combatting IS in these countries is—or ought to be—part of a broader and longer-term effort to restore security, tackle political injustice, increase economic output and promote effective governance. However, these efforts appear to have been largely overshadowed by military efforts.

International military operations against the Islamic State

On 3 December 2014, at the headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Brussels, diplomats and foreign ministers from 60 countries agreed to form the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL.⁴³ This coalition supplemented an earlier 10-nation coalition agreed at the NATO

⁴² Interestingly, a disproportionately large number of IS recruits come from Tunisia, which has many problems but is not in a state of anarchy and where the only armed conflict has been imported by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

⁴³ European External Action Service, 'High Representative/Vice President attends Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)', EEAS News release, 5 Dec. 2014;

Wales Summit on 5 September 2014. By 22 December 2015, US and coalition forces had used combat aircraft, armed unmanned aerial vehicles and sea-launched cruise missiles to conduct 8614 strikes against IS targets in Iraq and Syria (since 8 August 2014 and 22 September 2014, respectively, see figure 2.3).⁴⁴ When strikes began in August 2014 the initial focus was to halt the advance of IS forces and reduce threats to US personnel and religious minorities in northern Iraq. By late 2015 the focus had shifted to supporting military operations by Iraqi military and Kurdish forces in Iraq, and to weakening IS inside Syria. Among the specific US goals were: (a) to assist the Government of Iraq to take back Ramadi and Baiji, and set the conditions for retaking Mosul; (b) to enable new and additional local forces in Syria to retake the IS stronghold/capital, Raqqa; (c) to secure the border between Syria and Turkey, thereby drastically reducing the flow of foreign fighters and resources to IS; (d) to degrade internal IS lines of communication and supply across Iraq and Syria; and (e) to reinforce Jordanian and Lebanese defences as IS is rolled-back south and west.⁴⁵ Some of the airstrikes also appear designed to destroy IS's financial networks.⁴⁶

To advance some of these goals the Turkish Government granted the USA access to Incirlik Air Base and other bases in south-east Turkey in July 2015.⁴⁷ In November 2015 a US-backed Iraqi-Kurdish operation was undertaken to recapture the city of Sinjar, a US-led campaign of airstrikes commenced against IS-held oil facilities and infrastructure in eastern Syria, and the US launched its first attack against IS personnel outside of Syria and Iraq, with an airstrike that is thought to have killed the Iraqi leader of IS operations in Libya.⁴⁸ The US Department of Defense also proposed a plan to build up a string of military bases in Africa, south-west Asia and the Middle East to aid operations against IS.⁴⁹

The November attacks in Paris led France to step up its bombing raids on IS. France had been conducting airstrikes against IS in Iraq since September 2014, and had begun targeting IS in Syria in September 2015. The United

and McInnis, K., *Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State*, US Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress R44135 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 18 Nov. 2015).

⁴⁴ US Department of Defense, 'Operation Inherent Resolve: targeted operations against ISIL terrorists', Special report.

⁴⁵ US Department of Defense, 'Department of Defense background press briefing on enhancing counter-ISIL operations', News transcript, 30 Oct. 2015.

⁴⁶ Dyer, G., 'ISIS "financial minister" killed, says US', *Financial Times*, 11 Dec. 2015.

⁴⁷ Yeginsu, C. and Cooper, H., 'US jets to use Turkish bases in war on ISIS', *New York Times*, 23 July 2015.

⁴⁸ Pellerin, C., US Department of Defense, 'Coalition-supported Iraqi Kurds work to cut main ISIL line of communication', US DOD News, Defense media activity, 12 Nov. 2015; and Pengelly, M. and Stephen, C., 'Islamic State leader in Libya "killed in US airstrike"', *The Guardian*, 14 Nov. 2015.

⁴⁹ Mazzetti, M. and Schmitt, E., 'Pentagon seeks to knit foreign bases into ISIS-foiling network', *New York Times*, 10 Dec. 2015.

Table 2.2. International military coalitions against the Islamic State

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| <i>US-led global coalition</i> | | | |
| Albania | Finland | Latvia | Romania |
| Australia | France | Lebanon | Saudi Arabia |
| Austria | Georgia | Lithuania | Serbia |
| Bahrain | Germany | Luxembourg | Singapore |
| Belgium | Greece | Macedonia, FYR | Slovak Republic |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | Hungary | Moldova | Slovenia |
| Bulgaria | Iceland | Montenegro | Somalia |
| Canada | Iraq | Morocco | Spain |
| Croatia | Ireland | Netherlands | Sweden |
| Cyprus | Italy | New Zealand | Taiwan |
| Czech Republic | Japan | Norway | Turkey |
| Denmark | Jordan | Oman | Ukraine |
| Egypt | Korea, South | Poland | United Arab Emirates |
| Estonia | Kosovo | Portugal | United Kingdom |
| European Union | Kuwait | Qatar | United States of America |
| <i>Russian-led coalition</i> | | | |
| Iran | Iraq | Russia | Syria |
| <i>Saudi-led coalition</i> | | | |
| Bahrain | Guinea | Morocco | Sierra Leone |
| Bangladesh | Jordan | Niger | Somalia |
| Benin | Kuwait | Nigeria | Sudan |
| Chad | Lebanon | Pakistan | Togo |
| Comoros | Libya | Palestine | Tunisia |
| Côte d'Ivoire | Malaysia | Qatar | Turkey |
| Djibouti | Maldives | Saudi Arabia | United Arab Emirates |
| Egypt | Mali | Senegal | Yemen |
| Gabon | Mauritania | | |

Sources: Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL Coalition Ministerial Meeting, 3 Dec. 2014, <<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/234627.htm>>; and Browning, N. and Irish, J., 'Saudi Arabia announces 34-state Islamic military alliance against terrorism', Reuters, 15 Dec. 2015.

Kingdom also extended its airstrikes from Iraq to Syria in December 2015.⁵⁰ The British Government used a controversial justification to gather parliamentary support for this change in policy, claiming that it would be assisting up to 70 000 'moderate, anti-Assad, anti-IS forces' in Syria, although serious doubts were expressed about such claims.⁵¹

In September 2015 Russian forces began bombing raids against Syrian rebel groups, including the Free Syrian Army and IS, at the request of the Syrian Government. The Russian effort involved a coalition of Iraq, Iran and

⁵⁰ Parker, G. and McDermott, J., 'UK launches air strikes on Isis in Syria', *Financial Times*, 3 Dec. 2015.

⁵¹ Lister, C., 'Yes, there are 70 000 moderate opposition fighters in Syria: here's what we know about them', *The Spectator*, 27 Nov. 2015; MacDonald, A., 'Who are the 70 000 fighters the UK will be backing in Syria?', *Middle East Eye*, 26 Nov. 2015; and 'Senior defence figures warn David Cameron against saying there are 70 000 opposition fighters in Syria', *Daily Telegraph*, 4 Dec. 2015.

Syria, which operated a joint information centre in Baghdad.⁵² The Russian airstrikes, thought to number more than 5000 by the end of December 2015, have been heavily criticized for being indiscriminate and resulting in high numbers of civilian casualties.⁵³

In mid-December 2015 Saudi Arabia announced the formation of a 34-state Islamic military coalition to combat terrorism, with a joint operations centre based in Riyadh.⁵⁴ IS poses a political threat to Saudi Arabia because it directly challenges the legitimacy of the House of Saud, which has traditionally led and supported a particular Salafist interpretation of Sunni Islam. While details remain vague, the coalition is expected to target IS, although Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab neighbours have been launching airstrikes against Iran-allied rebels in neighbouring Yemen since March 2015.⁵⁵

By the end of the year, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which had previously been accused of providing surreptitious support to IS, were actively involved in the fight against it.⁵⁶ Despite some overlap in membership between the US and Saudi-led coalitions, the 60 countries in the US-led coalition, 34 in the Saudi-led coalition and four in the Russian-led coalition meant that about 45 per cent of the UN member states were part of the military response (see table 2.2).

Critics of airstrikes argue that operations to degrade or destroy IS will do little to undermine the attraction of its ideology and could in some cases strengthen its appeal.⁵⁷ The first Western journalist to be allowed extensive access to IS territories, Jürgen Todenhöfer, argues that the bombing campaign feeds into the IS narrative that the group is waging a war against the West to protect Muslims.⁵⁸ Other critics, such as former CIA Deputy Director John McLaughlin, argue for both a political and a military strategy, but that the military element also requires ground forces.⁵⁹ However, there is

⁵² 'Russia, Iran, Iraq & Syria setting up "joint information center" to coordinate anti-ISIS operations', RT, 26 Sep. 2015. On Iran's involvement on the ground in the Syrian war, see section V in this chapter.

⁵³ Al Jazeera, 'Russian air strikes "killed over 400 Syrian civilians"', 23 Nov. 2015; and Dearden, L., 'Russia denies killing civilians in Syrian air strikes while threatening to reveal alleged US "collateral damage"', *The Independent*, 15 Jan. 2016.

⁵⁴ Browning, N. and Irish, J., 'Saudi Arabia announces 34-state Islamic military alliance against terrorism', Reuters, 15 Dec. 2015.

⁵⁵ Al Arabiya News, 'Saudi "Decisive Storm" waged to save Yemen', 25 Mar. 2015.

⁵⁶ Boghardt (note 36); BBC News, 'Is Saudi Arabia to blame for Islamic State?', 19 Dec. 2015; Graeber, D., 'Turkey could cut off Islamic State's supply lines. So why doesn't it?', *The Guardian*, 18 Nov. 2015; and Yeginsu, C., 'Turkey strikes Islamic State targets in retaliation for Istanbul bombing', *New York Times*, 14 Jan. 2016.

⁵⁷ Atran, S. and Hamid, N., 'Paris: the war ISIS wants', *New York Review of Books*, 16 Nov. 2015; and Atwan, A. B., 'When it comes to "Islamic State", the West just doesn't get it', Open Democracy, 9 July 2015.

⁵⁸ Todenhöfer, J., 'I know ISIS fighters: Western bombs falling on Raqqa will fill them with joy', *The Guardian*, 27 Nov. 2015.

⁵⁹ McLaughlin, J., 'Ending ISIS (part 3): An ex-CIA chief's plan', *Today's Ozy*, 9 Dec. 2015.

currently little political appetite in any Western capital for the deployment of ground forces to combat IS.

Training, equipping and advising opposing forces in Iraq and Syria

While several states have sent military aid to Iraq and Syria in recent years in reaction to the advance of IS, the largest contributor has been the USA.⁶⁰ In Iraq, as of November 2015, approximately 3500 US military personnel were deployed to advise and train nine Iraqi Security Force (ISF) brigades and three Kurdish Peshmerga brigades, gather intelligence on IS and secure US personnel and facilities. Coalition partners deployed a further 1500 advisers and trainers. Nearly 16 500 ISF and Peshmerga personnel have been trained, and another 3000 are currently in training.⁶¹

In October 2015, the Obama Administration announced changes to its \$500 million programme, the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, to train and equip vetted members of the Syrian opposition. Congress authorized and funded the programme in 2014, but its limited results, the Russian military intervention in Syria and calls by some members of Congress for broader civilian protection missions led to a reconsideration of its direction and scope. The main change was the deployment of approximately 50 US Special Forces personnel to northern Syria to advise the forces fighting IS.⁶²

Overall, the US train-and-equip programmes in Syria and Iraq—like those in Afghanistan—have either failed or been highly deficient. In Iraq, for example, the USA spent about \$25 billion between 2003 and 2011 to train the Iraqi security forces, which quickly collapsed under IS assault and have since struggled to take back key cities such as Ramadi and Mosul.⁶³ In September 2015 it was reported that US and coalition efforts to train and equip Syrian soldiers to counter IS had produced only a handful of troops active in combat.⁶⁴

Efforts to combat IS financing and restrict travel by foreign fighters

Two UN Security Council resolutions were adopted in 2014 to strengthen IS-related international sanctions and halt flows of foreign fighters and financing to IS, Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Qaeda affiliated entities. Resolution 2170 calls on all member states ‘to take national measures to suppress the flow

⁶⁰ The other states are Albania, Australia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Iran, Italy, Russia and the UK. Wezeman (note 25), pp. 50–53.

⁶¹ Brooks, D., ‘82nd commander sees hope in Iraq, confident in forces’ fight against ISIL’, *Fayetteville Observer*, 12 Nov. 2015.

⁶² US Department of Defense, ‘Department of Defense press briefing by Colonel Warren via teleconference from Baghdad, Iraq’, News transcript, 4 Nov. 2015.

⁶³ Tritten, T., ‘House to review US programs to train and equip foreign forces’, *Stars and Stripes*, 8 Oct. 2015.

⁶⁴ Austin, L. (Gen.), Commander, US CENTCOM, Testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, ‘US Strategy Against ISIS’, 16 Sep. 2015.

of foreign terrorist fighters to, and bring to justice, in accordance with applicable international law, foreign terrorist fighters of, ISIL, ANF and all other individuals, groups, undertakings and entities associated with Al Qaida'. It also reiterates member states' obligations to prevent terrorist travel, limit supplies of weapons and financing, and exchange information on the groups. Resolution 2178 requires member states, consistent with international law, to prevent the 'recruiting, organizing, transporting or equipping of individuals who travel to a State other than their States of residence or nationality for the purpose of the perpetration, planning of, or participation in terrorist acts'. On 12 February 2015, the Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 2199, which reaffirmed and clarified the applicability of UN sanctions on IS-related individuals and entities that provide active and passive financial support to IS, Jabhat al-Nusra and others associated with al-Qaeda.⁶⁵

However, in seeking to target IS's finances, the international community is presented with a difficult policy challenge. The group's financial strength lies in securing large amounts of funding primarily from internal sources, and in exploiting ungoverned spaces and porous borders to move funds and looted antiquities.⁶⁶ These features often mean that the most common counterterrorist financing policy tools are inadequate in the case of IS, while new counter-finance responses remain largely embryonic and need to be balanced by the risk of damaging local economies and services, and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis.

International efforts to prevent the travel of foreign fighters also face major difficulties.⁶⁷ A US task force on combatting terrorist and foreign fighter travel concluded that 'there is currently no comprehensive global database of foreign fighter names. Instead, countries including the USA rely on a patchwork system for swapping extremist identities, increasing the odds foreign fighters will slip through the cracks'.⁶⁸ A follow-up meeting by the UN Security Council to discuss the implementation of Resolution 2178 outlined a range of security, legal and intelligence measures that were needed, and stressed the need to provide a counter-narrative to radicalization and address root causes.⁶⁹ The problems are thought to be particularly acute in Europe and Turkey. The EU policy response includes measures to prevent radicalization, detect suspicious travel, investigate and prosecute suspects

⁶⁵ UN Security Council Resolution 2170, 15 Aug. 2014; UN Security Council Resolution 2178, 24 Sep. 2014; UN Security Council Resolution 2199, 12 Feb. 2015.

⁶⁶ Myers, S. L. and Kulish, N., "'Broken system' allows ISIS to profit from looted antiquities', *New York Times*, 9 Jan. 2016.

⁶⁷ Grip, L., 'The growth in European foreign terrorist fighters', *SIPRI Yearbook 2015*, pp. 251–59.

⁶⁸ US House of Representatives, Homeland Security Committee, *Final Report of the Task Force on Combating Terrorist and Foreign Fighter Travel* (Homeland Security Committee: Washington, DC, Sep. 2015).

⁶⁹ United Nations, Security Council, 'Action against threat of foreign terrorist fighters must be ramped up, Security Council urges in high-level meeting', Press release SC/11912, 29 May 2015.

and enhance cooperation with third countries. Turkey introduced a travel ban on 20 000 suspected foreign fighters in September 2015, preventing them from heading to Syria and Iraq.⁷⁰ The issue, however, is of global concern and many states are focusing on policies at the national level, often as part of wider de-radicalization and counterterrorism measures. Russia, for example, is also struggling to stop the radicalization of young Muslims and their recruitment by IS.⁷¹

Prospects for 2016 and beyond

At the end of 2015, the international debates about how to counter the threat from IS were centred on five clusters of interrelated questions:

1. *Understanding the nature of the threats posed by IS.* Is the group primarily a regional security threat, a transnational terrorist threat or both? How should different views on the IS threat inform international responses?

2. *Developing coherent anti-IS goals.* What goals are most achievable, with what means and over what time period? How should the international community balance the use of diplomatic, military and economic tools in responding to the IS threat? How can the international community undercut the attraction of IS's ideology?

3. *The use of military force.* Should airstrikes be complemented by the use of ground combat military forces to recapture territory from IS? On what legal basis might such operations be authorized? Who would supply the ground troops? What would be the material, financial and human costs? What political and security arrangements would best prevent extremists from returning to recaptured areas or drawing new local support?

4. *The future of Iraq and Syria.* To what extent does progress in the fight against IS depend on altering the political dynamics of Iraq and Syria? How should the IS threat shape international policy towards Syria and Iraq, the delivery of support to partners and the resettlement of refugees?

5. *The appeal of IS and similar groups.* Why do they appeal to a small but highly significant minority of predominantly young Muslims in many different countries?

This last question moves the discussion beyond the tactical and strategic considerations that dominated the debates in 2015. Much of the international debate conceives of 'radicalization' as an event that can be prevented, and the effects of which can be reversed. A different, more challenging but

⁷⁰ Council of the European Union, 'The challenge of foreign fighters and the EU's response', Factsheet, 9 Oct. 2014; and 'Turkey puts travel ban on 20 000 foreign fighters', *Hurriyet Daily News*, 2 Sep. 2015.

⁷¹ Hille, K., 'Russia and radicalisation: homegrown problem', *Financial Times*, 7 Dec. 2015.

perhaps more productive line of argument is beginning to look at the social and cultural background to radicalization.⁷²

The different agendas of US, Russian, Iranian, Turkish, European and Arab state involvement in efforts to combat IS further complicate the already complex crises that have fuelled the rise of IS and facilitated its spread. These differences suggest that developing a united international response to the above questions will be challenging. Beyond US- and Russian-led military efforts, governments around the world have focused on trying to develop effective efforts to counter the radicalization of members of their own populations and improve domestic resilience to terrorist attacks.

Several of those involved in the November 2015 Paris attacks were European nationals who had reportedly been indoctrinated by IS.⁷³ They were able to operate covertly in several countries and attack civilians in public places with suicide vests and automatic weapons. Hence, in France and beyond the debate has shifted to broader questions of increased state security and surveillance powers, immigration, identity, religious freedom, the need for a resolution to Syria's civil war and the desirability or otherwise of expanded military intervention on the ground.

Achieving a settlement in Syria will mean talking to IS or at least seeking to degrade the group by non-military as well as military means.⁷⁴ The unanimous adoption by the Security Council on 18 December 2015 of Resolution 2254 calling for a ceasefire and a political settlement in Syria was an important step forward. The resolution envisages the formation of a unity government and calls for an immediate halt to attacks on civilian targets.⁷⁵ Talks between Syria's Government and opposition were expected to begin in January 2016. The resolution also endorsed the continued fight to defeat IS, making its long-term prospects uncertain. If IS fails to restore momentum in core areas of its operation or suffers significant military setbacks at the hands of coalition forces, it may have difficulty retaining territory and attracting new recruits. If IS is to be defeated in the longer term, however, a way must be found to defuse the Sunni Muslim revolt that has been building across the Arab world, and to cool the competition for influence and supremacy between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran, which has led to proxy wars in Yemen, Iraq and Syria, and further heightened tensions in the region at the end of 2015.

⁷² See Schmid, A. P., *Radicalisation, De-radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review* (International Centre for Counter-Terrorism: The Hague, 2013).

⁷³ Henley, J., Graham-Harrison, E. and Burke, J., 'France: the secular seat of Europe that has lost so many to radical Islam', *The Guardian*, 14 Nov. 2015.

⁷⁴ Powell, J., 'Bombing ISIS is not enough: we'll need to talk to them too', *The Guardian*, 1 Dec. 2015.

⁷⁵ United Nations, Security Council, 'Security Council unanimously adopts Resolution 2254 (2015): endorsing road map for peace process in Syria, setting timetable for talks', Meetings coverage SC/12171, 18 Dec. 2015.