The War on ISIS

David Von Drehle | Feb. 26, 2015

As the U.S. and its allies prepare to attack the terrorist group’s stronghold in Iraq, the real challenge is the chaos that could come after

To the Lurid Butchers of the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), the Pentagon says, Picture this:

It’s April in Iraq, the brief season of fine fighting weather after the winter gully washers and before the crippling heat and sandstorms of summer. Outside Mosul, the largest city under ISIS control, is an army of roughly 25,000 men, drawn from a cross-section of Iraqi society: Sunni tribesmen determined to rid themselves of the fanatics. Shi’ite militiamen eager to reassert the authority of Baghdad. Battle-hardened Kurds of the peshmerga army ready to seal off escape and resupply routes.

The last time ISIS confronted an Iraqi army in Mosul—in June 2014—the government soldiers melted like soft-serve ice cream, setting off a panic that helped topple Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and briefly threatened the capital, Baghdad. But these troops, the Pentagon argues, will be freshly trained and expertly led. They will march with American military drones and bombers darting overhead, and they will likely have elite Western special forces alongside to spot targets and choreograph tactics. They will pack an overwhelming punch.

According to a recent briefing by an official from the U.S. Central Command (Centcom), up to 2,000 ISIS troops are posted in Mosul. Military doctrine suggests that five soldiers are needed to dislodge each fortified enemy fighter. This force will budget more than twice that. “There will be five Iraqi army brigades. There will be three smaller brigades that will comprise a reserve force,” the Centcom official said. “There will be three pesh[merga] brigades that will help contain from the north and isolate from the west, and then there will be what we’re calling a Mosul fighting force”—made up primarily of former Mosul police. A brigade of Iraqi counterterrorism specialists will round out the attack.

Republican Senators John McCain of Arizona and Lindsey Graham of South Carolina denounced the Pentagon’s decision to disclose so much of its plans. But Uncle Sam was sending the message that two can play the intimidation game. Intent on countering ISIS propaganda, the briefer noted that the Battle of Mosul will come after months of pounding on ISIS positions by a multinational air wing led by U.S. fighter jets and bombers. Already, the sorties number in the thousands, military officials report; coalition bombs have taken out hundreds of ISIS targets—vehicles, buildings, oil assets, even small, dug-in fighting positions. An estimated 6,000 or more ISIS fighters have been killed, a toll that would be higher save for the fact that the terrorists are afraid to show themselves in sufficient numbers to be hit.
ISIS—afraid? This was something new. This image of a besieged terrorist army facing a powerful counterattack confounds the familiar picture of brazen and burgeoning ISIS legions, sovereign over lands larger than Belgium, boasting terrorist cadres from Lebanon to Pakistan. More formidable than its al-Qaeda precursors in the view of many experts, ISIS is more than a network of terrorist cells or even a militia: it's almost a nation. In the tracts of Iraq and Syria under its aegis, ISIS collects taxes and delivers government services with one hand while slaughtering prisoners and demanding ransoms with the other. Its armies are supplied from captured arsenals and paid with money from looted banks.

Osama bin Laden talked of establishing a new caliphate to rule over the world's devout Muslims. ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi actually declared himself the new Caliph last June—and thousands of violent jihadists worldwide have pledged allegiance to his black flag. His supporters see nothing but strength in the movement's ultraviolent propaganda, which exploits 21st century media to communicate the 7th century vision of Armageddon at the core of ISIS ideology.

Coalition air strikes have yet to interrupt the steady flow of ISIS's carefully scripted videos. Its filmmakers spare no detail, casting hooded Westerners as their spokesmen and executioners, as if to say that ISIS is everywhere, anonymous yet lethal. They seize flighty Internet attention spans by varying their outrages—from beheading individual prisoners to burning a Jordanian pilot alive to carrying out the mass execution of 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians in Libya. They costume their captives in orange jumpsuits, evoking the prisoners held by the U.S. at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay. They murdered their Egyptian victims on a Mediterranean beach, where the Copts' blood mixed with waves that might soon enough touch the hem of Europe.

"They are seeking to establish themselves as the vanguard terrorist organization that is at war with the U.S. and the West on behalf of Islam," explains Ben Rhodes, the Deputy National Security Adviser to President Obama. "Therefore they need to attract as much attention as they can."

Yet which picture of ISIS is closer to reality? Is it the reeling and ragged force battered by coalition bombs? Or is it the triumphal caliphate framed in ISIS videos? The answer lies in a tangle of complexity somewhere in between. As a military force, ISIS is only as strong as the power vacuum it inhabits. Where anarchy reigns, its small but fanatically ruthless units can pile up rapid victories. But against disciplined and well-supplied foes, ISIS fades. As an ideology, the movement probably burns too hot to take substantial hold in healthy societies. ISIS feeds on chaos. The West will likely see more lone wolves who dedicate acts of violence to the celebrity jihadists of ISIS. But for now, it seems, al-Baghdadi's organization would rather recruit Westerners to the battlefields of Syria and Iraq than deploy them on terrorist missions back home. That fact was driven home on Feb. 25 when three Brooklyn residents—a citizen of Kazakhstan and two citizens of Uzbekistan—were arrested and charged with attempting to provide material support to ISIS.

The greatest threat that ISIS poses—even to the poor souls living under ISIS rule—is the unintended damage that might follow from the effort to eradicate the group. A growing number of nations appear ready and determined to defeat ISIS, yet the group continues to provoke its enemies. Why? Because a labyrinth of hazards and pitfalls lies between the looming battle for Mosul and the unseeable, unknowable end of the conflict. ISIS is luring the world into a trap. Always troubled, the Middle East faces crisis on all fronts: the Arab Spring in tatters, conflict boiling between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, millions of refugees stranded by the Syrian civil war, Yemen and Libya leaderless, the Sinai breaking from Egyptian control, Iran racked by economic sanctions yet driving a wedge between the U.S. and Israel. ISIS has tentacles in all these troubles. It won't be easy to pry those tentacles loose without making everything worse.

Which is exactly what ISIS wants: to make matters worse.

NATURE OF THE THREAT

ISIS goes by many names: The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or simply the Islamic State. Its Arabic-speaking foes usually refer to it, in sneering tones, as Daesh. The group’s history is almost as varied as its present-
day labels. Hatched in the late 1990s as a jihadist cell under the leadership of a Jordanian radical known as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the group found its calling as al-Qaeda’s franchise in Iraq after the U.S. invasion of 2003. Even by the standards of that time and place, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was bloodthirsty, unleashing a campaign of suicide bombings and videotaped beheadings, with Shi’ite Muslims the most frequent targets. Al-Zarqawi’s fellow Sunnis in the main al-Qaeda leadership eventually soured on his tactics; by some accounts, it was an al-Qaeda source who betrayed his location shortly before he was killed in his hideout by a pair of American smart bombs in 2006.

The following two successors to al-Zarqawi were killed in 2010. Then al-Baghdadi took charge. A mysterious figure—perhaps a soldier, perhaps a cleric—he favored al-Zarqawi’s playbook of mass murder and widespread mayhem, even though AQI’s excessive tactics had triggered the backlash beginning in 2005 known as the Sunni Awakening. Hoping for a less violent future, Sunni tribes had risen up against the terrorists. Some of al-Baghdadi’s best soldiers ended up in neighboring Syria, where they were clapped into prison by the Shi’ite-oriented dictator Bashar Assad. But then a strange and breathtakingly cynical thing happened. After widespread protests broke out in 2011 against corrupt tyrants across the Middle East, Assad found himself in a desperate struggle for power. To justify a brutal crackdown, he turned jihadists loose, knowing they would surely join the fight against him. When they did, he cloaked the repression of his enemies in a mantle of antiterrorism.

Meanwhile, the Americans pulled out of Iraq, and Prime Minister al-Maliki, a Shi’ite, turned on the Sunnis as soon as Uncle Sam was gone. Leading Sunni political figures were pushed from office, Sunni protests were violently suppressed, and critics charged al-Maliki with turning a blind eye to the work of Shi’ite death squads. Oppressed and resentful, the same Anbar tribes that had driven AQI out during the Awakening embraced the return of the group, now headed by al-Baghdadi.

“The environment was prepared for ISIS to enter Iraq widely, and all the support of the people at first came as a regular reaction to the unfairness that the Sunnis faced from the past Iraqi governments—especially the al-Maliki government,” says Muthasher al-Samuraei, former governor of Salahuddin province, which is now largely controlled by al-Baghdadi’s men. “ISIS told the Sunnis they are here to support Sunnis.”

The point of this history is that there was less than meets the eye to the dazzling blitzkrieg that brought ISIS to the world’s attention last year. Al-Baghdadi’s troops raced through northwestern Iraq to the outskirts of Baghdad not because they were an unstoppable military force but because no one wanted to stop them. In city after city, they met seething residents eager for a champion. It was a cakewalk.

A relatively small fighting force—perhaps 25,000 to 30,000 spread thinly through two countries, according to U.S. intelligence—ISIS capitalized on the interfaith strife in Syria and Iraq to make itself seem larger than life. “The marginalization and resentment felt in the Sunni Muslim areas is real,” says Aron Lund, editor of the blog Syria in Crisis for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. And as long as it continues, ISIS will have a home.

But if the military triumph was less than it seemed, ISIS has been brilliant at marketing the illusion of its invincibility. For thousands of would-be jihadis haunting makeshift mosques and Internet chat rooms or following ISIS on Twitter, al-Baghdadi’s group was the first strong horse to come along in years. A decimated al-Qaeda had lost its grip on the radical imagination. The apocalyptic mastermind of 9/11, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, languished in prison, and the charismatic icon bin Laden was dead, succeeded by the comparatively colorless Ayman al-Zawahiri. Here was ISIS, bloody and fearless, willing to bring the medieval visions of jihadist philosophers to life.

In the East London suburb of Ilford, ISIS sympathizer and active proponent of jihad Anjem Choudary sat down with TIME to explain the appeal he finds in the movement. It comes down to Scripture, he says. The mass killings and immolations are required, he believes, by certain severe passages in the Quran. “When you start to see things like crucifixion and beheadings, people say, ‘Oh, I haven’t seen that before!’” says Choudary. “And yet that has always been there in the Quran.” What is new is the restored caliphate, which, he says, changes the rules on how such punishments could be applied, according to an extreme interpretation of early texts. “There has not been a situation where you have a Caliph who would implement those aspects of the penal code.”
This reading of Islam’s founding text is far from the mainstream. But if al-Baghdadi’s orgy of bloodshed repels Muslims by the millions, it has also attracted a few thousand Western Muslims to Syria and Iraq to defend the caliphate. The question is whether extreme violence is costing ISIS momentum, says Fawaz Gerges, the Emirates chair in contemporary Middle East studies at the London School of Economics. "ISIS has won support by capturing territories from the Iraqi and Syrian governments, showing by its deeds and actions—not just rhetoric—that it is able to help the Sunni communities defend themselves," he says.

“What we are seeing now is more and more Sunnis taking a second look at ISIS and wondering, What's going on here? We have many reports now that there are summary executions, that they’re burning Iraqis, they’re terrorizing the population.” Refugees from the territory held by ISIS describe town squares decorated with severed heads and military conscription for children. The Sunnis may once again turn against al-Baghdadi to become “a liability that could really implode ISIS from within,” Gerges says.

That’s the hope of U.S. military and foreign policy planners, who helped to pressure al-Maliki from office in favor of a more conciliatory Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi. The new administration in Iraq hopes to woo minority Sunnis with a share of the country’s oil riches and a promise to authorize local units of the national guard—a counterweight to the Shi’ite militias backed by neighboring Iran.

Perhaps the best way to think about the ISIS threat is to weigh the power to control vs. the power to inspire. Where the group has control, it is nothing less than a nightmare. Unlike most terrorist organizations, it has sophisticated weapons, captured from arsenals well stocked by the departing Americans. It has many sources of revenue, including a special tax—the jizya—levied on Christians in its territory who hope to be left alone by this new government. ISIS kidnaps for ransom, plunders antiquities and smuggles commodities to market.

But unlike other terrorist organizations, ISIS also has large bills to pay. Much of its money must be plowed into local patronage, experts explain, to shore up support and fulfill Quranic obligations. “Now that they have declared a caliphate,” said Choudary, “that means they are providing food and shelter and facilities like education” to the Sunni faithful in the ISIS domain. Like other Middle East conquerors before it, ISIS may discover that governing territory is harder than winning it.

The ability of ISIS to inspire violence beyond its sphere of control rests with its propaganda arm, though it’s not clear whether ISIS is lighting fires or simply blowing smoke. ISIS is adept at gaming Twitter by using bots and cascading retweets to project an impression of overwhelming support. And many of the terrorist cells now flying the black flag in scattered countries are pre-existing groups that have changed their brands, according to one senior U.S. Administration official. “Most of these groups are pretty insular,” the official said. “Below that flag, it’s all about themselves. They’ve got their own agenda, they’ve got their own objectives, and often those objectives are completely local—they’re tribal, they’re ethnic, they’re religious.” So far, ISIS has shown scant ability to direct the actions of its associates even in nearby countries. As for taking jihad to the West—attacking Rome, as ISIS puts it in its antimodern idiom—that’s mostly talk. In contrast with al-Qaeda, ISIS has not directed a single successful plot in the West, although analysts say they can’t rule one out.

“The threat to the homeland resembles what we have seen in Ottawa and Australia and Paris,” says Rhodes, the White House adviser, referring to recent terrorist attacks. That is, “individuals who are either radicalized of their own volition taking up arms to commit those types of acts, or individuals who may have traveled to Iraq and Syria returning to create those kinds of attacks. People with guns or IEDs”—homemade bombs—“carrying out those kinds of attacks. It’s different than 9/11.”

NATURE OF THE TRAP

As dangerous as it is to have a terrorist kingdom in the middle of the world’s geopolitical tinderbox, ousting ISIS will be every bit as dangerous. Should the process begin in Mosul, expect a crimson springtime. “Retaking Mosul is going to be like Fallujah on steroids,” says Thomas Donnelly of the American Enterprise Institute, referring to the
two bloody battles in 2004 in the city in western Iraq that resulted in the deaths of more than 100 U.S. soldiers.

President Obama is determined not to put U.S. troops on the front lines. In a letter to members of Congress explaining his views, he wrote, “Local forces, rather than U.S. military forces, should be deployed to conduct such operations.” But can he find enough battle-tested local troops willing to fight and able to win a possible house-to-house struggle? “ISIS is a movement that would be hiding in caves if it did not have a professional cadre of trained, internationally recruited, professional light infantry,” says retired Marine Colonel Gary Anderson, who is skeptical of the Pentagon’s plan to train enough local troops to do the job. “They are very good at what they do, and the rabble of Iraqi, Syrian and Kurdish militias opposing them—and I include the Iraqi army here—is not going to dislodge them.”

Moreover, unless a strong majority of the liberating troops are Sunnis, the counteroffensive could be self-defeating. Sending a force bristling with Kurdish peshmerga and Shi’ite militias would only strengthen the image of ISIS as saviors of their people.

Though deeply skeptical about another war in the Middle East, Obama came away from a recent meeting at the U.N. more hopeful than before that something can be done. He met with the Shi’ite Iraqi Prime Minister al-Abadi and representatives from the Sunni leadership of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain and Qatar. “For all the differences there have been in the region, everybody essentially agreed,” Rhodes says. “For the first time there was a regional alignment that understood that even if there were differences … everybody could essentially agree that this was a group that had crossed into a different area. That’s when I think we had sensed that the regional balance had shifted to the point where this was the one thing everyone in the region could agree on.”

One deeply experienced American observer—retired Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni, former head of Centcom—recently returned from a trip to the Middle East full of similar confidence. Sunni-majority nations in the region “are getting scared,” Zinni says, “and have gotten angry at ISIS’s atrocious behavior.” The general believes that if Obama would commit 10,000 U.S. troops to coordinate the counteroffensive, the others would join in: “A brigade from the UAE, a brigade from Jordan, maybe a brigade or two from Saudi Arabia and a brigade or two from Egypt. We could certainly twist the arms of the Kuwatis—they owe us anyway—maybe even the Qatari. I think if it starts to form that way, you could even see the French, the Brits, the Belgians and others throw in. Pretty soon, you could have a pretty good force.”

But that pretty good force would be a team of rivals, at best. For example, Egypt’s ambassador to the Arab League recently denounced Qatar as a sponsor of terrorism. Saudi Arabia’s new King Salman recently hosted a group of Islamic scholars with close ties to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is the leading force in the opposition to Egyptian President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi.

At the same time, the very existence of the coalition could aggravate tensions on the Iraqi border with Iran. Shi’ite Iran, along with Assad, its vassal in Syria, wouldn’t be happy to see a multinational force of Sunni soldiers massing so close by, with the U.S. and its allies poised alongside. To many in the Iranian government, ISIS is a creation of Western interests intent on stirring up Sunnis and discrediting the Islamic faith.

What Yezid Sayigh, a senior associate at the Carnegie Middle East Center, says of the ISIS threat and Lebanese politics is true of the entire region: “It’s a unifying factor, but not to the point where anyone is going to set aside their private agendas.” Sharing a common enemy will not make foes into friends. The broader the coalition, the more fragile it might be in the long haul.

And it will be a long haul. On that, nearly all the experts agree. Even if sufficient force is mustered to drive ISIS out of Iraq, al-Baghdadi’s organization will continue to hold territory in war-torn Syria. The ongoing civil war, the ethnic divide and Assad’s ruthless desire to prop up the most radical elements of the Syrian opposition all conspire against any hopes of eradicating ISIS. At the same time, ISIS seeds have been planted in other ungoverned lands, like Libya and the Sinai. “As long as the root problems are not
addressed, the Islamic State is not going away,” says Carnegie’s Lund.

A FEELING OF DÉJÀ VU

This feels grimly familiar. Once again, the West is gearing up for another go at the 3-D chessboard of Middle East conflict. And once again, the opening moves are clearer than the endgame.

There was a flap in Washington in mid-February when a State Department spokeswoman named Marie Harf told a television interviewer that the ISIS problem ultimately stemmed from a lack of jobs. “We cannot kill our way out,” she said. A ham-fisted attempt at a more complicated truth, Harf’s diagnosis was widely mocked. But it’s worth a moment’s pause over what she said.

There is a deeper issue behind the ISIS ugliness, and there will be no true victory until that issue is dealt with. Civil society is collapsing in large parts of North Africa and the Middle East. The absence of competent government creates mass unemployment—there’s the jobs issue—but it also creates resentment, suspicion, desperation and a sense of victimhood. And this is the nest in which terrorists are hatched.

As tricky as the military piece of the ISIS puzzle may be, it is simple compared with the civil-society piece. The U.S. showed in 1991 and again in 2003 that it knows how to take down enemies in Iraq. What it has never shown an ability to do is leave something better afterward.

Some might say this deeper problem should be left to the countries themselves to solve. But the history of Western interventions in the region has made self-help much harder than it might have been. The very idea of a nation called Iraq was a half-considered Western confection spun in the wake of World War I, and it doomed the region to a century of three competing peoples—Shi’ite, Sunni and Kurd—living miserably under one flag. To a significant extent, the bleeding Middle East is the West’s own botched creation.

Says Middle East analyst David Butter of the London-based think tank Chatham House: “The big question is, Have outside powers blundered around in the Middle East, doing too much or too little?” He answers his own question. “Having become very deeply involved in Iraq, they’ve made a lot of mistakes, underestimated and badly planned what they were going to do.”

In an interview with TIME, Pakistan’s Minster of Defense, Khawaja Asif, reflects bitterly on the high cost of the West’s repeated failures to plan more deeply than the first easy steps of each new intervention. The tactics employed by ISIS are hardly worse than some of the outrages committed by the Taliban, Asif notes, which is to be expected because “the Taliban and ISIS are just different franchises of the same phenomenon. They may be called different names in different places,” he continues, but both “have the same culture, and their roots lie in the ’80s when the Americans trained and funded these people through Pakistan to fight against the Soviet Union.”

And it’s true that some of the same mujahedin trained and armed by the U.S. to drive the Soviets out of Afghanistan went on to be founding fathers of modern jihadist terrorism—men like bin Laden and Mullah Omar, creator of the Taliban. No thought was given then to what would become of these battle-hardened fanatics after the West was done using them.

So “they keep on coming back to haunt us, fundamentally, and ultimately they also haunt the international peace and security,” Asif says. “Especially after the Arab Spring that has turned into a long Arab Winter now,” as governments from Libya to Yemen have essentially ceased to exist. “The result has been that the situation is far worse today. They are threatening the entire region: Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.”

Asif knows his history. This cycle of rash beginnings and unplanned ends may make Americans feel as if decisive action is being taken, but the results are clear: it isn’t working. And ISIS is taunting the world to run the cycle one more time. Put an army on the road to Mosul and let the rest take care of itself.

But that’s a trap. As bad as these people are, there is room for things to get much worse. And they will unless the U.S. and its latest coalition have the discipline at last to think all
the way through to the end. The question is not beating ISIS. It’s what comes after that. More than ever, that question needs an answer.

–WITH REPORTING BY SUHA MAAYEH/AMMAN; MOHAMMED AL SAADI/BAGHDAD; THANASSIS CAMBANIS, REBECCA COLLARD AND MOHAMMAD GHANAM/BEIRUT; CHARLOTTE MCDONALD-GIBSON/BRUSSELS; JARED MALSN/CAIRO; ARYN BAKER/CAPE TOWN; PIOTR ZALEWSKI/ISTANBUL; NAINA BAJEKAL, CONAL URQUHART AND OMAR WARAIY/LONDON; NIKHIL KUMAR/NEW DELHI; KARL VICK/NEW YORK CITY; VIVIENNE WALT/PARIS; KAY ARMIN SERJOIE/TEHRAN; MASSIMO CALABRESI, MICHAEL SCHERER AND MARK THOMPSON/WASHINGTON

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