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BY JESSICA LEWIS MCFATE, HARLEEN GAMBHIR, CHRISTOPHER KOZAK, AND JENNIFER CAFARELLA,  
WITH DINA SHAHROKHI

## MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 30

# ISIS FORECAST: RAMADAN 2016



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Cover: Part of a wall clock is seen at the al-Mo'ayyad mosque hit by two bombings in Yemen's capital Sanaa September 3, 2015. Islamic State's Yemen branch claimed responsibility for two bombings at the mosque in the northern district of the capital Sanaa that media run by the Houthi militia said killed at least 28 people and wounded 75 on Wednesday. REUTERS/ Khaled Abdullah

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### ISIS FORECAST: RAMADAN 2016

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## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The Institute for the Study of War (ISW) is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization. ISW advances an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. ISW is committed to improving the nation's ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats in order to achieve U.S. strategic objectives.

The Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute equips policymakers, opinion leaders, and the military and intelligence communities with detailed and objective open-source analysis of America's current and emerging national security challenges. Through daily monitoring, in-depth studies, graphic presentations, private briefings, and public events, the project is a unique resource for those who need to fully understand the nuance and scale of threats to America's security to effectively develop and execute policy

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ISW believes superior strategic insight derives from a fusion of traditional social science research and innovative technological methods. ISW recognizes that the analyst of the future must be able to process a wide variety of information, ranging from personal interviews and historical artifacts to high volume structured data. ISW thanks its technology partner, Praescient Analytics, for their support in this innovative endeavor. In particular, their technology and implementation assistance has supported creating many ISW maps and graphics.

Praescient Analytics is a Veteran Owned Small Business based in Alexandria, Virginia. Its aim is to revolutionize how the world understands information by empowering its customers with the latest analytic tools and methodologies. Currently, Praescient provides several critical services to our government and commercial clients: training, embedded analysis, platform integration, and product customization.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The next forty-five days constitute a high-risk period for a surge of attacks by ISIS during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. ISIS traditionally uses Ramadan – which begins on June 6 and ends on July 5, 2016 - as a justification for its attacks and as an occasion to reorient its strategy. This year, ISIS will likely take action to reverse serious losses in Iraq and Syria while expanding its attacks against the non-Muslim world in an attempt to spark an apocalyptic total war. ISIS is still operationally capable in its core terrain and stands poised to expand its operations over the next six weeks, particularly in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. This forecast will outline the most likely and most dangerous targets that ISIS may seek to operate against during Ramadan.

ISIS will implement its global strategy with simultaneous and linked campaigns across multiple geographic rings. ISW has refined its previous assessment of these geographic campaigns to identify the following four rings: **core terrain**, including Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, and the Sinai Peninsula; **regional power centers**, including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt; the **remainder of the Muslim world**; and the **non-Muslim world**. ISIS will pursue different strategic objectives in each ring in order to advance its grand strategic objective to expand its caliphate across all Muslim lands while provoking and winning an apocalyptic war against the West. ISIS has suffered numerous losses within Iraq and Syria that it will likely seek to reverse by setting new conditions during Ramadan. ISIS will attempt to exploit an ongoing political crisis in Iraq by targeting demonstrators or other soft targets in a mass casualty event that prompts the mobilization of Iraqi Shi'a and sparks reprisals against Iraqi Sunnis. ISIS will also launch attacks in Homs City, Tartous, and Latakia Provinces in Syria to exploit the current focus of pro-regime elements upon other major cities such as Aleppo and Damascus. ISIS has already demonstrated this capability in early 2016 and will continue to pursue these courses of action in April - May 2016 leading up to Ramadan.

ISIS will also seek to generate new conditions in Iraq and Syria by launching attacks within neighboring countries, including Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. ISIS will likely select targets in neighboring states that relieve pressure from the group in Syria while setting conditions for future expansion in those states. Targets that serve this dual purpose include foreign tourists, state security forces, and U.S. military elements in Turkey and Jordan. ISIS has already accelerated its attacks within Turkey and Lebanon since November 2015. Jordanian Special Operations Forces uncovered an operational ISIS presence in Irbid in March 2016, indicating that ISIS is developing the capability to conduct attacks inside Jordan as well.

ISIS is similarly organizing campaigns to weaken regional power centers - including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt – in order to eliminate its rivals for leadership within the Muslim world. ISIS has pursued an indirect campaign against Iran that focuses upon its proxies in Iraq and Syria. Meanwhile, ISIS is escalating its attacks against security forces in Saudi Arabia with targets including the capital of Riyadh, Shi'a populations of Eastern Saudi Arabia, and potentially the holy city of Mecca, based upon recent arrests. These attacks may serve to boost regional recruitment for ISIS while signaling its long-term intent to seize control of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. ISIS will also likely take advantage of political discontent against Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to further drive disorder in mainland Egypt and delegitimize the rival version of Islamism espoused by the Muslim Brotherhood.

ISIS will likely also announce new global affiliates elsewhere in the Muslim world during Ramadan, continuing a trend from previous years. The group announced a new governorate, Wilayat Sahel, on the northwestern coast of Syria on May 23, 2016. ISIS is particularly likely to announce new governorates in Bangladesh and Southeast Asia over the next forty-five days, although new governorates in the Sahel and Somalia are also possible. ISIS will likely launch attacks during Ramadan in each of these locations in order to claim a presence in the far corners of the Muslim world, where it is directly competing with al-Qaeda and staging for future attacks against the non-Muslim

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

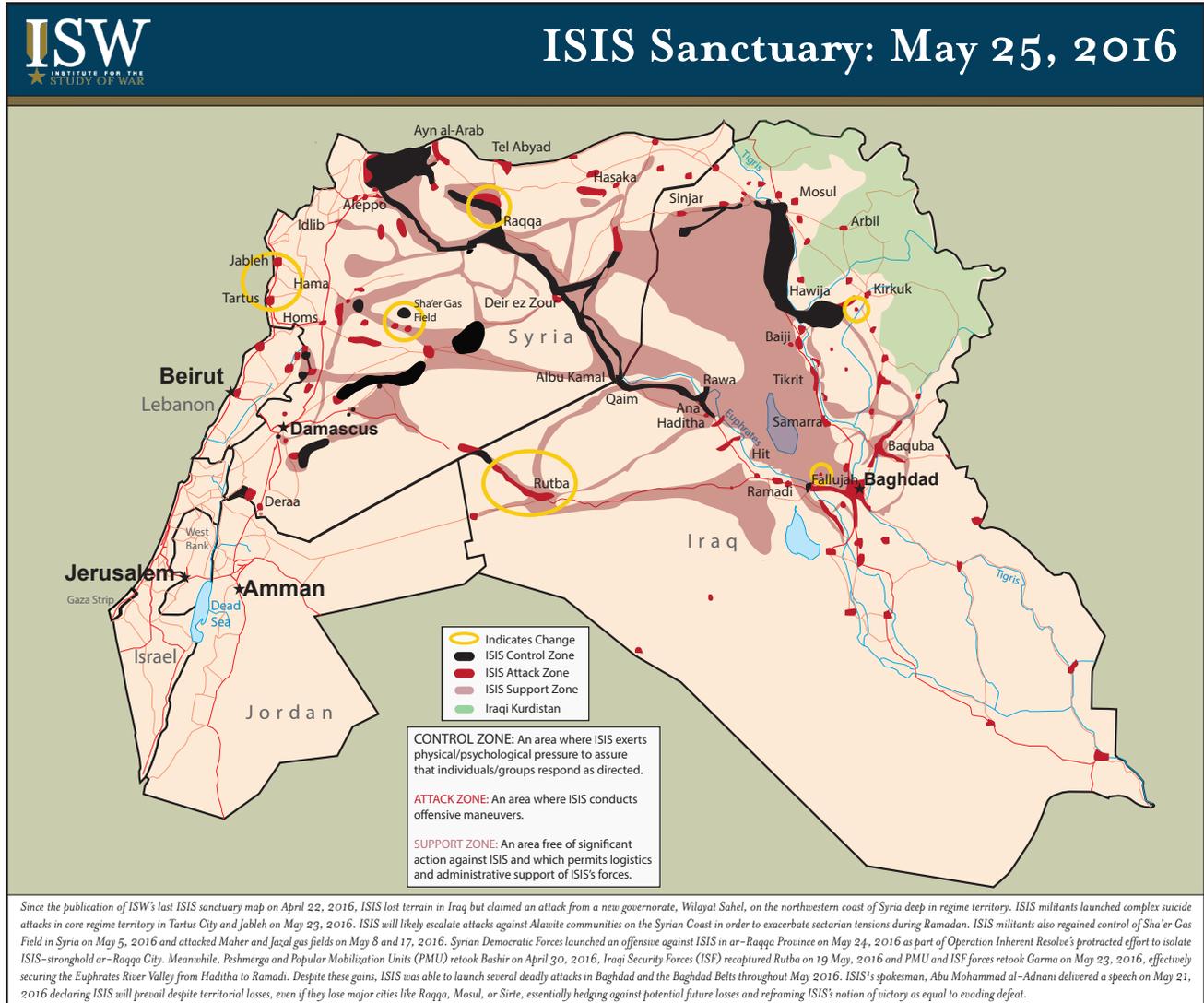
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world. ISIS could also declare a governorate in Tunisia over Ramadan, although conditions may not be set for such an announcement in the near-term. ISIS will expand its control and influence in Libya from its stronghold in Sirte, which it can use as a platform to escalate its expansion into Tunisia and Northern Africa.

ISIS will likely attack the West during Ramadan, particularly Europe. ISIS may well attempt to target major sporting events and other crowded public venues, including the Euro 2016 soccer tournament between June 10 and July 10. In a most dangerous course of action, ISIS could target Great Britain in an effort to exacerbate underlying tensions over refugee policy, accelerate its exit from the European Union, and break a key alliance in the West. ISIS could also conduct attacks against Canada and the U.S. over this period, particularly around the respective Independence Days of each country on July 1<sup>st</sup> and July 4<sup>th</sup>. The risk of 'lone wolf attacks' across the West will rise during Ramadan, as indicated in a recent speech by the group's spokesperson urging followers to target the Crusaders in the West.

The anticipated surge in attacks by ISIS during Ramadan coincides with other precarious geopolitical trends that may allow ISIS to achieve outsized effects against its adversaries. ISIS could attempt to provoke an escalation in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict by launching cross-border attacks from Syrian Kurdish terrain or deploying ethnic Kurds as suicide bombers in Turkey. An intensification in this conflict could exacerbate tensions between the U.S. and Turkey over anti-ISIS strategy given the current reliance upon Syrian Kurds linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) as the primary ground partner against ISIS in Syria. Meanwhile, Russia has also leveraged the Kurds as one vector to challenge Turkey amidst a wider campaign to pressure NATO through its southern flank. These additive pressures create an unstable security environment in which ISIS can generate asymmetric effects in the absence of U.S. support. ISIS's Ramadan campaign thus threatens to inflict dangerous pressure upon the global system of U.S.-led security alliances even as it challenges domestic security across Europe. Countering this campaign will require the U.S. to dedicate increased resources towards disrupting its ground campaign, protecting vulnerable targets, and reinforcing key global and regional alliances.



# ISIS FORECAST: RAMADAN 2016

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Jessica Lewis McFate, Harleen Gambhir, and Christopher Kozak, and Jennifer Cafarella, with Dina Shahrokhi

## INTRODUCTION

ISIS will likely execute a deliberate campaign during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan as it has consistently in previous years. ISIS is still a cogent military organization despite recent losses in Iraq and Syria, and it retains the capacity to design and execute sophisticated campaigns across its global footprint. ISIS will use intense attacks during Ramadan to exacerbate Iraq's political crisis in order to collapse the Iraqi government, provoke sectarian mobilization and reprisal against Sunni civilians, and thereby guarantee ISIS's persistence and reconstitution even should it lose terrain. ISIS also seeks to recapture the initiative in Syria in order to neutralize anti-ISIS operations that threaten its core terrain. ISIS may also focus on neighboring states such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, where it has longstanding support zones alongside the rear areas of anti-ISIS forces. ISIS has already demonstrated operational presence in each, and it may expand its attacks in these countries in order to compromise anti-ISIS coalitions and weaken states it intends to absorb into its caliphate ultimately. ISIS is also poised to announce new global affiliates, which it will likely unveil during Ramadan in order to demonstrate that its caliphate is still expanding. Finally and not least, ISIS will encourage coordinated and lone wolf attacks against American, European, Russian, and Australian targets.<sup>1</sup> ISIS will coordinate attacks throughout its depth during Ramadan in pursuit of these objectives.

### *Geopolitical Context*

The alliances and institutions upon which the U.S. bases its security are vulnerable to numerous pressures. Russia is actively undermining U.S. global influence, challenging NATO, and working to break apart the European Union in order to reassert its great power status. Russian President Vladimir Putin has found an ideal vector for this pressure in Turkey, where Turkish President Recep Erdogan is embroiled in both the Syrian Civil War and an internal counterinsurgency against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). These tensions have been exacerbated by the emergence of a contiguous and aspirational autonomous zone among Syrian Kurds with the direct support of the U.S. Al-Qaeda is on the rise in Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere while the world focuses on ISIS, undermining the potential success of efforts to defeat ISIS without strengthening Al-Qaeda in the process. Meanwhile China is deploying nuclear-armed submarines into the Pacific, and North Korea continues to conduct submarine missile launches, preventing the U.S. from focusing exclusively upon threats emanating from the Middle East and Russia.

The sectarian and geopolitical war in the Middle East is escalating as the Gulf States attempt to counter the hegemonic ambitions of Iran. Iran has deployed conventional forces from both the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and Iranian Army (Artesh) to Syria<sup>2</sup> and suffered significant losses there. Saudi Arabia pulled funding from the Lebanese Armed Forces in early 2016 in response to Lebanon's failure to condemn an attack against the Saudi Embassy in Iran, which was itself a response to Saudi Arabia's execution of a prominent Shi'a religious figure in January 2016.<sup>3</sup> The Gulf Cooperation Council designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization,<sup>4</sup> a notable step against the Iranian axis of resistance. Meanwhile, Turkish and Gulf states continue to battle divergent interests in Libya, another front on which ISIS is actively expanding. ISIS can leverage this regional

sectarian war and other regional ethnic conflicts, especially the Turkish-Kurdish and budding Arab-Kurdish conflict, to prevent coherent anti-ISIS campaigns from forming and to overwhelm the international system's ability to reestablish order in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere.

Yet ISIS is recovering from serious losses. ISIS lost the cities of Ramadi, Shaddadi, and Palmyra between December 2015 and March 2016, perforating its contiguous control within Iraq and Syria to the degree that ISIS's spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani's Ramadan message on May 21, 2016 hedged against further losses.<sup>5</sup> The U.S. conducted a leaflet drop in Raqqa on May 19 warning civilians to leave, and US-backed forces are messaging about an upcoming attack on the city.<sup>6</sup> The U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition has killed numerous senior leaders through targeted strikes, ISIS's foreign fighter flows into Iraq and Syria have been constrained by Turkey and redirected by ISIS to other fronts, and ISIS's finances have been cut through Operation Tidal Wave II, which has crippled ISIS's oil industry.<sup>7</sup> Various anti-ISIS ground forces continue to converge on ISIS's territory, and ISIS is losing opportunities to maneuver to regain lost territory and compromise ground counter-offensives. ISIS is likely to seek creative solutions, exploit new opportunities and compensate for its losses in order to maintain its physical caliphate and its global image in the immediate term. In the long term, current conditions favor ISIS given the panoply of adjacent conflicts that guarantee that ISIS will retain resiliency within Iraq and Syria.

No force is in position to deny ISIS all of its territory in the near-to-medium term. ISIS is therefore not facing an existential threat as Ramadan 2016 approaches, despite President Obama's remarks in April 2016 that ISIS is on the defensive as its core terrain shrinks.<sup>8</sup> ISIS maintains control

of terrain in Iraq, Syria, and Libya as of May 2016. ISIS has declared *wilayats*, or governorates in nine countries extending from Afghanistan and Pakistan in the east to Algeria in the west. These *wilayats* indicate the presence of operational cells that report to ISIS, with organizational and attack capabilities in most cases, and the intent to export their version of Islamic governance to new locations. ISIS also possesses sanctuary in ungoverned spaces throughout the same territory, making ISIS resilient as a military organization. ISIS stands ready to declare new *wilayats* in Africa and Southeast Asia, and its European attack network is likely poised to attack during Ramadan.

### *Ramadan*

Ramadan will begin on June 6, 2016 and last until July 5. ISIS's activities are intensifying in the weeks before Ramadan in order to set conditions for success during the holy month. ISIS traditionally uses Ramadan as a justification for attacks and as an occasion to reorient its strategy.<sup>9</sup> ISIS's spokesman, Abu Mohammad al-Adnani delivered a pre-Ramadan speech on May 21, 2016<sup>10</sup> that may be useful to anticipate how ISIS

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*ISIS traditionally uses Ramadan as a justification for attacks and as an occasion to reorient its strategy.*

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will orient its campaign during Ramadan 2016. Adnani spoke primarily to America throughout the speech, indicating that ISIS is focused on the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition as a primary adversary. He acknowledges that ISIS is on the back foot militarily within Iraq and Syria by delivering a narrative of victory that equates to evading defeat, the strategy of a weak force in the face of the U.S.-led coalition. In so doing, he hedges against further losses, should ISIS lose control of major cities such as Raqqa, Mosul, and Sirte, by declaring that the Mujahideen will prevail regardless. This artifact shows that ISIS is still thinking like a military organization, though, and that its Ramadan campaign will likely be sophisticated as it has been in previous years.

Adnani also alludes to specific locations in his speech that are noteworthy in tracking ISIS's military plans for Ramadan, such as Damascus and Mesopotamia. ISIS will likely focus attacks upon Western Syria and Baghdad during Ramadan, as this forecast will explore. Adnani also referred to other places where Muslims are persecuted, including Burma, Turkistan in Central Asia, Indonesia, Kashmir, Philippines, Palestine, Chechnya, Iran, and the Central African Republic (CAR). ISIS is active in most of these places, and the reference indicates that ISIS intends to demonstrate its expansion throughout the Muslim world during Ramadan. Finally, ISIS calls for lone wolves to attack civilian targets in the West

during Ramadan. The threat to the West has been escalating over the last six months, and ISIS likely intends to showcase its capability to conduct terrorist attacks this year.

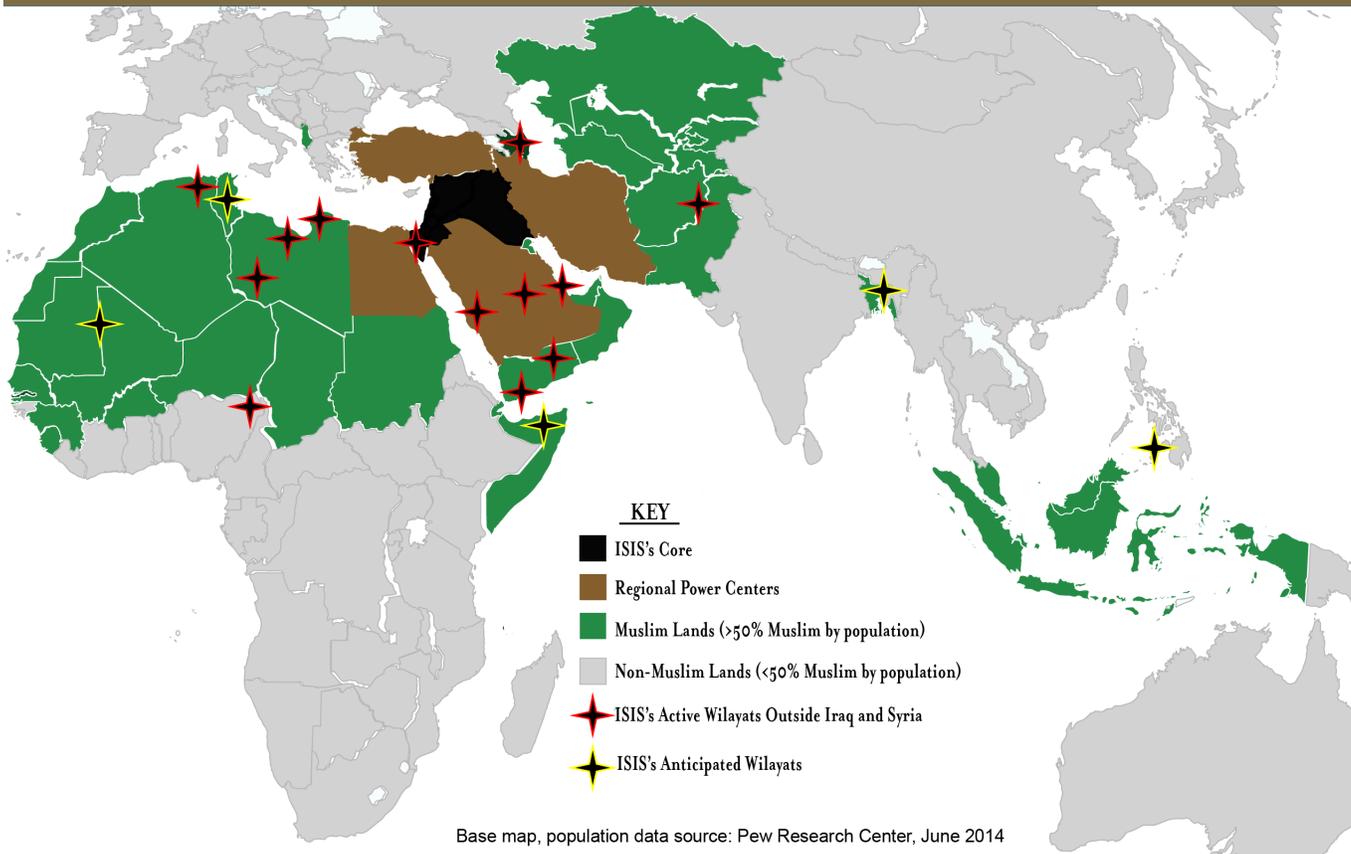
Forecasting what ISIS will do before and during Ramadan 2016 therefore requires a review of ISIS's strategy and its current state of play. The following sections will provide the necessary background to identify where ISIS has opportunities to advance its strategy, mitigate recent losses, and mark the symbolic dates of Ramadan as well as other key events that overlap with the Ramadan period, such as U.S. Independence Day on July 4, 2016. This forecast will not project a specific or tangible threat to the U.S. on July 4, but a general threat exists. ISIS will likely plan main efforts that serve multiple purposes when it can take advantage of symbolism in pursuit of its deliberate strategy. ISIS needs to generate operational momentum and regain freedom of action within Iraq and Syria, and it will chose symbolic targets that serve a practical purpose toward this end, particularly in neighboring states. This forecast will seek to identify ISIS's potential courses of action during Ramadan.

## THE RINGS REVISITED - FRAMING ISIS'S GLOBAL CAMPAIGN

ISW previously described ISIS's global campaign in terms of three rings: the Interior, the Near Abroad, and the Far Abroad, representing ISIS's defense of its physical caliphate, the expansion of its caliphate, and the war against the West respectively.<sup>11</sup> ISW has also described the Near Abroad in terms of geographic precedents, such as lands formerly ruled under historic caliphates, in an effort to estimate ISIS's potential aspirations for the ultimate borders of its caliphate. ISW is reassessing the category of the Near Abroad because ISIS's aspirations do not fit within historic caliphate boundaries, as demonstrated by early indicators that ISIS will declare a *wilayat* in Southeast Asia. Additionally, ISIS is exhibiting unique behaviors in Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and other states that require a more nuanced description of the Near Abroad as a multi-faceted component of ISIS's global campaign. ISW is therefore reframing the rings that describe ISIS's global campaign on the basis of ISIS's worldview and the many active fronts of its global campaign. ISW now assesses that ISIS conceptualizes the battlefield in four rings: 1.) its Core Terrain in Iraq and al-Sham, including Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and the Sinai; 2.) Regional Power Centers including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt; 3.) the rest of the Muslim World; and 4.) the Non-Muslim World.

### *Iraq, Al Sham, and the Sinai: The Core Terrain*

ISIS has an increased opportunity to inflict damage upon the Iraqi state at this time due to numerous escalating political crises. The government of Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi stands on the verge of collapse, accelerating a pre-



existing competition for power among Shi'a political factions. A de facto coup attempt by followers of cleric Muqtada al-Sadr erupted in Baghdad on April 30, 2016 as thousands of protesters stormed the Green Zone to demand fundamental political reforms.<sup>12</sup> The government and security forces restored order, but protesters once again stormed the Green Zone and the Prime Minister's office on May 20, 2016.<sup>13</sup> These tensions can lead to the removal of Prime Minister Abadi without a viable replacement, exacerbate government inactivity, and even prompt a unilateral declaration of independence by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). These events could not be better timed for ISIS, which seeks to destroy modern states and establish a caliphate in their wake. ISIS has already attempted to fuel these tensions by revamping its campaign of explosive attacks in Baghdad, successfully targeting Shi'a pilgrims and attempting to target large protests and soft targets in Baghdad leading up to Ramadan.<sup>14</sup>

Iraq also faces a renewed threat of geographic fragmentation as of May 2016. Iraqi Kurdish President Massoud Barzani has reasserted the need for Kurdish independence and the redrawing of state boundaries since January,<sup>15</sup> and his nephew Masrour Barzani called for an "amicable divorce" from

Baghdad on May 5 in an op-ed in the *Washington Post*.<sup>16</sup> The reunion of opposition Kurdish parties into a parliamentary alliance will help mitigate the threat of a unilateral declaration of independence.<sup>17</sup> An independent Kurdistan fundamentally weakens Iraq and undermines the U.S.-led anti-ISIS strategy in the region, and therefore benefits ISIS. The concurrence of Baghdad's political crisis, Kurdish calls for independence, and ISIS's Ramadan campaign suggest that ISIS can achieve outsized effects in Iraq during Ramadan despite its operational losses.

ISIS's position in Syria is more constrained, but ISIS can escape its constraints by leveraging conflicts among its adversaries who are all focused upon other strategic threats. Syrian Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra and allied opposition groups in Northern Syria are attempting to deflect a main effort by the Assad regime and its allies in Russia and Iran to seize Aleppo City.<sup>18</sup> ISIS is taking advantage of this focal point to seize opposition-held terrain in Damascus, Qalamoun, Dera'a,<sup>19</sup> southern Aleppo, and eastern Hama provinces. ISIS also launched a new offensive against regime-held portions of Deir ez Zour City on May 14, 2016, a likely indicator that ISIS means to exploit the focus of Syrian opposition and pro-regime forces upon the battle for Aleppo

and further fix Syrian regime forces away from targets that ISIS will strike during Ramadan.<sup>20</sup> ISIS has also continued its assassination campaign against leaders of Jabhat al-Nusra and Salafi-jihadi group Ahrar al-Sham in Idlib Province, challenging al-Qaeda's stronghold and the rival center of Sunni Arab governance in Syria.

ISIS also has the potential to threaten the Azaz border crossing north of Aleppo, still held by Syrian opposition groups, in order to disrupt threats to its own cross-border access to Turkey through al-Ra'i and Jarabulus. This region is also contested by Syrian Kurds, sparking resistance from Syrian Arabs and Turkey as well as ISIS. These local battles also occur within the context of wider geopolitical struggles over the Syrian Civil War. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar remain locked in a proxy war with Iran in Syria that has resulted in expanded support for Salafi-Jihadist groups throughout the country. Turkey and Russia have also used Syria as an outlet to pursue their own regional conflict as both sides deploy artillery and other military equipment along the Syrian-Turkish border. ISIS is therefore in a position to make tactical gains while its opponents focus on other strategic priorities.

ISIS is also boosting its operations in Lebanon and Jordan, which support ISIS's campaign in Syria but will become main efforts for ISIS in the long term. ISIS has been cultivating support networks in neighboring countries, and has lately begun to conduct isolated attacks in Lebanon and to demonstrate attack capability in Jordan. In Lebanon, ISIS mounted four attempted explosive attacks in Beirut

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*ISIS ultimately means to  
destroy the Turkish state and  
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and Tripoli in November 2015, two of which successfully detonated despite an ongoing security crackdown.<sup>21</sup> ISIS is also expanding its operations in Jordan. An ISIS attack cell in Irbid engaged Jordanian Special Operations Forces in an intense firefight in March 2016.<sup>22</sup> All of the members of this cell reportedly wore Suicide Vests (SVESTS), illustrating their capacity and intent to launch attacks in Jordan. It is possible that the ISIS group holding a pocket of terrain on the Syrian side of the border facilitated the Irbid cell and can generate future attack cells. Attacks in neighboring countries, including Lebanon and Jordan within al-Sham, are part of ISIS's mobile defense of its caliphate holdings in Syria. ISIS means to protect its caliphate by weakening anti-ISIS alliances and generally disrupting the status quo in Syria. ISIS likely will mount attacks in neighboring countries as a main effort if it continues to lose momentum in Syria.

ISIS's activities in the Sinai are also accelerating as Ramadan 2016 approaches. ISIS's Wilayat Sinai has been one of its most active satellites since it first established external wilayats in November 2014.<sup>23</sup> ISIS's attack capabilities in Sinai regenerated after a security crackdown in late 2015 following ISIS's brief capture of the city of Sheikh Zuweid in North Sinai on July 1, 2015 as well as subsequent major attacks on security forces in Sinai. ISIS also downed a Russian plane departing Sharm el-Sheikh in October 2015 after the crackdown had begun.<sup>24</sup> ISIS renewed its attacks upon multiple Egyptian military positions across northeast Sinai in March 2016.<sup>25</sup> ISIS poses a sufficient threat to U.S. forces in the MFO base in Northern Sinai that the U.S. withdrew 100 U.S. MFO troops in April 2016, and is considering withdrawing the remaining 300 U.S. troops in favor of unmanned surveillance technology.<sup>26</sup> By compromising the MFO mission in Sinai, ISIS can challenge the Camp David Accords, splitting regional adversaries and breaking state order broadly by exploiting the seam between Egypt and Israel. ISIS also retains attack capability near tourist sites in Sharm al-Sheikh, Giza, and Cairo, means by which ISIS can disperse and attrite the Egyptian security forces, injure the Egyptian economy, compromise its strategic partnerships, and target Westerners and Russians abroad.

*The Regional Power Centers: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and Iran*

ISIS ultimately means to destroy the Turkish state and seize Constantinople.<sup>27</sup> The confluence of a great power struggle between Russia and the U.S. as well as escalating tensions between Turkey and the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) give ISIS a windfall opportunity to weaken Turkey now. Russia is likely leveraging the threat of the PKK to weaken and provoke Turkey, as indicated by the shoot down of a Turkish AH-1 Cobra attack helicopter by the PKK with a Russian SA-18 Igla MANPADS on May 13.<sup>28</sup> This adjacent conflict also reinforces ISIS's immediate objective to ensure it retains freedom of action in southern Turkey. Turkey acted against these networks in late 2015, in response to pressure from Western partners and as ISIS's launched its first spectacular attack in the Turkish capital of Ankara.<sup>29</sup> ISIS retaliated to this pressure by attacking foreigners in Istanbul in January and March 2016.<sup>30</sup> ISIS also began to launch artillery fire into Kilis, southern Turkey from Syria and deployed a Vehicle-borne Improvised Explosive Device (VBIED) against Turkish security forces in Gaziantep in early 2016 after Turkey began providing support to Syrian opposition groups attempting to seize the Syrian-Turkish border from ISIS.<sup>31</sup> ISIS is leveraging Turkey as a neighboring state, as a regional power center, and as a NATO member in order to accomplish multiple objectives.

ISIS's approach to Saudi Arabia may be more direct. ISIS has declared two *wilayats* in the Kingdom and possibly a third called Wilayat Bahrain. These satellites have conducted attacks north of the Saudi-Yemeni border, in Riyadh, and

in the eastern al-Ahsa province near Bahrain.<sup>32</sup> ISIS has also sought to target the holy city of Mecca as Ramadan approaches, demonstrated by a thwarted attack south of Mecca on May 5, 2016<sup>33</sup> and by a second unclaimed attack on a police station in Taif east of Mecca on May 8, 2016.<sup>34</sup> The latter event has not been firmly attributed to ISIS, but security forces uncovered an SVEST and other explosives after a firefight with militants. Attacks near Mecca demonstrate ISIS's intent to undermine the House of al-Saud as the Custodians of the Two Holy Mosques as well as ISIS's intent to control the holy cities ultimately. It is unclear how extensive a support base ISIS has inside Saudi Arabia in 2016, but ISIS's predecessor AQI derived 41% of its foreign fighters from Saudi Arabia in 2006-2007, amounting to hundreds of fighters.<sup>35</sup> ISIS may be prepared to escalate attacks inside Saudi Arabia in order to leverage this recruitment base.

Iran enters the Ramadan season in a weakened posture due to the loss of line units after fighting Jabhat al-Nusra and the Syrian opposition in Northern Syria on May 9, 2016.<sup>36</sup> Iran may react to the loss by increasing its support to an ongoing pro-regime offensive against opposition-held neighborhoods in Damascus. Iran's actions in Syria remain focused on other enemies besides ISIS, a condition ISIS may exploit to weaken

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the Iranian axis in Syria. ISIS has traditionally targeted Iran indirectly by focusing attacks upon Shi'a civilians in Iraq and upon Shi'a shrines in Iraq and Syria. ISIS has already exploited this focus by increasing its attempts to target Shi'a shrines in the region, attacking the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus several times and attempting to attack a shrine in Balad north of Baghdad in May 2016. Iran may increasingly deploy forward into Iraq and Syria based on deteriorating security conditions in Aleppo, Syria and Diyala, Iraq, where ISIS is conducting attacks to exacerbate a provincial political crisis immediately adjacent to the Iranian border. In so doing, Iran will provide ISIS with further opportunities to target Iranians outside of its borders.

ISIS is also indirectly targeting Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran by stoking regional sectarian wars in which these entities focus on fighting each other rather than fighting ISIS. These states are driving towards sectarian war independent of ISIS's actions. Saudi Arabia and Turkey have funded opposition groups led by Jabhat al-Nusra in operations near Aleppo City as of May 6, 2016,<sup>37</sup> resulting in significant casualties within several Iranian combat units. Saudi Arabia also intervened

in Yemen to block Iranian involvement there. ISIS has also attempted to influence the proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Yemen despite the continued dominance of al-Qaeda in the country. ISIS's attacks in Yemen have become restricted to Aden and Hadramawt in 2016, where several Salafi-Jihadi groups have freedom of action. Yemen is nevertheless another exogenous opportunity for ISIS that enhances its overall sectarian agenda and intent to weaken Iran and Saudi Arabia by focusing their aggression against each other. ISIS will likely attempt to exacerbate this wider conflict in order to develop new opportunities for its own expansion.

Meanwhile, the Egyptian government has undertaken recent measures that ISIS may exploit. Egypt gave two islands in the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia in April 2016, sparking large protests by Muslim Brotherhood members and others in Cairo, Giza, and other cities.<sup>38</sup> ISIS likely seeks opportunities in Egypt, Jordan and Syria to demonstrate that the Muslim Brotherhood's approach to Islamism is invalid and ineffective. Muslim Brotherhood protests also provide an outlet for ISIS to tap into radicalizing populations and mount a wider campaign of attacks on the Egyptian mainland. ISIS can exploit Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's propensity to blame the Muslim Brotherhood for ISIS's attacks. The attack claimed by ISIS against the Russian airliner departing Sinai in October 2015 demonstrates that ISIS is also incorporating covert explosive techniques previously used by al-Qaeda and conducting those attacks against Egypt's airline industry. This capability may or may not be responsible for the Egyptian airliner downed on May 19, 2016 en route from Paris to Cairo.

### *The Rest of the Muslim World*

ISIS's campaign elsewhere in the Muslim world is also a competition for leadership of the Salafi movement overall. ISIS's approach to this competition as well as its approach to defeating the state system is to maximize the swath of territory to which it can lay claim. ISIS is framing this campaign by seeding new *wilayats* across the Muslim world, particularly where al-Qaeda has established networks. ISIS's selection of *wilayats* is pragmatic and based upon where conditions are set for successful operations. ISIS's most established *wilayats* outside of its core terrain are Wilayats Barqa and Tarabalus in Libya, the latter of which controls the city of Sirte. ISIS is working to expand the military capabilities of its *wilayats* in Algeria, the Caucasus, and Saudi Arabia. ISIS is likely preparing to announce new *wilayats* in Bangladesh, the Sahel, and Southeast Asia based on its recent behaviors on those fronts.

ISIS's *wilayats* in Libya demonstrate military capability to conduct ground attacks resembling ISIS's military campaign in Iraq. ISIS executed a multi-front campaign against Libya's oil infrastructure in January and February 2016, which included

terror and guerilla attacks as well as conventional maneuver to seize terrain.<sup>39</sup> ISIS is defending and governing a stretch of terrain along Libya's central coast that includes deceased Libyan President Muammar al Ghaddafi's hometown of Sirte. It is exploiting Libya's ongoing civil war to expand territorially and build support amongst disenfranchised parties such as the Gaddafah, Warfalah, and Ould Suleiman tribes, portions of which affirmed their relationship with ISIS on May 7, 2016.<sup>40</sup> ISIS's leadership is directing fighters unable to travel to Iraq and Syria to go to Libya instead. ISIS also reportedly shifted some of its leadership from Iraq and Syria to Libya to take advantage of its safe haven outside the scope of the main anti-ISIS campaign.<sup>41</sup> ISIS's growth in Libya has driven the U.S., Italy, Britain, France, and Jordan to deploy special operations forces to advise anti-ISIS Libyan forces and provide targeting assistance for coalition airstrikes against ISIS.

ISIS is also infiltrating existing al-Qaeda and local trafficking networks in order to expand its presence across Africa radially from its beachhead in Libya. ISIS's presence in Libya is expanding in Fezzan,<sup>42</sup> the southwest quadrant of the country that connects the Libyan coast to main transit routes across the Sahel, particularly in Mali. There is potential for ISIS to also expand into the Sahel; a veteran Salafi-Jihadi militant broke from al-Qaeda in summer 2015 and re-declared his group as ISIS in the Sahel in May 2016.<sup>43</sup> ISIS may increase its cooperation with Boko Haram over the coming months, as indicated by the interdiction of an alleged arms shipment

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throughout the country.*

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from ISIS in Libya to the Lake Chad region in April 2016<sup>44</sup> and an attack claimed by ISIS Wilayat Gharb Afriqiyya on May 12, 2016 in Borno, Nigeria.<sup>45</sup> U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken also indicated in May 2016 that ISIS's *wilayats* in Libya were cooperating more with Boko Haram in Nigeria, detected through an increase in capability by the latter group.<sup>46</sup> A group of fighters in Somalia has also declared allegiance to ISIS, conducting at least one IED attack in Mogadishu.<sup>47</sup> Individuals in other African countries, including Tanzania, have begun to declare affiliation with ISIS.<sup>48</sup> ISIS's expansion in East Africa is not likely to gain rapid traction given the dominance of al Qaeda affiliate al Shabaab, but ISIS likely seeks to expand in the region in the long term.

ISIS's campaign in Afghanistan overall has slowed and does not appear to be fully operational as Ramadan 2016 approaches due to successful Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) operations supported by the U.S. However, ISIS claimed two IED attacks in Peshawar, Pakistan on May 18, 2016.<sup>49</sup> ISIS's local *wilayat*, Wilayat Khorasan, lost much of the terrain it held in southern Nangarhar Province in 2015 to ANSF operations with coalition support, but ISIS has begun to clash with Taliban elements in Achin, Nangarhar again in May 2016.<sup>50</sup> ISIS maintains sanctuary in the mountain passes connecting Nangarhar, Kunar, and the FATA in Pakistan and likely intends to regain control of populated areas, but not likely during the next 45 days. The Taliban fighting season increases rather than limits ISIS's freedom of action overall by challenging state security throughout the country. Taliban attacks have typically diminished during Ramadan, but they may increase this year. Mullah Akhtar Mansour was leading the Taliban on an aggressive campaign of retaking territory in advance of Ramadan before his death in an airstrike on May 21. Mansour's death puts ISIS in a competitive environment in Afghanistan, and the group may increase its attacks against the Taliban, Hazara civilians, and the Afghan government in order to stay relevant and exploit the fractures in the movement.

ISIS is expanding its presence in Asia. ISIS's newest official *wilayat* in Russia's North Caucasus region, Wilayat Qawqaz, launched its first explosive attacks in March 2016, targeting Russian security forces in Dagestan.<sup>51</sup> ISIS declared Wilayat Qawqaz during Ramadan on June 23, 2015,<sup>52</sup> raising the possibility that ISIS will mark the anniversary by declaring new *wilayats* during Ramadan 2016. Bangladesh and Southeast Asia are likely candidates. ISIS has attack cells in Bangladesh that are targeting foreigners, Shi'a, Sufi,<sup>53</sup> and Christian individuals in the country.<sup>54</sup> ISIS may also declare a *wilayat* in Southeast Asia, where it has recently claimed attacks and is building relationships with existing militant groups. Southeast Asian fighters currently in Syria are resourcing militant groups in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, encouraging them to conduct attacks in ISIS's name.<sup>55</sup> ISIS also began to claim routine clashes between pro-ISIS groups in the Philippines and local security forces in April 2016, signaling intent to increase cooperation with local militants.<sup>56</sup> ISIS is still competing with other Salafi-Jihadi groups for global dominance, but these developments demonstrate that ISIS's network is still capable of growth.

### *The West*

ISIS is using its foreign fighters and safe havens throughout the Muslim world to execute a terror campaign within Europe. The organization has reportedly trained as many as 400 fighters for external attacks.<sup>57</sup> It enjoys an extensive support network across Europe and is adept at exporting fighters to the continent after training them in Iraq and Syria. ISIS's attack in Brussels on March 22<sup>58</sup> reflects a larger strategy

to punish, destabilize, and polarize the West. ISIS seeks to exacerbate tensions between European states, raise defensive requirements within those states, cause an environment of fear, and inflict additional economic damage on Europe.<sup>59</sup> ISIS also seeks to promote radicalization and migration to the caliphate in order to secure recruits and fuel its narrative of a war against Islam. European unity is already threatened by financial pressures, debates over refugee policy, and Russian-funded far-right parties. ISIS's successful attacks continue to strengthen European anti-immigrant parties and organizations calling for Britain's exit from the European Union, the vote for which is approaching on June 23.<sup>60</sup>

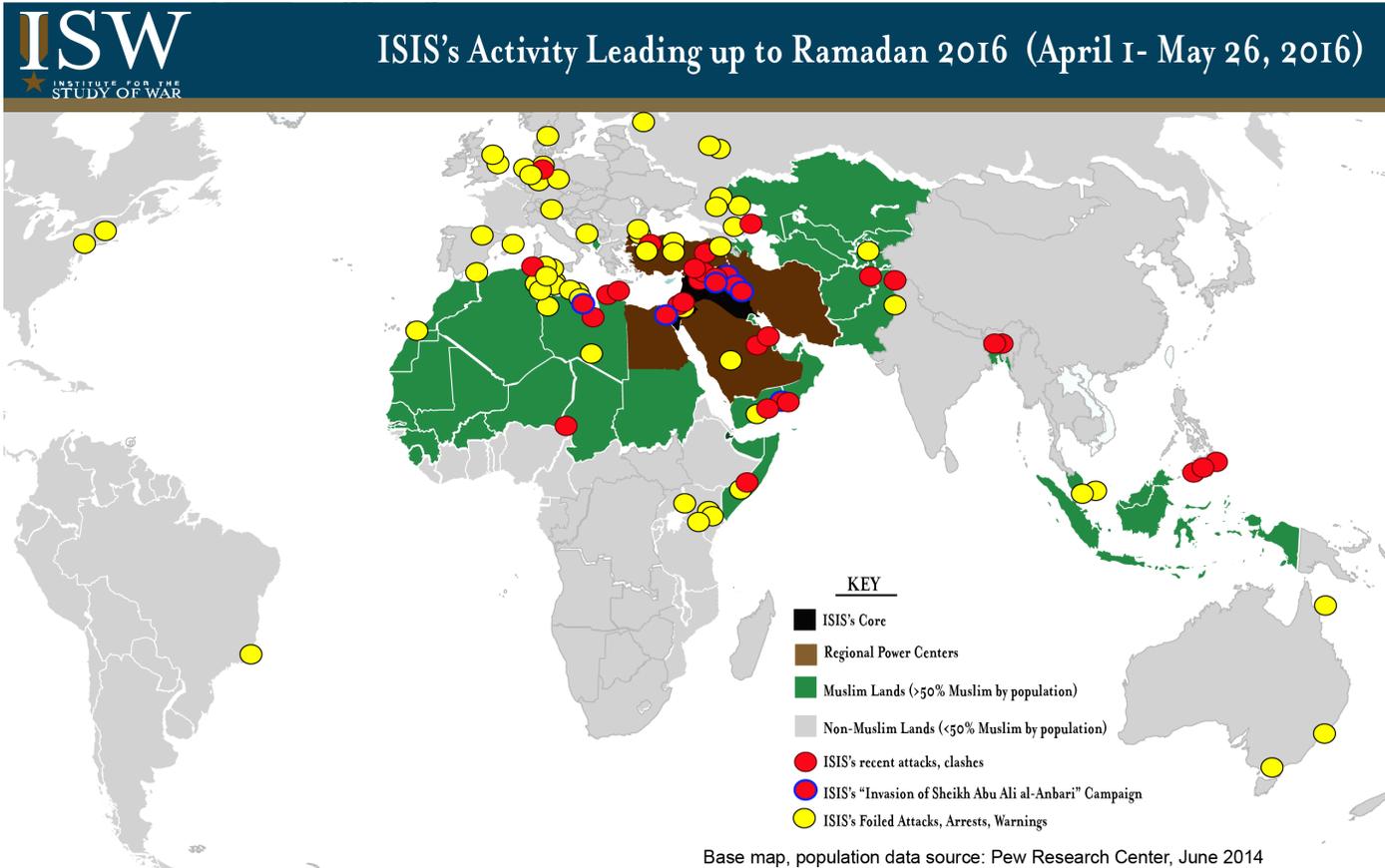
*ISIS is using its foreign fighters and safe havens throughout the Muslim world to execute a terror campaign within Europe.*

The European refugee crisis will likely escalate in 2016. Refugee inflow on the Mediterranean from January to March 2016 increased more than sevenfold as compared to the same period in 2015.<sup>61</sup> ISIS members are intentionally using refugee transit to enter Europe, seeking to strengthen

xenophobic organizations and rhetoric in Europe, thereby fueling anti-Muslim sentiment and encouraging cultural polarization. Russia may also be encouraging migration to Europe through its military operations in Syria in order to pressure the EU, according to former NATO Supreme Allied Commander-Europe, General Philip Breedlove.<sup>62</sup> Increasing pressure on European security and cohesion will open opportunities for both Russia and ISIS to expand their influence. ISIS particularly aims to destabilize Europe through polarization, which it calls "destroying the gray zone."<sup>63</sup> ISIS hopes attacks in its name will provoke state and social backlash against Europe's Muslim communities, encouraging radicalization and jihadist recruitment.

### THE COUNTDOWN TO RAMADAN

ISIS declared a unified named operation in Iraq on April 30, 2016, "The Invasion of Abu Ali al-Anbari," likely intended to set conditions for Ramadan in multiple locations and indicate the synchronization of multiple *wilayats* in different places.<sup>64</sup> ISIS has since declared attacks in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt<sup>65</sup> under the same operational banner, a trend that may expand to include more of ISIS's established *wilayats* before Ramadan. This named operation indicates that ISIS's Ramadan countdown has begun and affirms ISIS's capability and intent to orchestrate a campaign involving multiple areas of operation. ISIS also appears to be conducting a



broad denial of resources campaign within Iraq and Syria by targeting multiple gas infrastructure facilities in Taji, Tikrit, Kirkuk, and Sha'er.<sup>66</sup> Other auxiliary attacks may be synchronized in time only. ISIS's emerging attacks near Mecca, Cairo,<sup>67</sup> Ankara, and Istanbul also indicate that it will escalate against the regional power centers during Ramadan. The unexplained downing of an Egyptian airliner traveling from Paris to Cairo on May 19, 2016 may also be the work of ISIS, though the group has not yet claimed the attack.<sup>68</sup> Arrests made throughout Europe, in Denmark, England, Germany, and Russia indicate that ISIS is likely preparing to attack in Europe as well. It is possible and vital to anticipate what ISIS will choose to strike during Ramadan to reset conditions within Iraq and Syria, expand its caliphate, and escalate attacks against the West.

## ISIS'S STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

ISIS's Ramadan campaign will nest within its overall strategy. ISIS's grand strategy remains predicated upon the expansion of its caliphate to all current Muslim lands and spark and win an apocalyptic war against the West.<sup>69</sup> ISIS intends to destroy the modern state system in order to sustain and expand its caliphate over the long-term. ISIS is working toward this goal by starting or perpetuating local conflicts, transforming local conflicts into a broader sectarian war, polarizing believers and nonbelievers around the world, and breaking the alliances that unite its adversaries. Conditions on the ground in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Yemen, and other states in which ISIS has begun to operate are slipping into a sustained state of disorder, which enhances ISIS's longevity despite its recent

### ISIS'S STRATEGY WITHIN ITS CORE TERRAIN

Maintain the physical caliphate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defend and consolidate in the Euphrates River Valley</li> <li>Contest previously-controlled cities in Iraq and Syria</li> <li>Block Kurds from advancing against ISIS-held Arab areas in northern Iraq</li> <li>Increase external border access through Lebanon and Jordan</li> </ul>
Break modern states within Iraq and al-Sham and prevent new states from forming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attack Iraqi Security Forces in Baghdad and the Baghdad Belts</li> <li>Deny regime resources required to govern</li> <li>Seize more territory in Western Syria in order to break military stalemates and undermine stability in regime-held areas</li> <li>Reduce remaining regime capabilities in Eastern Syria</li> <li>Conduct attacks in Lebanon and Jordan to weaken state security</li> </ul>
Incite local ethnic and sectarian conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attack Shi'a civilians in order to stoke sectarian violence</li> <li>Conduct attacks targeting Kurdish civilians</li> </ul>
Break alliances among the enemies of ISIS fighting in Iraq and Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attack in Lebanon to drive Hezbollah to return from Syria</li> <li>Neutralize Syrian armed opposition elements working with the U.S.</li> <li>Infiltrate strongholds of al-Qaeda in Syria</li> <li>Attack U.S. forces and coalition partners</li> </ul>

### ISIS'S STRATEGY FOR THE REGIONAL POWER CENTERS

Challenge rival states for leadership of the Muslim world	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conduct direct attacks in Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia</li> <li>Target Western tourists</li> </ul>
Escalate ethnic and sectarian regional wars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attack Shi'a in Saudi Arabia</li> <li>Attack Shi'a shrines</li> <li>Attack Turkish security forces in Southeast Turkey</li> <li>Maintain status quo of ongoing Civil War in Yemen</li> </ul>
Break alliances among the enemies of ISIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attack U.S. forces in the region</li> <li>Persecute religious minorities to delegitimize power centers</li> </ul>

ISIS's STRATEGY IN THE MUSLIM WORLD	
Break modern states	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defend and expand control in Libya</li> <li>• Attack security forces in Tunisia</li> <li>• Attack Western tourists in Africa</li> <li>• Exploit Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan</li> <li>• Spark or accelerate local insurgencies in Southeast Asia</li> </ul>
Challenge rival non-state Islamist movements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Denigrate the Muslim Brotherhood movement</li> <li>• Infiltrate al-Qaeda networks and induce adherents to pledge allegiance to ISIS</li> <li>• Deny resources to competing factions in Libya to protract the civil war</li> <li>• Invigorate resource networks in southern Libya and Africa that compete with al-Qaeda's</li> <li>• Defeat Taliban movements in Afghanistan</li> </ul>
Unite the Ummah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solicit Salafi-jihadi groups worldwide</li> <li>• Recruit Muslims worldwide on an individual basis</li> <li>• Persecute religious minorities in order to purify the Muslim world</li> </ul>

ISIS's STRATEGY IN THE NON-MUSLIM WORLD	
Polarize European communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provoke state and social crackdown against European Muslims</li> </ul>
Weaken and Destabilize the West and Russia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raise defensive requirements within the U.S. and Europe</li> <li>• Inflict economic damage on the U.S. and Europe</li> <li>• Conduct attacks in Russian speaking areas</li> </ul>
Spur natural conflicts among enemies of ISIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spark nationalist backlash in Europe</li> <li>• Exploit broad Russo-Turkish conflict</li> <li>• Exploit U.S. vs. Russia rivalry for global power</li> </ul>

operational setbacks. Meanwhile, ISIS's terrorist operations in the West are gaining momentum,<sup>70</sup> and ISIS is gaining new supporters around the globe.<sup>71</sup> ISIS retains a multitude of options to evade defeat, perpetuate its caliphate, accelerate expansion, and launch a global war against non-believers. Regaining operational momentum within Iraq and Syria will likely be the core objective of ISIS's deliberate Ramadan campaign in 2016, but ISIS's Ramadan campaign will maximize the fighting strength of its entire global network. This forecast will identify the various ways that ISIS may do so.

## ISIS's POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION [T+45]

ISIS will use Ramadan as an opportunity to reestablish momentum within Iraq and Syria by attacking neighboring

countries; to destabilize the region by attacking regional power centers; to mark its expansion to new regions across the Muslim world; and to continue its terrorism campaign in the West. ISIS will likely focus its efforts upon neighboring states within its core terrain and upon Turkey, which serves multiple purposes for ISIS. ISIS is an extremely destructive force in the near-term despite recent operational losses because it has potential to conduct high risk attacks at a time when the U.S. and its partners are facing other geostrategic threats. Among ISIS's possible courses of action over the next 45 days, three directly threaten U.S. citizens or ongoing military missions: 1) a wave of catastrophic attacks in Baghdad; 2) an attack against a U.S. base, such as the MFO base in the Sinai; and 3) attacks on mainland Europe or inside the U.S. This section will explore those threat vectors in the context of ISIS's strategic framework.

*OBJECTIVE 1: Break Iraq as a state*

Iraq is facing a political crisis in Baghdad, a second political crisis in Diyala Province, and a heightened threat of Iraqi Kurdish independence. ISIS will likely target major demonstrations, other soft targets, or the weak central government during Ramadan in order to induce mob behavior, undermine fragile state institutions, and force the U.S. to recalculate its strategy in Iraq, expanding upon attacks that have occurred in Baghdad over the last six weeks. ISIS may also target Shi'a shrines or civilians gathered during Ramadan, prompting organized sectarian reprisals that fuel a wider return to civil war. Finally, ISIS's attacks on soft targets and security forces are accelerating intra-Shia

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*ISIS will likely target major demonstrations, other soft targets, or the weak central Iraqi government in Ramadan.*

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conflict between Sadrism militias and Iranian-backed proxy forces, such as the Badr Organization, which figure heavily inside Iraq's security forces. ISIS can exploit these rivalries by attacking vulnerable areas.

ISIS conducted a VBIED attack in Diyala's provincial capital of Baquba on May 9, 2016 and a series of attacks within and north of Baghdad between May 10 and May 13, indicating ISIS may exacerbate Iraq's existing conflicts to generate chaotic conditions that prevent the central government from recovering. ISIS may approach this end two ways:

**Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA):** ISIS will likely attack Shi'a soft targets in order to drive Iranian-backed Shi'a militias operating in Sunni majority areas to conduct sectarian cleansing. ISIS may also continue to attack Iraq's southern provinces in an effort to fix security forces there or force units conducting counter-offensives against ISIS in Anbar to contract to core defenses. Such an outcome would alleviate current pressure on ISIS's control of the Euphrates River Valley and allow ISIS to reinvigorate its military campaign in Iraq. This effect would undermine the ISF's strategy to recover terrain from ISIS. This course of action is also highly likely based upon ISIS's attacks leading up to Ramadan in Baghdad and in southern Iraq.<sup>72</sup>

**Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA):** ISIS can attack Baghdad at a time of intense political peril and generate chaos in the capital to the degree that the U.S. can no longer continue its anti-ISIS mission in Iraq under current authorities. ISIS may attempt to seize territory in the Baghdad Belts north or west of the city to reduce confidence in the Iraqi Security Forces and disrupt Prime Minister Abadi's

ability to navigate the political crisis. ISIS may also attempt to target key facilities in Baghdad to threaten U.S. presence in the capital, such as the Baghdad International Airport or the Green Zone. ISIS could also attack a soft target, such as the Sadrism protest sit-ins in Baghdad, in a way that generates mob violence. This COA may drive the U.S. to consider basing its anti-ISIS operations in Iraq primarily out of Iraqi Kurdistan rather than balancing efforts between Baghdad and Erbil. The fracture between Baghdad and Erbil would likely exacerbate ethnic Arab-Kurdish conflict, which will continue to drive support for ISIS in ways that will permit its reconstitution should forces ultimately drive it from Mosul. It would also exacerbate intra-Kurdish friction, including across the border in Syria where the rival YPG is working to establish its own semi-autonomous region.

*OBJECTIVE 2: Regain freedom of action in Turkey*

ISIS ultimately seeks to collapse the Turkish state and isolate it from the West. In the immediate term, ISIS most likely seeks to regain freedom of action throughout southern Turkey, reversing constraints that Turkey had placed upon the group in late 2015. ISIS aims to limit state security services in southern Turkey, making the area an ungoverned space where ISIS can operate freely. ISIS likely also seeks to prevent

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*ISIS aims to limit state security services in southern Turkey, making the area an ungoverned space where ISIS can operate freely.*

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the U.S.-led coalition from basing in Turkey and sealing the Syrian-Turkish border. ISIS's campaign in Turkey will account for the country's status as both a neighboring support zone to its core terrain and regional power center. ISIS has two main pathways to achieve these effects:

**MLCOA:** ISIS will likely attempt to maintain freedom of action in southern Turkey by overstressing Turkish security forces in that area. ISIS wants to limit the hold of state security services in Southern Turkey to set it on the path of becoming an ungoverned or penetrable space. This also interferes with U.S. plans to seal the Syrian-Turkish Border and use Turkey as a secure base for anti-ISIS operations throughout the country. To that end, ISIS will likely continue shelling the Turkish town of Kilis from its positions near Azaz, Syria. ISIS may also escalate attacks against Turkish security forces in southern Turkey, as indicated by its Suicide VBIED (SVBIED) attack on a Turkish police headquarters in Gaziantep on May 1, 2016. ISIS's attacks will impose new security requirements on Turkish forces and detract from anti-ISIS efforts in Southern Turkey.

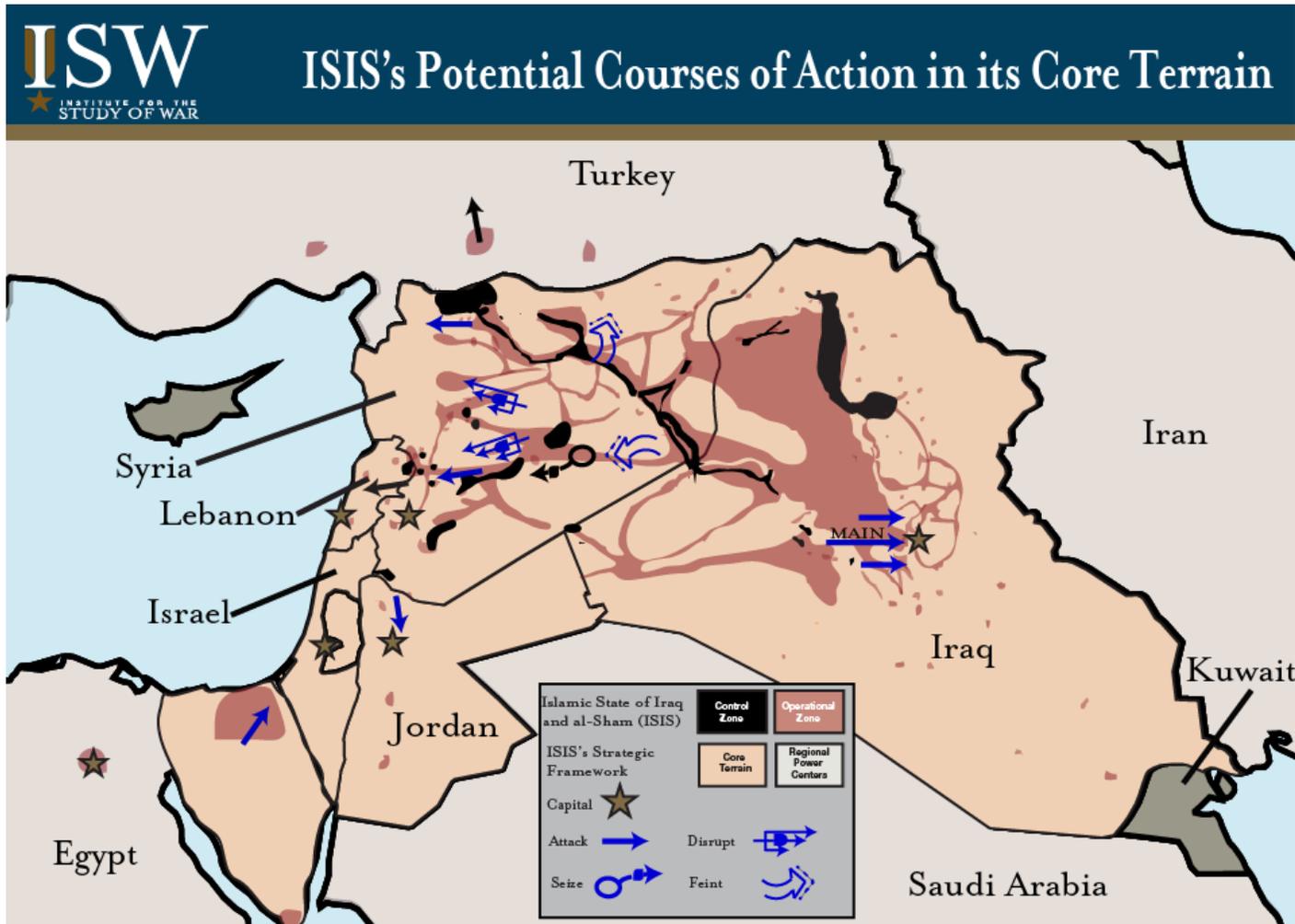
**MDCOA:** ISIS may seek to undermine the Turkish state as a whole in order to open security gaps in the country. This course of action poses more risk for ISIS than the MLCOA because it may provoke a Turkish crackdown that ultimately decreases ISIS’s ability to act in Turkey. ISIS’s leadership may choose this destabilization attempt as a last-ditch effort, however, if it appears that Turkey will act against ISIS’s ability to use the Turkish-Syrian border regardless.

*ISIS will need to fundamentally change the conditions of the Syrian Civil War in order to regain lost territory and expand further.*

**Option 1:** Within this MDCOA, ISIS could escalate attacks against Westerners in Turkey in order to demonstrate its strength against “Crusaders,” harm Turkey’s tourism industry, and raise requirements for Turkish security forces. ISIS has already targeted Western tourists in Istanbul in early

2016, demonstrating it has the capability to pursue this line of effort. ISIS could alternately attack Russian interests in Turkey to punish Russia, thereby exacerbating the Russo-Turkish conflict. These two lines of effort are most dangerous for the U.S. primarily because they threaten U.S. citizens or alliances, not because they are likely to significantly destabilize Turkey. Additional stress upon the Russo-Turkish conflict could push Turkey to increase its involvement in Syria in a way that ultimately benefits ISIS.

**Option 2:** ISIS could alternately aim to fuel Turkish mobilization domestically or within Syria, overstressing Turkish security forces in a manner that gives ISIS greater freedom of action in Turkey. ISIS could do so by launching spectacular or brutal attacks against Turkish soldiers or civilians, thereby inciting broader mobilization for or against ISIS within Turkey. Turkey may increase its involvement against ISIS in Syria in response to these attacks, particularly if they are launched by an ISIS contingent in Syria. Separately, ISIS may attack Kurdish or other minority populations in Turkey to exacerbate the ongoing PKK insurgency in Southern Turkey and possibly bait Syrian YPG forces into a more aggressive posture that sparks a conflict between Turkey and the YPG.



*OBJECTIVE 3: Regain freedom of action in Syria*

ISIS must shift its strategy in order to reestablish operational momentum in Syria. ISIS's campaign in Syria has become sufficiently constrained that ISIS will need to fundamentally change the conditions of the Syrian Civil War in order to regain lost territory and expand further. ISIS likely seeks to recapture Palmyra, which requires overcoming Russian and Iranian-backed Assad regime forces in the city. ISIS renewed operations to seize the Sha'er Gas Fields north of Palmyra in April 2016, indicating that ISIS is able to project force into Homs Province while pro-Assad actors focus upon operations in Aleppo Province. ISIS will also need to spoil planned counter-offensives against its core urban terrain in Raqqa, compromise the ground effectiveness of the Syrian regime, gain greater followership from within the Syrian opposition, maintain external access through Turkey, and open redundant access through Jordan or Lebanon to sustain foreign fighter flows into Syria. ISIS can pursue these objectives in several ways.

**MLCOA:** ISIS will likely conduct one or more ground offensives in Syria in order to regain freedom of action and reclaim lost terrain. The Syrian regime and its backers, and the opposition and Jabhat al-Nusra and their backers, are currently focused upon the battle for Aleppo City. ISIS will likely exploit this focus by challenging regime positions elsewhere in Syria, particularly in Homs or Deir ez Zour Provinces. ISIS may attempt to regain its positions near Palmyra, central Homs, as indicated by ISIS's recent recapture of the Sha'er Gas Fields or it may press further into Syria's western corridor, as indicated by a continuing series of ISIS-claimed VBIEDS in Homs City. ISIS could seek to escalate in Homs Province in order to strengthen its access to external supply routes from Homs to Lebanon through the Qalamoun border region. ISIS could also attack the Assad regime's supply line in Homs Province, which would likely encourage support for ISIS among Syrian opposition groups because it would hinder the regime's ability to move between Damascus, the Alawite coast, and Aleppo. ISIS may alternately launch a main effort against Assad regime forces in Deir ez Zour City in order to exploit the regime's focus on Aleppo, as signaled by the group's significant advances against regime positions in the city on May 14. ISIS will likely support its main effort in Syria with attacks to further disrupt its opponents in Aleppo Province.

**LEBANON MLCOA:** ISIS will likely complement its maneuver offensives inside Syria with attacks inside Lebanon. ISIS seeks to fix Hezbollah in Lebanon as means to degrade pro-Assad forces. ISIS has already demonstrated the ability to penetrate Beirut and Tripoli with suicide attackers. ISIS will likely leverage this capability during Ramadan in conjunction with ground operations inside Syria.

**MDCOA:** ISIS may attack Jordanian security forces or the Jordanian capital of Amman in order to undermine the Jordanian state and disrupt Jordanian participation in the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition. ISIS may have the capability to launch such attacks, as an ISIS-linked Syrian opposition group operates along the Jordanian-Golan border and as ISIS maintained an attack cell in Irbid, northern Jordan until March 2016. ISIS may conduct attacks inside Jordan in order to provoke a political or military state response against Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood and its Nusra-leaning Salafi-Jihadi movement. These actions may not win ISIS favor immediately, but they may foster resentment or radicalization among Jordan's Islamist populations that ISIS can leverage in the long-term.

*OBJECTIVE 4: Weaken regional power centers*

**EGYPT MLCOA:** ISIS may conduct attacks on mainland Egypt, particularly in the Nile Delta, in order to drive security force crackdowns against the Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. This approach mirrors the methodology pioneered by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founder of ISIS's predecessor al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Al-Zarqawi sought to provoke attacks against

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*The opening of the Rafah border crossing will increase ISIS's access to Gaza and thereby its ability to bypass Hamas to attack Israel.*

Muslims in order to radicalize and mobilize potential supporters.<sup>73</sup> An ISIS-driven state security crackdown in the Nile Delta could exacerbate unrest among the Muslim Brotherhood and demonstrate that the movement is an ineffective vehicle for resistance to the state. Muslim Brotherhood members may begin to mobilize violently, encouraging them to consider joining ISIS or al-Qaeda. The historic presence of al-Qaeda leadership in Egypt and the recent release of Mohammad Zawahiri from prison incentivizes ISIS to expand its operations in Egypt before al-Qaeda does so.

**SINAI MDCOA:** Egypt has recently opened the Rafah border crossing in the Sinai to Gaza. ISIS's Wilayat Sinai may conduct attacks across the border into Gaza or Israel in order to incite an Israeli crackdown against Hamas. Such a crackdown may challenge diplomatic relations between Israel and Egypt and the Camp David Accords by extension. The opening of the Rafah border crossing will increase ISIS's access to Gaza and thereby its ability to bypass Hamas to attack Israel. ISIS is not likely to pursue this over the next 45 days, and this COA is not likely to achieve immediate effects if attempted.

**SAUDI MDCOA:** Saudi security forces foiled two attack plots near Mecca possibly linked to ISIS in the weeks leading up to Ramadan 2016. These events suggest that ISIS may have been, and may still be targeting the holy city during Ramadan. Fourteen million people visited Mecca during Ramadan in 2015 for Umrah, or minor pilgrimage outside of the Hajj period. Most of the pilgrims are Sunni, but ISIS may attempt to target Shi'a pilgrims in Mecca if they are gathered in a public place or for evening meals. This COA would undermine public confidence in Saudi security forces, but it is most dangerous for the incendiary effect it would have upon Iranian-Saudi relations which have already been strained by the stampede that killed 464 Iranian pilgrims during Hajj in September 2015.<sup>74</sup>

*OBJECTIVE 5: Expand the Caliphate throughout the Muslim World*

ISIS's primary intent during Ramadan 2015 was to demonstrate that ISIS's caliphate was still vital after its first year, and that it continued to remain and expand. This theme is still one that typifies ISIS's activities outside of its core terrain. Frontier positions in Africa and Asia allow ISIS to isolate regional power centers, foment disorder along multiple borders, and also push the boundaries of ISIS's caliphate to areas

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*The locations in which ISIS  
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proximate to non-Muslim lands. ISIS will likely continue to expand its *wilayat* footprint and exert greater local control to achieve notable new benchmarks in its expansion campaign during Ramadan.

**MLCOA 1:** ISIS will likely declare new *wilayats* during Ramadan, as it did in 2015. The locations in which ISIS appears most ready to declare new *wilayats* are Bangladesh and Southeast Asia. ISIS may additionally declare *wilayats* in Somalia and the Sahel, though ISIS's positions are not likely well established in these places as Ramadan approaches. ISIS is also likely to expand its attacks further into Tunisia from its stronghold in Sirte, Libya. Conditions are not optimized for ISIS to declare a *wilayat* in Tunisia at this time, however.

**MLCOA 2:** ISIS will likely conduct further military operations in Libya in order to expand its control west from Sirte, particularly in the direction of Misrata. ISIS will likely escalate explosive attacks in Misrata to support the seizure of new terrain along the coastal highway between Abugrein and Misrata. ISIS is likely cultivating networks across North

Africa from Libya in order to support a future campaign to connect across Africa from Libya. Attacks connected with ISIS's established *wilayats* in Libya may therefore occur in Algeria, Tunisia, and Nigeria. ISIS must fight and win a local battle against Libyan armed factions in order to preserve its rear area in Sirte.

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**MDCOA:** ISIS may conduct attacks in new locations along the periphery of the Muslim world in order to drive the frontline against non-Muslim lands farther away from ISIS's core terrain. Since April 1, 2016, arrests targeting individuals linked to ISIS have occurred in numerous places immediately proximate to the Muslim world and beyond ISIS's *wilayat* footprint, including Southern Russia; Tajikistan; Ceuta and Majorca, Spain; Punjab, Pakistan; Nairobi, Kenya, and Kampala, Uganda. ISIS is likely using these locations to extend its global support networks; however, ISIS may be preparing to conduct attacks in these locations during Ramadan. ISIS may also begin to convert its support zones connecting Turkey to Europe through the Balkans into attack zones in order to close the distance between its frontier *wilayats* and enemy capitals outside of the majority Muslim world. This COA counters efforts to contain ISIS within its current positions.

*OBJECTIVE 6: Attack the West to polarize, radicalize, and fracture Western alliances*

ISIS's attacks in Paris and Brussels demonstrate the depth and capability of its operational network in Europe. ISIS benefits from security crackdowns that target Muslims, specifically refugees from Syria, as well as the ascent of right wing political movements across Europe. ISIS also benefits from the Kremlin's support of far-right political parties and its attempts to weaken NATO's will to undertake collective self-defense.

**EUROPE MLCOA:** ISIS will likely continue to attack soft targets in France and Belgium during the summer of 2016. ISIS's pre-existing recruitment networks in Spain, Italy and the Balkans will likely continue to provide financial and logistical support to individuals seeking to join ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. ISIS's support networks in southern Europe may also enable ISIS's operatives to launch operations in other parts of the continent, including Austria, Germany, Spain, and Italy. ISIS will likely target symbols of European cohesion, as demonstrated by its reported plot to bomb

football stadiums during the Euro 2016 soccer tournament between June 10 and July 10. ISIS may also encourage its supporters to launch less sophisticated attacks in the U.S. on or before Independence Day. ISIS is likely to attempt such attacks. The degree to which ISIS succeeds depends upon the preparedness of security forces in each country to intercept ISIS's attackers. European authorities have already arrested ISIS-linked individuals in Copenhagen, Denmark; Ulm, Essen, and Cologne, Germany; Birmingham, England; Majorca and Madrid, Spain; and Volgograd and Moscow, Russia in the weeks leading up to Ramadan 2016.

A dangerous branch on this COA, ISIS may achieve an amplified religious response in Europe if it targets Christian churches, particularly targets related to the Catholic Church, including prominent cathedrals such as Cologne or the Notre Dame in Paris, the Vatican, and Rome, though ISIS does not likely have the capacity to penetrate the Vatican itself. A hyper-religious European Christian response to ISIS's attacks will likely alienate European Muslims to a greater degree. Such a campaign would also empower European far-right parties, encouraging anti-immigrant policies. Major attacks in Italy in particular may fuel state and popular reactions against the sizeable refugee populations currently seeking shelter in southern Italy and along Italy's coast. ISIS has demonstrated greater capability to launch attacks in France, Belgium, Germany, and Britain thus far. ISIS-linked attacks in Italy and Spain are also possible, however, and are increasingly likely based on recent arrests leading up to Ramadan 2016.

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**EUROPE MDCOA:** ISIS can attack targets in the U.K. as the Brexit vote approaches on June 23 in order to increase the likelihood that voters, who are nearly evenly split in polls as of May 5, will support the referendum to leave the E.U. Spectacular attacks by ISIS in Europe, particularly in the U.K. would exacerbate underlying tensions over refugee and migrant policy, a key issue driving support for the referendum. ISIS could thereby accelerate the fraying of the

E.U. on which European economic power rests, achieving its own objectives to break Western alliances and accelerating the achievement of Russia's as well.

**U.S. MDCOA:** ISIS can attack U.S. government positions in the Middle East, forcing the U.S. to accept casualties or reconsider its deployment configuration. U.S. military facilities in Turkey and Sinai have already acknowledged a heightened threat,<sup>75</sup> indicating ISIS likely intended to pursue this COA and preventative measures may have interrupted its execution. Some U.S. bases, such as Incirlik, Turkey are heavily fortified such that ISIS likely cannot likely penetrate them, though ISIS has succeeded in changing the U.S. force posture to essential personnel in Turkey due to a heightened threat of attacks. Other facilities such as U.S. firebases in northern Iraq and the KASOTC in Jordan have already sustained enemy fire and are within ISIS's reach, but they are resilient.<sup>76</sup> U.S. servicemen in Amman, Jordan and the U.S.

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*ISIS can attack U.S. government positions in the Middle East, forcing the U.S. to accept casualties or reconsider its deployment configuration.*

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HIMARS deployed to the Syrian-Turkish border in May 2016 represent additional potential targets for ISIS. ISIS may cause the U.S. to alter certain strategic positions in the Middle East. The MFO base in northern Sinai is one such target, from which the U.S. has lately begun to withdraw troops because of the threat posed by ISIS's Wilayat Sinai. The MFO base is exposed, and ISIS will likely target it over the next 45 days. A withdrawal of U.S. troops from the base will undermine the legitimacy of the UN and leave Egypt and Israel to form their own accommodation to address with the mutual threat of cross-border violence by ISIS.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Numerous actors are taking anti-ISIS measures as Ramadan approaches to counter some of the COAs outlined in this forecast. Many of ISIS's positions throughout the Muslim world and Europe became visible because of arrests and foiled attacks in April – May 2016, indicating some success. State security forces are on a heightened alert in many places where ISIS likely plans to attack, including states that fall along the periphery of the Muslim world and the West such as Spain, Italy, and Tunisia. Within Iraq, Popular Mobilization elements led by Iranian-backed militias are launching an offensive against ISIS's oldest stronghold in Fallujah. The

U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition continues to help Iraqis to retake cities in Anbar from ISIS, which could disrupt offensives ISIS intends in Syria if ISIS has to reinforce its positions in Anbar instead. U.S.-supported groups in Syria are intensifying their campaign to isolate Raqqa City from the north<sup>77</sup> as the U.S. recruits and trains additional forces. The U.S. has also taken steps to remove non-mission critical personnel from bases that ISIS may target in Turkey and Sinai in order to decrease their attractiveness as targets. These measures are important, timely, and may prevent considerable loss of life during Ramadan.

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*The U.S. and its allies should enter the Ramadan period aware of the heightened risk of spectacular attacks by ISIS. ISIS will likely target the West directly, particularly in public transit facilities and large sporting events.*

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Several of ISIS's COAs are currently not represented, however, by the policies of the U.S. and its allies. The goal of this forecast is to illuminate these COAs so that mitigation measures can be taken. For example, it is important for U.S. forces to recognize that the ISIS threat extends to Amman, Jordan despite a lack of attacks by ISIS there to date. Efforts to reduce ISIS's presence along Jordan's borders with Syria and Iraq may not mitigate ISIS capabilities inside Jordan. Likewise it is important for European security to recognize the threat to the Euro 2016 soccer tournament and to England generally before the Brexit vote, and for Saudi security forces to recognize that ISIS may attack Shi'a civilians in Mecca. There are additional ISIS COAs for which existing mitigation may not be enough to prevent ISIS from instigating negative strategic effects. These include COAs intended to leverage separate threats to the U.S.-led coalition in Turkey and Iraq that are posed by Russia, Iran, and a general proliferating state of disorder. The U.S. should plan near-term responses that contend with the possibility that these essential coalition partners will emerge from Ramadan weakened and less stable. Above all, it is critical to include ISIS's possible COAs as a central planning factor even if they are unlikely. ISIS will seek soft targets that its adversaries did not anticipate and leverage geopolitical opportunities.

The U.S. and its allies should enter the Ramadan period aware of the heightened risk of spectacular attacks by ISIS. ISIS will likely target the West directly, particularly in public

transit facilities and large sporting events in Europe. ISIS will declare new *wilayats* and launch commemorative attacks in Africa and Southeast Asia, just as it declared a new *wilayat* in Latakia, Syria on May 23, 2016. The U.S. should also be prepared to reinforce its regional partners, especially Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia, which will likely face attacks by ISIS in the next 45 days. ISIS will target some or all of these states with direct attacks, forcing them to focus upon domestic security and weakening their cooperation with the U.S. against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. ISIS will also seek to preserve its holdings in Iraq and Syria by launching attacks against rival ground forces, most likely in Homs, Syria and Baghdad, and in Latakia, where it has lately begun to attack. The U.S. and Canada are also likely to face a heightened threat during Ramadan, given Adnani's call for lone wolf attacks. This forecast seeks to alert the U.S. to the possibility of where ISIS may attack over the next 45 days so that potential attacks may be averted.

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